

CREATING AN ANTIDOTE TO STUDENT APATHY:  
"THE NEWS OF THE WEEK"

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This September, at a conference dinner following two days of interdisciplinary presentations, an environmental scientist seated next to me bemoaned the fact that she could not "get them to talk." Nobody questioned that the "them" was students, and a sociologist at the table chimed in that her students were also apparently disinclined toward interaction. As nearly everyone at the table taught at a regional comprehensive university, this invited an opportunity to discuss an in-class pedagogical methodology that I have developed and found to be extremely successful in stimulating student participation: "The News of the Week."

Paul Rogat Loeb, in his 1994 *Generation at the Crossroads: Apathy and Action on the American Campus*, viewed students as apolitical adapters more unwilling than unable to act publicly upon their convictions. His argument takes as a given that students are on the whole informed but make a decision to be apolitical, whereas my concern is whether students are routinely informed enough to make logical leaps between class readings and discussions to their own lives. It has been my experience that college students are rarely interested in what is in the Sunday papers, frequently not yet awake for the Sunday chat shows, and more likely to be busy reminiscing about who went where/saw what/left with whom on date night than if they can give Luke Russert a run for his money. Just because I teach college does not mean I don't remember college.

When I began my career as a graduate student at the London School of Economics and Political Science, I found my seminars to be largely populated by Oxbridge professors who taught the world over and published as routinely as most of us order dinner. Somehow, in nearly every course, world and local news was woven into class conversations. In retrospect, it was also a socialization exercise, whereby students were inculcated into a social and academic interaction process. I do not know whether this loosely constructed pedagogical methodology was in line with what sociologist Robert Merton would have called manifest (stated) intention or latent intention (with unintended consequences). What I do know is that masters and doctoral level students listened to professors present their views of the daily news. In addition, students heard and participated in discussions with their instructors and peers about regional, national, and international events, as they pertained to

seminars in sociology, criminology, and law. Rather than detract from seminar topics, these interwoven discussions of topical and timely events reinforced book learning and made students relax about (indeed, into) presentation and discussion of their papers and the papers. Moreover, disagreement was not only tolerated, but encouraged, as long as students could articulate arguments with academic support.

When I started to teach, I created an element called "The News of the Week" designed as a way to get my students talking to each other. It was also designed as a way of allowing for a range of opinions to be respectfully developed in a supportive environment. Further, the element was constructed as a way of stimulating students to voluntarily do some independent reading, to the extent of knowing about topics of moment and how they related to the syllabus. Last, a stated goal of the weekly exercise was to get students sufficiently involved with the world and communicating with one another (and the professor) in a meaningful way so that the students could "think job interview (the part where they take you to lunch and tell you the interview is over, but they are actually assessing your social skill set) or Thanksgiving/Fourth of July with your beloved's family." In short, the goal was to give students both additional access to theoretical course materials and access to (and enhanced confidence in) practical life situations. I have used this method at three academic institutions with different populations, a four-year business college in New England, a regional comprehensive university in the Mid-Atlantic, and a small comprehensive college in New York City. Student populations have ranged from generally privileged to largely diverse and urban students who are primarily first-generation college students. Courses have ranged from required core courses in legal studies and in sociology to advanced electives in sociology, anthropology, criminology, and legal studies.

"The News of the Week" is a panel discussion of (usually) one topic from a selection of three questions that I construct. Question sheets are generally available and e-mailed the day of class (with several hours of lead time) or e-mailed via Blackboard the night before. Students have an opportunity to express their individual views about one question, which the group chooses as a group, at the beginning of the panel discussion. I moderate the panels with follow up questions. After 10 minutes, I invite the panel to be applauded (thanked) by the class, and then I invite the panel to sit in their regular class seats before the class proceeds to engage in a 10-20 minute directed discussion of the news panel's chosen question as it relates to the readings. I encourage diversity of views, as long as respectfully expressed. In the syllabus, I instruct that samples can be seen on *The View*, HBO's *Real Time* (students are delighted to learn that Bill Maher started his wildly successful series of shows based upon

Friday nights in the dorms, where a bunch of guys would order pizza and have beers, while talking about what was going on in the world), and *The Daily Show*. Both the syllabus and oral instructions include bans on words that would be “bleeped” on daytime television. On occasion, students ask if another news show is applicable, to which the answer has, to date, always been yes – the stated goal is to get students engaged, and by asking if they can follow their favorite news program or channel, the students are demonstrating that they are already engaged. Since the purpose of this element is to discuss what is happening in local, national and international events, and how they pertain to weekly units, this is an ungraded element. I specify in both the syllabus and in oral instructions that there are no right or wrong answers (assuming arguments are supported by critical analysis); rather, the point is to think and engage in meaningful dialogue.

During Fall 2011, for example, there was a question regarding the controversy of “birth tourism” during the week that one of my sociology classes was reading the chapter on families as a social institution. This allowed a variety of student views into what might otherwise have been a relatively dry discussion about either childbirth in the family life cycle and/or discussion of an essay in the text about the sociology and technology of surrogacy (a prime juxtaposition to birth tourism, in view of the expenditures and travel often involved in creating a family). The student panel included an African American woman (who expressed the view that birth tourism was a business transaction that brought money into the United States, during a time of economic downturn), a woman of Southern European descent (who decried the notion of coming to the United States to effectively “purchase” citizenship by birthing on American soil) and a woman who viewed herself as a neutral and impartial commentator (who said that as a mother, one would want the best opportunities available for her offspring). While the question was general in nature, referring to a morning talk show news segment, and two of the three students came to class after work, they nonetheless came to class armed with additional research as to the cost of cultural tourism in New York (for a particular mother to purchase a tourist package) and commentary on constitutional considerations of the child being born on American soil. Moreover, after the panel discussion, one student asked about birth certificates in another country, offering an opportunity for comparative cultural discussion in a way that went beyond the original four corners of the lesson plan.

As another example, during the Fall 2011 unit on deviance, students were invited to consider the question of whether the prosecution’s case against Michael Jackson’s physician, Dr. Conrad Murray, was compellingly stated or not. This provided a backdrop for a discussion

about whether off-license use of pharmaceuticals was deviant from the norm, and further led to a film viewing that led to Dr. Jack Kevorkian's final case, that of the euthanasia of Tom Youk, in a segment televised by the CBS newsmagazine 60 Minutes on November 22, 1998. The students demonstrated the ability to assimilate information about the context of medical deviance (as well as deviance and the law), using two different cases, from two different jurisdictions, separated by over a decade, one via "The News of the Week," for a spirited discussion of the differing roles of the individual and society in these two cases involving celebrity doctors. While celebrity doctors might not appear on the formal syllabus, "The News of the Week" also provided access to a conversation regarding Gesham Sykes and David Matza's techniques of neutralization to deflect societal norms (a technique seemingly employed by both Kevorkian and Murray). Furthermore, a cursory reading of the assigned text contains a section on the medicalization of deviance, which classically refers to a discussion of issues pertaining to mental illness; however, the students engaged in further critical thinking and contemplated how depression may have factored into Michael Jackson's death, as well as into the death of Kevorkian's end-stage ALS patient Youk. This last was more to the level of an advanced class in Sociology/Anthropology of Health and Medicine, and was a superb outcome that led into further development of the course materials.

It is important to note that "The News of the Week" is part of the class plan, rather than a general conversation that takes time from the class. For example, questions for a Spring course in Principles of Sociology were (and remain) coordinated so as to lead to a discussion of industrialization (an early topic in the introductory course) and socialization. "The News of the Week" provides a vehicle via the Super Bowl, which is broadcast around the last week of January. The Super Bowl annually invites a question that relates either to subcultures, socialization into gender messages, or social structure and social interaction. In 2011, one of the three questions read as follows:

INDUSTRIALIZATION/SOCIALIZATION VIA SPORTS: The Super Bowl was broadcast on Sunday, February 6, 2011. The two teams that made it to the game were the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Green Bay Packers (Green Bay won). On Monday, February 7, 2011, Whoopi Goldberg made the following comment on the ABC chat show, *The View*, "[they] were two warrior teams [that] came out of the steel mills." Why is this important in terms of the discussion of the impact of industrialization on society? What is the sociological importance of team sports in socialization (not the same as socializing)?

This particular question led the class directly into a discussion about

socialization, using team sports as a metaphor. In addition, while many men and some women followed football in the class, a fair number of the women students (and a few of the men) followed the ABC chat show, which is primarily directed at a demographic of women of a variety of ages, races and ethnicities, and also diverse political leanings. In other words, this question had a deliberate design to draw both men and women, whether or not they are interested in spectator sports. The question was of such a draw that some students continued to discuss the Super Bowl and how much fun it was to discuss as part of the class, well after class was over, as students adjourned for coffee, dinner and the like. It was a stunningly successful moment of unifying "The News of the Week" to the curriculum. Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" during her 2004 Super Bowl half-time performance also proved to be a terrific vehicle for a Legal Studies class to discuss regulatory mechanisms of the FCC, in a course on Legal Environment of Business. While I am not knowledgeable about football generally, I have found that the Super Bowl frequently offers an opportunity to have a popular cultural experience integrated into the class content, as well as heighten student interest and participation in relating classical course information in a fresh context. These two examples, from different courses, show how the element can be woven into being a part of the class, rather than taking time away from the class.

Over the course of several years, I have noticed the program generally breaks down into three time periods over the semester. This is more by natural flow than deliberate design, yet remains fairly constant from semester to semester and among institutions. First, after the initial worry of standing up before the class (which was absent in some classes, particularly in urban environments) and some slight reticence, there is a general discussion. After a few weeks, discussion becomes more focused and detailed, with more outside references to news outlets and/or course readings. Around the third month, students start bringing in relevant articles to prove their own points (or to contrast to their own views). A high point of the semester is when a team brings in an article or series of articles on a topic not on the official list, but which the students think discussion worthy. This generally happens around the middle of the semester, but once, students in an Introduction to Sociology class asked if they could discuss the suicide of a bullying victim, rather than the three assigned questions (my answer to this was a very enthusiastic yes, and I quickly reworked the evening's lesson plan to embrace this topic as within the ambit of a discussion about sociologist Emile Durkheim and his classical study of suicide, which is included in almost all introductory sociology courses during the first week or two).

Perhaps the most important observable conclusion came from a

colleague in the course of a peer evaluation. She noted the high level of student participation and confidence in a week where the syllabus was focused upon the sociology of gender and the student panel chose to focus upon the anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire (the deadliest industrial accident in New York City history, in which 146 garment workers died from fire, smoke inhalation or jumps to escape a fire). The randomly assigned student panel—which included a Latina who was a single mother working her way through college, an African American nursing student, a young woman from China and a young woman from Mexico—in the space of four hours, created a montage of images to present to the class, made commentary about union formation relating to the text, gave specific critique about the fact that most of those who died in the fire were young female Jewish and Italian immigrants without union protection, correctly noted that the fire had led to legislation of fire and safety standards and made commentary about a then-topical union issue in Wisconsin. In addition, the young women from China and Mexico gave comparative commentary about reported sweatshop practices in their home countries, which stimulated further discussion and participation from other students. This tied in to the assigned chapter on the sociology of gender (and the previous week's work regarding race and ethnicity). The evaluator wrote that "the students were active, engaged and able to apply sociological concepts to current events ... [and that] the students were respectful and highly engaged in the material." What was most important for me in receiving this evaluation was the fact that I took as a given the level and confident nature of student participation, both by the original panel and by the class after the original panel concluded (and I opened up a general discussion), a level of confidence and enthusiastic participation that continued into the next discussion of the assigned text and additional materials on stalking as (generally) gendered criminal conduct and victimology.

"The News of the Week" program has been launched successfully in courses in legal studies, sociology, anthropology and criminology; however, it lends itself to adaptation in humanities and social science courses generally. I should note that it does require a significant amount of preparatory time. In addition to culling articles and searching online sources for pieces relevant to the syllabus topic of the week, I create mini-outlines to relate each question to the course readings and materials. In essence, this means that I have to have three mini-outlines for each lesson plan or seminar. That said, I find that this extra research and preparatory work bears fruit in class discussions that are very fresh and original. While this may not spur a grass roots movement to change the world, at the very least I am hopeful that "The News of the Week" may change the social world of students, if I pay homage to sociologist Paul Rock's examination

of small groups in English criminal courts. I am hopeful, too, that students may go out and order a pizza and shoot the breeze about what is going on in the world, before they are compelled to talk turkey at an interview or client meeting. In the meantime, if I have invited and facilitated critical thinking, if my students accept the invitation by applying course concepts to social and legal problems, I shall be glad to have my class imbibing the antidote to college student apathy—participation in the world and knowledge of it.

#### Note

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