



# Social Science Department

3<sup>rd</sup> Assessment Cycle 2012-2015

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## Assessment Plan

General Education Competency  
Critical Thinking &  
Written Communication

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## Background

As part of the colleges Outcomes Assessment Council, each department is required to choose a high enrollment course to assess using two general education competencies. The Social Science Department chose to assess SO 101 (Introduction to Sociology) during the college's third assessment cycle. The department representative chose to assess critical thinking and written communication for this project.

A sociology faculty member who has been engaged with on-going discipline discussions on assessing critical thinking in sociology sought out a colleague (Better, 2013) from a peer institution as a regional conference. Better was in the process of publishing the results of a similar project at her community college. During the duration of the project at FCC, Better's work (on which the FCC assessment project was based) was published:

Better, Alison. 2013. Learning from Experience: Integrating Students' Everyday Lives into the Urban Community College Sociology Classroom, *The American Sociologist* 44(4): 385-395.

The FCC assessment project builds on and affirms her work on the importance of methodically integrating students' everyday experiences to illustrate sociological concepts in class.

# Methodology

The faculty worked via email to discuss the SO101 course and to review the wide variety of assignments being used in the introductory course. The department representative invited the other full-time faculty member and all adjunct sociology faculty to participate in the piloting of the new course assignment and evaluating the results for the OAC. The involvement of adjunct faculty was crucial as they teach the majority of the sociology courses. In the end, one full time faculty member and two adjuncts piloted the assignment.

Based on the documents and experiences shared by Better, the department representative created the project that is described below.

## Log and Paper Assignment

For the rest of the semester try to keep a small notebook with you at all times. When you find yourself noticing something that relates to our course (and/or sociology in general) or find yourself thinking sociologically (which you should be trying to do as much as possible now!) jot it down in your notebook. Try to make at least two observations per day in your notebook. Write whatever you need to write to remember what it was that you observed/noticed/thought about and how it relates to the course. For example you might jot down:

“Grocery store--gender roles--mostly moms shopping”

“Noticed socialization processes at church today.....”

“Today I was paying attention to the privileges I receive as a result of my (race/class/gender) and noticed .....

Write down everything that you observe that makes you think of something you read or that we discussed in class, or that you find to be patterns and trends in the social world.

Then, when you get home, (or at a minimum prior to our class) type up your best observations (shoot for about 4 per class) in a more complete form, as follows:

By the time your final log and paper are due, you should have a minimum of 15 observations recorded about your social world. You can use a concept or topic more than once, but don't become excessive. If you cite an example of status and its relationship to symbolic interaction theory for 5 of your observations this would be excessive and would not illustrate a broad understanding of numerous sociological concepts.

Finally, you will write a paper that analyzes and summarizes your data. Take a look over your observations, and think about how your perspective has shifted over the semester. *What has changed in the way you see the world? Is the world the way you thought it was before you took this course? How so and how not? In what ways did you and others construct this world? What was this experience like for you?*

You will address these questions in terms of your data in a 5-6 page summary of your experience. You will hand in this paper with your original field notes attached. This written report will constitute your “Sociological Imagination” paper in this course. This paper will be due in class on August 8.

The paper assignment will be handed out in class by the second week.

There is an opportunity for *boosting your grade* in this paper. If you write a detailed log with 25 or more sociological observations that are well explained and analyzed, you can receive up to one extra point on the “observation log” portion of your grade. Also, the more observations you have to draw from, the stronger your paper can be.

This assignment will be worth 0-5 points, based on the following two criteria:

*Criteria 1: Intellectual Engagement with Key Concepts (4 points possible)*

4 points: Student demonstrates that the activity was used to make deeper connections with the readings and class discussions. Additionally, the student’s analysis demonstrates insight and relevance to the world and society. Let’s call this the 4 point answer because here you are providing strong evidence that you are developing a strong sociological imagination.

3 points: Student uses the activity to make some connections with the textbook and class discussions.

2 points: Student comprehends the surface level meaning of the activity and draws some connections to the readings and class discussions.

1 point: Student demonstrates that the activity was completed by but does not make connections with the textbook, class discussions, or the bigger picture.

Zero points: Student does not take the challenge and submits no work.

*Criteria 2: Professional Communication (possible to gain 1 or 0 points, or, even lose 1 point)*

1 point: Student has a very good command of written English, writes with some flair and originality, and the paper could be used as a model for other students to emulate.

0 points: Student has a good command of English and recognizes that proofreading a paper prior to turning it in is essential for making a positive impact on the reader.

Minus one point – Student demonstrates some evidence of correct spelling, grammar, punctuation.

# Analysis of Data

The OAC faculty read and analyzed the logs and papers submitted as a part of the final course grade. The majority of papers analyzed were from her class. The focus of the analysis was the portion of the papers where students were asked to do the following:

Finally, you will write a paper that analyzes and summarizes your data. Take a look over your observations, and think about how your perspective has shifted over the semester. *What has changed in the way you see the world? Is the world the way you thought it was before you took this course? How so and how not? In what ways did you and others construct this world? What was this experience like for you?*

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## THE FINAL PAPERS AND ANALYSIS OF LOGS

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There are many themes which emerge from the students logs, many of which support this assignment as a tool to facilitate communication, critical thinking, and a content specific perspective.

Among the results:

1. The ability of students to recognize metacognition skills (thinking about their own burgeoning sociological analysis).
2. The ability to apply course content to everyday life in a way that interrupted binary thinking patterns.
3. The ability to recognize “taken for granted” perspectives must be critically challenged and a more nuanced perspective embraced.
4. A burgeoning sociological imagination is not the same as one that is fully developed, and that an introductory course can only hope to sow the seeds.
5. A practical opportunity to collect data from daily life and analyze it builds an important opportunity for embracing a larger worldview.

Here are various selections from papers accompanying the logs written by students:

*“Reflecting on an entire semester’s worth of observations has made me realize that viewing society through a sociological lens has changed my perspective on the world. ... This knowledge will definitely stay with me and shape the way I see the world and those around me. This experience has been really fascinating for me, and has taught me to step back and view situations and people through an unbiased “big picture” type of perspective before passing judgment, making assumptions or acting too quickly. I have definitely learned a great deal this semester, and in a strange way I think this class has made me a better person...more capable of empathy and understanding. As a young adult I think that is incredibly important. I am very grateful for the opportunity to expand my understanding of my own life.” (Maggie)*

*“My perspective has definitely shifted since beginning the observations. At first I was in denial about a lot of things and I didn’t really see the observations teaching me anything didn’t already know but I was wrong, so wrong.” (Kiara)*

*"This class has taught me many lessons and many "have come from going out and observing, rather than only reading my textbook. These projects have forced me to step out of my normal thought and think like a sociologist in my daily life." (Erin)*

*"Admitted, I was not looking forward to this project simply due to the amount of work it entailed. However, I have to admit, I grew to truly love and appreciate this assignment through the process of keeping my log. I made newer and deeper connections than I would have been able to at the start of this course, and I ended up being very surprised by some of the observations that I made." (Natalie)*

*"The world is a different place than it was before I began this course. I see even the most mundane daily tasks so differently, engulfed with question after question. Nothing is any longer just accepted, I question the why, regularly." (Cassie)*

*"My world was not like I thought it was before I began to carefully observe and learned to think sociologically." (Shawn)*

*"At the beginning of class, Dr. Schultz told us something very intriguing. She said that sociology will make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. At first I thought it would be impossible. However, as the class went on and my ability to observe and analyze grew, I realized that having a sociological imagination can allow a person to see their everyday experiences as unfamiliar." (Anne)*

*"Through my observations and this class I have noticed how I have internalized the social world. In the beginning I turned to my family to find observations to log. I was able to see 'ethnocentrism' when my daughter shrieked in disgust at a television show about food unfamiliar to her and I, in turn, listened to my husband explain different food preferences using 'cultural relativism'. Later in the semester I recorded 'role conflict and role strain' to explain why I dropped my English course to assist my child with her struggles in school." (Jessica)*

*"This assignment really got in my head. I found myself thinking "that's ontological equality" at the mosque during a discussion about all people being born equal under the eyes of god. When I noticed a young man with pink dyed hair and many piercings and tattoos, I thought about deviance and how transgressions can make norms more visible. Then a friend announced his engagement to a girl from the same country, who speaks the same language, and shares the same culture, and I immediately thought 'that's endogamy'. If I logged everything I began to see and understand sociologically, the list would be never-ending." (Haza)*

*"Taking this course at first seemed like it was going to be tough and a struggle to get through, but now that I'm all finished I think it has helped me with looking at things sociologically and has given me a set of tools which this fish needed to 'see' the water. (I remember that you said that teaching sociology is like teaching the fish to see the water.) This class has changed my perceptions and my observation log is evidence that I am thinking sociologically in my daily life and will continue to do so even though class is over." (Ashley)*

*"Prior to getting involved in this project I had no idea how much a person can learn from just keeping a close eye on events and people around them." (Sheila)*

*"My 2-year-old was walking around the house in her favorite Minnie Mouse nightgown. She grabbed the sides of jammies and curtsied then took a bow, saying 'I'm a princess'. Even at 2, she is playing princess, not soldier or knight or fireman, but princess. I immediately thought Journal entry!"*

*"It has been strange and exciting to look at things from a new perspective. It was at first unnerving to view everyday things as strange events, but it soon became an experience that I looked forward to having daily. At the beginning it was tough to do, to look at something that was so common and familiar with new eyes and new understanding. The day now becomes full of questions." (Brennan)*

*"I would say I'm a close-minded person and I am very stubborn. Putting on a sociological perspective to see the world around me wasn't exactly easy for that reason. I now think, however, that I am more*

*open to different viewpoints and beliefs. In my observations I found myself open to different interpretations and in a way, I learned about myself as a result.” (Daniela)*

*“By completing this project I have learned that there are two worlds, one in which we conform and a sociological world. In the world of conformity, we do not stop and ask ‘why?’. Instead we abide by the norms set in place for us and do our best to stay within these parameters for fear of discrimination. In a world of conformity one is unable to find any similarities between the strange and familiar. To these individuals, the only thing they are able to see is how contradictory those two words are. However, in the sociological world, we question everything and this is how we make the familiar strange. By doing so, we challenge conventional wisdom and question what other people take for granted. Before this course, I was not able to look deeper into why we do what we do nor did I care. I was unable to see what was right in front of me. I have developed significantly as a critical thinker and analysis of my social world.” (Kelly)*

*“My sister complains about working all day and having to clean the dinner dishes. It felt like she was acting out a script by bragging about how long her day was. I usually get annoyed, now I just apply dramaturgical analysis.” (Becca)*

*“At the beginning of this class, the term ‘sociological imagination’ seemed very foreign to me. As the class progressed I was able to observe everyday actions in people, take those actions, dissect them, and identify the social forces shaping those actions. Now that I am aware of the forces that push and pull with society, I now have a better understanding of the world around me.” (Tyler)*

*“The social of construction of reality is a term I began to understand when I recorded my interactions with the media. I noticed that if I read only one newspaper I could be totally unaware of what is going on in the world or other perspectives on the news. That ‘big’ concept was suddenly not only real to me, but of critical importance.” (Damaris)*

*“I have truly learned to make the familiar strange by applying the sociological perspective to my surroundings. Never would I have related something as simple as watching my customers at work continually adding more and more coins in our tip box because the previous customer added coins as conformity. Nor would I have seen a powerful creature such as Maleficent as an example of how much gender roles in the movies have changed for women. The ability to analyze my daily experiences sociologically is starting to be second nature to me.” (Jeseyra)*

*“Let’s face it, society is all around us, we encounter it daily. This class has opened my eyes to be more aware of my surroundings, only now I do like a sociologist does! I feel like the project has made me a better person in such a way that I feel like my mind is more open. I am not as afraid to think outside of my comfort zone.” (Casey)*

*“I always felt that the social world was out there, somewhere, external to me or any power I might have to make change. Doing the observations made me think about how society is constructed by the actions and intentions of each of us. We are the solutions to the personal and global problems we face since we are the cause of most of them.” (Evan)*

*“I really learned a lot about socialization through the observations. I really paid attention to the performance of roles, especially while I was at work at McDonald’s. But that’s not all. In just one semester at work I think I observed something that could be related to every chapter we covered. I never expected that to happen and learned a great deal about sociology because it did.” (Ariel)*

*“Breaking down our familiar routines we do every day and asking us to look at them sociologically really did make the familiar strange. I feel like a budding sociologist because I can examine aspects of a personal experience and connect it with the broader society.” (Devynica)*

*“The sociological imagination that I developed taught me to see the world around me in different ways, as demonstrated in my log, but it also taught me to think about my future in a different way. I now see myself as able to make changes in my life and in society.” (Danielle)*

*"The first few observations that I entered into my log took more time and effort than they probably should have, seeing as they took me almost 20 minutes to figure out how what I saw related back to sociology. Then, one day while recording my observations, something clicked in my mind. I understood what it meant to make the fish see the water. I began to understand how to see the world around me as strange, as constructed, and the observations I recorded were incredibly sociological and it became much easier to record observations and analyze them." (Lexi)*

*"During my analysis I realized that my log entries did not stop at a few themes, they covered every chapter in the book. I learned so much from this course and I am sad that it is ending. I was forced to see the strange and it put me through a loop. I was unaware of the real impact this course would have on me and my life." (Rachel)*

*"There were so many complex and interesting concepts that we discussed this semester that absolutely changed the way I see the world, what is really the point: I'm actually seeing the world now! By using my sociological imagination and completing the log project, I am truly able to connect to the world around me." (Erika)*

*"The world is absolutely not how I thought it was before I completed this project for sociology. This course has taught me many things about society and the world around us. I never thought about the world or my life in the in depth ways I have discovered in this class. I feel like am using my sociological insight on a daily basis now." (Haley)*

*"For the past two month of this daily project, I noticed so much. Everywhere I went, everything that happened, I saw it sociologically." (Vanessa)*

*"Our goal was to see our daily experiences with a different perspective. ... Thinking like a sociologist is very rewarding. I believe this class has changed the way I look at the world. I question more. This project has been nothing but beneficial to the way I process my own life." (Darren)*

*"I was surprised to be able to find so many sociological concepts illustrated at Panera's, where I work, especially gender stratification and the effects of the glass ceiling.... It is definitely a growing process developing sociological imagination and it can be uncomfortable at times trying to confront the truth about the way the world works. ... I do believe that I can more accurately see the world now even though the process was not always easy and led me to question and change my beliefs about many things. In the end, I leave sociology class with a newfound self-empowerment because it is somewhat freeing to learn to perceive the world more accurately, even if what you perceive may be upsetting. As a result of this new ability, I think that perhaps I can make a difference in the world." (Ashley)*

*"As a result of completing my log, I learned that gender does matter. I observed experiences in a variety of settings that I occupy on a weekly basis. Over and over again I was able to see that while gender feels like a very personal experience it is linked deeply to larger social institutions and structures. I can say that gender is constructed and produced daily." (Angie)*

*"In the beginning of this course, I read a quote stating that having a sociological imagination is 'in many ways ... a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one'. These were the words of renowned sociologist C. Wright Mills, who claimed that if one must think critically about the social world around us, we need our sociological imagination. Much like attaining an artist's eye, when achieving a sociological imagination, the world appears significantly different. Mills' impressive statement stuck with me throughout the semester, and I find it to have absolutely rung true when analyzing the observation portion of this project." (Alex)*

*"From what I know now, I can say that my views before this class were very narrow at best. Now I can see the inner workings of interactions between people and understand what is happening that may not be obvious before taking sociology. The covers have been yanked off aspects of my daily life. This class has definitely shifted my perspective of the world. I can see things now that I wouldn't have dreamed of seeing before this class. I'm glad for this as I feel that the more perspective an individual*

*has, the more enlightened and thoughtful they become. I can now "unpack" situations more critically."* (Nick)

*"Looking over entries in my log, I see stratification as a strong theme. Underlying many of the entries are concepts having to do with standards of equality. I doubt many in our society would argue against the notion of ontological equality and, of course, I am assuming the optimistic point of view that science has pretty much debunked the idea that some human groups are biologically inferior to others. Likewise, few would argue that inequality of outcome does not exist. The observations in my log raise the question of how we get from ontological equality to such profound inequality of outcome in our society and worldwide. I realize, after having all but completed this course, that this must be one of the fundamental questions in sociology."* (Margaret)

*"Throughout this course I was taught to think in ways I normally would not have practiced and I was challenged to think about things in much more depth than I normally would. ... It's harder to observe and record sociological concepts throughout the day than I thought it would be. But now, some things are much more interesting to think about. By changing the way we think and the way we perceive things, it also changed the view I had of where I work. This course made me appreciate my job more and gave me insight on how others feel about my job as well. It was very rewarding to be able to apply classroom concepts to our personal lives. This is one of the few courses that will actually stay with me outside of the classroom and after the course has been completed."* (Olivia)

*"Prior to this class, I did not know what to expect from sociology. I started out confused, then my confusion soon became interest, and this interest gave me the ability to ask questions about my everyday experiences. I must admit that many of my observations took me by surprise.... I am convinced that this project, this professor, and this author, have changed my mindset for the better. I feel as if I have been rewired and that I am just now discovering the world."* (Rafael)

*"This was a challenging project for me because I have limited social exposure. My daily life generally doesn't take me out of a ten mile radius and life is usually so rushed that I don't take the time to observe things that are taking place around me. In completing this project I was forced to slow down and I became much more aware of the world around me... This course was a bit challenging for me and has helped me to realize that I need to work more on my critical thinking skills. I also realized by doing this project that I need to get out and interact with people more and I need to keep up with current events. I have even added a subscription to the New York Times to my Christmas list this year. I have become more aware of the effects of consumerism and the media in my daily life."* (Angela)

*"This project and course have changed my perspectives on many things. This class taught me how to accept that everyone has varying opinions and beliefs and those are shaped by experiences which may be different than my own. In my observations, I began to understand how the personal is deeply connected to the social."* (Taylor)

*"Although I didn't often think about it before, this project showed me that I am a person responsible for helping to shape society. I should not be passive, as even my passivity (such as not paying attention to global events) contributes to an ignorant world. I can see now that what individual people do, or don't do, creates experiences for other people."* (Jade)

*"As I look at my log, I see evidence that I am changed. I now find myself explaining sociology to others based on what we see around us every single day."* (Brianna)

*"I was often disturbed when the familiar comments made at work were seen sociologically. What once seemed natural (such as comments made about tipping behaviors of certain racial groups) now looked like examples of prejudice. This project opened my eyes and gave me a hands on way to experience the concepts, even if it was uncomfortable to discover because it is right in front of me."* (Megan)

*"I'm not sure if I did this essay any justice, but I am grateful for this log because it's gotten me past just looking but going beyond that and thinking. I have a different view of the world I live in and my outlook has definitely changed. I went into this class without a clue what a sociological imagination*

*was and now I'm using it every day without noticing it. It encourages me not to take something at face value." (Emma)*

*"This project has been one crazy ride. There are so many things that go on around me every day but it took me actually recording them on paper to be able to really 'see' them and be able to analyze the data sociologically." (Courtney)*

*"Conley [text book author] says 'You May Ask Yourself'. I certainly have asked myself many things based on the observation log and analysis. I realize now how little observation I did before this class. I think the most important idea to consider now is, what am I going to do now? ... and I see how much this project and this class helped me grow as a person." (Bre)*

# Recommendations

Using a participant-observer assignment in the SO101 Introduction to Sociology course has produced the following two important recommendations.

*Recommendation: Embed this assignment in all SO101 courses and treat SO101 as a gateway course ( pre-requisite) for all other sociology courses.*

Sociologists like to say that we must “teach the fish to see the water” and that can be a very difficult task. It was not without basis that Dandaneau (2009) published an article with a rather clever, if stunning, title: “Sisyphus had it Easy: Reflections of Two Decades of Teaching the Sociological Imagination”. The difficulty in teaching this introductory survey course is that sociology is what Dandaneau calls “a radical form of self-consciousness”. Few believe this level of critical thinking can be acquired in one semester or possibly even in one class.

As such, it has become very apparent, through this OAC project, that students can demonstrate the acquisition of movement toward metacognition and self-awareness in SO101. This means that without SO101 as background, students may not have the orientation or requisite knowledge needed to be successful in other sociology courses which rely on a fundamental knowledge of the discipline.

At the present time, sociology courses are neither sequenced nor restricted with a SO101 pre-requisite. Two examples: 200-level SO courses, for example, do not require successful completion of a 100-level SO course; enrolling in SO102 Social Problems is currently independent of completing the critical discipline acquired training from SO101.

It is very clear that the critical thinking about self and society encouraged by this time and labor intensive log and paper can build basic, foundational knowledge on which current and future sociology courses should be built. As is apparent in the student comments, it is at the end of SO101 that this ability begins to take shape, and should therefore lead us to a deeper exploration of the scaffolding and logical built into the SO courses.