Il Buono, Il Brutto, Il Cattivo: Teaching Introduction to Sociology

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12/7/99
Introduzione

I started writing this paper shortly after I finished my second class, having taught Sociology 10 in both the Fall of 1998 and the Spring of 1999. I then let it sit for another semester while I interviewed drunken UNC students and scrambled to finish my MA. As I write about my first teaching experiences from over a year ago, I am simultaneously planning to teach Sociology 50 for the first time. So when I began to work on it again, I was apprehensive, wondering if I had become too far removed from my preparation, my teaching, my successes and failures, and my reflections to talk about them again. I discovered, however, that my memories of each class are vivid. I can easily recall the pleasure of creating effective opportunities for my students to learn, and the challenge of adversity. These classes exceeded all my expectations about the excitement and the struggle of teaching. They still echo strongly in me, and I am delighted by the work that my students and I accomplished.

I believe that these first classes were very successful. I say this now because what follows may not always appear to be so. My most indelible memory originates from a cheating incident and its subsequent honor court hearings. This experience upset me, and forced me to scrutinize my course design, my role as an academic policeman, and my ideas about honor in the university. Consequently, I discuss this at length at the end of the paper, and it may overwhelm everything else that worked so well and was so fulfilling to me. So, with all apologies to Clint Eastwood, I present to you the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of my first teaching experiences.

Il Buono

Teaching these classes was the most gratifying professional activity I have done. I looked forward to my time in the classroom. I was fortunate to have good students, and to teach a
course that I knew well. Most importantly, teaching fulfilled all my expectations about its excitement and challenge because my training permitted me to focus less on my doubts and fears and more on teaching and learning.

The teaching seminar prepared me well, more than I had believed it would. I first thought that some of the topics we discussed would serve as helpful practical tools. I later discovered that using them ultimately created opportunities to learn. The Bloom taxonomy of critical thinking, for example, redefined how I planned and led classes. As a teaching assistant, I often had the responsibility of planning and leading classes. I constructed them with the intent of promoting discussion, but I did not know how to push our debates and student thinking towards greater analysis and ultimately insightful and coherent evaluation. Indeed, I most often asked questions that only required students to paraphrase what they had read, and then skipped them to final evaluations without helping them down the path. I used Bloom to evaluate questions I wanted to ask, and I could discover how I would guide the class and heighten our debates. Both classes had strong discussion from the beginning of the semester until the end, even with over 50 students in each class and one class meeting at 8am. For many students, our discussions permitted and encouraged them to push themselves farther in their thinking and learning.

Assignment and test planning also benefited from critically examining how I asked questions. This was helpful - and necessary - because I structured the class to emphasize the connection between good writing and good thinking. One of my primary goals was to show students how writing provides the opportunity to discover, clarify, and focus thoughts. Consequently, my students write often. They submitted journal entries to me every week, reflecting on recent class material; all three exams were take-home essays. Journal and exam topics were focused, giving students a definite structure to guide them in developing essays. The
questions necessitated that students briefly summarize class material, but also move ideas into new settings, and analyze evidence and theories together. Written assignments opened opportunities for application, analysis, and personal reflection, all of which I had hoped to encourage. I chose the take-home exams in particular because they enabled students to write and refine their ideas.

More importantly, I made writing central to the class by addressing it directly at the beginning of the semester and integrating it into the regular class schedule. In the syllabus I wrote that regular writing in and out of class “is an opportunity to improve your writing skills and think seriously about what you are learning in this class. Good writing is not simply a requirement of English class; it is a critical part of your education.” I was more dramatic when describing my hopes for the journals:

Journals allow you to wrestle with what you are learning, to analyze and criticize our discussions, and to apply your sociological imagination to your experiences. This can be simultaneously an exciting enterprise, an uncharted journey, and a courageous struggle. Just as an undergraduate professor once did for me, I also devoted all of the second class to discussing and practicing writing. I tried to establish that writing was an integral component to thinking, and show them practical suggestions to improve writing that would also force them to improve their thinking. Of course, some students would remark to me that they didn’t realize that writing was such an important part of Sociology, rather than of learning. But in general, it meant that they took their writing seriously.

All of this worked very well. Weekly journals kept students actively involved in class material and channeled their voices. I could hear how each student understood what they were learning. I could give them individual feedback (some joked that I commented on their papers more than their English professors). And though they did not all turn into little William Zinssers, I did receive thoughtful and insightful writings every week.
My classes benefited from using technology in and out of the class, not so much because it represented innovative ways to deliver information, but because it helped me organize more thoroughly in advance and concentrate class time on teaching. I developed a web site to make available the course syllabus, class notes, and other class business (http://www.unc.edu/~cbartley). I taught both classes in the same new classroom, stocked with computers, projection equipment, a stereo, and other fun gadgets. Many students expressed how much they appreciated having the web site available because it helped them organize their studying and learn in class more effectively.

I only used them, however, to compliment the main discussions that I was leading. I did not use available technologies to give more information than I would without the web or without a funky classroom. I rarely tried to create complex multimedia performances, and I did not throw detailed notes and analysis at students. Some evidence has suggested that providing too much information invites students to ignore in-class work, believing that all they require to pass is online, and grades drop significantly (papers presented at the 1999 meeting of the Southern Sociological Society). For every class I placed an outline on the web and displayed it; most of the time, I used this for nothing more than what I could write on the blackboard. The success of using technology in the classroom was that it freed me to focus on the students and our conversations. Perhaps I could have accomplished this with overhead projectors, or even with (good lord no!) chalk. I will not always have a cybernetic classroom, nor will most instructors. The preparation I put into using these technologies made classes better, and I bring that to any class I teach.

Classes worked best when I focused on what I hoped students would learn, rather than on what I wanted to say to them. I resisted the urge to structure classes around laundry lists of
materials, as it only promoted lecturing. Still, for a few topics, I believed that I could only teach some material by telling them what they should know. While I speak well and feel confident in front of a class, I watched their collective energy drain from their bodies. The best classes stemmed from developing discussions and activities from things I do well and enjoy. By focusing on what I wanted them to learn, I developed exercises that involved using tangible analogies to represent abstract concepts. For example, students became owners and developers of a new bar on Franklin Street in order to teach them about mechanical and organic solidarity, rationalization, and class exploitation. And I apparently gained a reputation around campus after teaching students about social roles by teaching them to swing dance. Classes that involved students, and that involved me, created the most fruitful learning opportunities.

**Il Brutto**

In general, I can say that not much went wrong in both classes, though I reserve my discussion of the honor case for later. I did not have to address problems stemming from renegade sniper students, or from uninvolved students. I knew my topics well enough that I did not fear being unable to complete a class, and I drew heavily on discussions and activities from my own undergraduate days that had worked well.

From the beginning I knew that I had already created the most difficult task for myself: grading papers. The assignment structure meant that I spent countless hours reading and evaluating papers. Journals required at least 8 hours to read; exams over 40. Oddly, grading time during the second semester only seemed to increase. I am unsure as to how to remedy this, because the take-home exams were excellent learning experiences and I would be disappointed if I
switched testing formats. My relief will probably only come when I have the opportunity to teach smaller classes.

I did feel, however, that at times I did not always give students every chance to succeed. I structured the class to reward those who completed all of the work on time, and to penalize those who did not. I made my policies clear. I reasoned that if students chose to ignore these policies, then their final grade would reflect this. More than one student did appear to make this choice, and their grades fell. I noted in particular one student who rarely attended class, and did not complete journal assignments. His lack of class involvement showed on his exams. I knew all of this, and I knew that he would fail the class. Yet I did nothing. I did nothing because I found the situation almost comical, and wanted to find out how long he would hold out until he approached me with a sob story about his troubles. I told other graduate students about it. They described similar experiences, and we convinced ourselves that we did not need to be concerned with these students; they had made their choices. I do not believe that I could have transformed this student into an active class member, but I did not have to sit idly by and watch him slip away. Nothing more than an email would have shown him that I was aware of what was happening. Whether this helped him come talk to me, or only scared him into attending class, I might have helped him avoid failure.

Finally, having taught the same class twice, I can attest that while having the course structure already in place reduces some work, instructors should not feel that they are necessarily just as prepared to teach each individual class. In the first semester, I developed the details and flow of each class period the evening before. The class materials, and the steps the class would take to get to it, were always fresh. I certainly stumbled at times, but I knew how I wanted to proceed. In the second semester, I had class preparations ready, and I sometimes believed that I
could teach with little review. Without fail, these became the worst classes. I became lost. I confused my students and myself. Prepared materials do not equal prepared instruction, nor do they mean prepared instructors.

**Il Cattivo**

As I mentioned in the introduction, the most difficult and significant problem I encountered was discovering and addressing an honor code violation. Not only was this problem difficult to confront, but also it unveiled to me a tension between my understanding of honor versus my understanding of structures of opportunity. I was forced to examine how I devised the class, and how I might have to change it in the future.

**Case Summary**

I chose to give students take-home exams so that they could develop cohesive arguments. They had to follow specific instructions on how to answer each question, demonstrating that they both understood class material and could also analyze and evaluate it. Several students knew each other well and would likely work together, and in fact I hoped they would. For regular exams, students are free to study with each other, and I wanted to encourage students to work with and learn from each other.

At the same time, the exams needed to be only their own work, so I discussed with them the boundaries of group study. On the exams, I wrote that students could work together. I permitted students to talk to each other in order to clarify the main points of readings, just as though they were reviewing for the exam with me in class. They could not, however, in any way attempt to answer questions together. In other words, in their discussions they could not apply readings to specific exam questions, plan their answers together, or write their answers together.
I wrote this policy in the instructions, I explained it to all students in class, and I illustrated it. I also briefly reminded students that the honor code was in effect.¹

On the first take-home exam, I found that two students had submitted unusually similar responses. Two essay questions contained some of the same ideas and a few matching phrases. Had these anomalies been the only evidence of a problem, I would never have noticed them. The other two questions, however, were too alike to be coincidence. They contained identical sentences and paragraphs. They used identical examples and metaphors. They made the same errors. The only attempt to disguise these violations was to change occasional adverbs and switch paragraph ordering. There was no doubt that either these two students had either collaborated in their work (covering themselves poorly), or one of them plagiarized their exam from the work of the other.

Following the next class period, I asked these two students to meet with me individually. I knew that they were friends, and I learned that they were also housemates. I asked them how they prepared for and completed their exams. I showed them the identical passages. They were surprised, and both denied any misconduct. One said that she saved her essays on a computer that all of her housemates shared, and that the other consequently had easy access to her work. I told each of them that university policy required that I report this problem to the Student Attorney General.

After five weeks, the Attorney General’s office charged both students with violating the honor code. It separated the two cases, so each case had its own investigative counsel, and each student had her own defense counsel. All counsels interviewed me about the evidence I had

¹ See Appendix II for exams and procedures.
presented to the Attorney General. Two weeks later, the Honor Court conducted two trials, with
different court members presiding over each case. I testified at the start of each hearing, but the
court did not permit me to hear the rest of the cases. Each trial lasted one evening. The Honor
Court found the student who kept her work on the shared computer innocent; it convicted the
other student, ruling that she had plagiarized her work from her housemate. The former stayed in
the class and finished the semester. The latter was suspended for the remainder of the term,
received an F in my class, and was withdraw with no credit for any of her other courses.

Ruminations

When I approached the Student Judicial Board with this case, I had reservations about the
ability of student courts to judge academic cases. I did not think that honor court members would
be in any way biased towards either students or instructors. Rather, my sense of honor
proceedings indicated that they evaluated evidence strangely, and final outcomes were
inconsistent. My knowledge of the honor court has come primarily from accounts of people who
have experienced it and observations of how other instructors have addressed cheating. For
example, my sister at Barnard College received probation for alleged plagiarism. The only
evidence introduced against her was the professor’s impression that her final paper did not
resemble her earlier work; the professor could not produce the original, supposedly plagiarized
source material. At the same time, many other instructors have told me that they have handled
cheating cases themselves, outside of the honor court process. They believed that the court
would not find students guilty, even in blatant cases, because the court too often concluded that
extensive plagiarism was simply an honest mistake. I was convinced that at least one of the
students had cheated, so I worried less about false convictions. I did not actually witness any
cheating, however, so I could not testify that one or the other, or both, had cheated. Given this, I
feared that the court would agree that cheating had occurred, but without further evidence, could not convict either of them.

On top of this, in one of the essays with different responses, one student revealed sensitive information about herself in order to illustrate a point. Since I was to be the only one reading her essay, she felt comfortable doing so. Few of her friends knew what she had told me. The other defendant was not aware of this information (she even argued that this demonstrated her innocence). She was afraid that what she had written would come out during the trial. I submitted the essay with sensitive sections blocked out, and vouched that they were different from the other student’s work. Still, this student showed trust in me by writing about herself as she did. If this information were to become part of the trial, it would produce irrevocable damage on herself and her relationships with her friends. No academic infraction should result in such a penalty, and I feared that the trial might produce too cruel a punishment. I wondered if I might have better served the students if I had rejected my role as academic policeman and handled the case myself.

I pushed forward with the cases for two reasons. First, it was my obligation to do so. And second, the students had the right to have a formal hearing and to defend themselves, rather than have me act as their judge and jury. In fact, when I first read the matching papers, I initially presumed that they had collaborated, that both were guilty, and I would have been wrong. In the end, I realized that I really knew very little about our academic judicial process. I was unsure of what would happen and what would result, but I understood that it was the right way to proceed. I could only trust that the court would understand that there was no reason to introduce the sensitive information into the case.
I learned that immediate suspension and no credit for all other class work was the standard penalty for plagiarism. With the semester nearing its end and after the long delay in bringing these cases to trial, I challenged the severity of the sentence. The infraction deserved punishment. The mark of suspension, however, lingers long after the suspension is finished, both on official records and on students. This reduces opportunities for students to recover from their penalty, and to demonstrate that they have learned from the experience. In the letter I wrote to the Attorney General, I recommended failure for the class. The Honor Court considers this, but ultimately it appears that their concerns for consistency of sanction across cases outweigh the arguments of individual instructors.

Throughout the trials, I struggled to understand their meaning for how I would teach in the future, because these cases revealed a contradiction between my sense of the seriousness of the honor code and my awareness of the impact of structures of opportunities on cheating. I needed to examine why I chose to give take-home exams. I did this not because I believed I should abandon these exams, nor did I feel that the Student Judicial Board handled these cases unprofessionally or unjustly. I did need to find a way to define my own responsibilities in reducing opportunities to cheat and in communicating with students about academic honor.

I did not think that my class would be impervious to academic cheating. When I created the class, I was aware that take-home exams open opportunities for some kinds of cheating, most notably plagiarism. I have assisted in one class, for example, that has assignments that almost invite cheating, and the instructor routinely identifies violations and charges students. I maintained that the structure of the assignment needed changing to prevent these recurring
problems. Anticipating that take-home exams could introduce problems, I wrote essay questions that asked students to tie together class materials in ways that would make plagiarism from independent sources difficult. As noted above, exams required students to briefly summarize class material, but also to apply ideas to new settings, and analyze observations and theories in relationship to each other. While it would surely be possible to copy some texts from other sources, extensive plagiarism would most likely appear as awkward, unrelated to what the essay questions were really asking. In addition, the journal entries helped me become familiar with each student’s writing style. Even with over 50 students, reading their writing every week meant that I would be able to recognize work that was out of character. I knew that I would have to be attentive to fraud, but I also felt that I might be able to identify concealed violations if they occurred.

Discovering such an obvious violation, then, shocked me. I was reading over 200 essays, but I recognized the copied sections right away. I initially felt that one or both of them thought me incapable of noticing the plagiarized sections, and I was angry. In my frustration, I questioned the dedication of UNC students to the honor code, believing that academic integrity meant very little to these undergraduates. Every horror story I had ever heard about student cheating and the lack of commitment to a meaningful education resonated with me. Consequently, I had difficulty in making sense of the significance of these cases; a salient honor code that shapes how students approach their work should make the existence of opportunities to cheat largely irrelevant. Over

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2 The assignment requires each student to complete telephone surveys with 10 undergraduates that the instructor randomly selects from complete registrar records. We identified one or two students every semester that had simply made up answers, rather than call those that were sampled.
two semesters, however, I encountered only this one case.\textsuperscript{3} Students wrote every week, and by the end of each semester, they had written over 450 journal entries and 150 exams (over 600 essays). And though it is possible that I failed to identify cheating in other work, it appears that only one student cheated, and on only one exam. Perhaps the exam design did in the end help to prevent cheating, and the students uphold the honor code more readily than I first believed.

Academic cheating does occur, however, and perhaps with greater frequency than anyone can measure. I argue that we should not immediately interpret infractions as disregard for academic integrity. In fact, I think that the convicted student made a poor choice; her violation is not necessarily a reflection on who she is, or on how students generally treat the honor code. I now see the honor code as a contract; instructors have as much responsibility to create spaces for learning and evaluation without inviting cheating as students have in upholding the honor code themselves. I am now satisfied that I did not ask my students to perform unreasonable tasks, and that I prevented at least some cheating with the questions I asked. No instructor can prevent all cheating, but the fact that students do not observe the honor code 100\% of the time does not make it meaningless.

Recognizing that some testing formats open opportunities for cheating should not be cause for abandoning those formats. If instructors believe that take-home exams, or extensive but open research papers, or any other unsupervised work promotes better learning and excitement for learning, they should use them. A few students will take advantage of this, and a few will make poor choices when other pressures bear upon them; many more, however, embrace this chance to learn. I watched so many students flourish on these exams that I stand committed to

\textsuperscript{3} In the second semester, I again found two suspicious essays, but eventually concluded that the similarities were coincidence, more a factor of following my class notes too attentively.
using them again in future classes. In the end, I think that this case affirmed for me that I planned these classes well, but that I cannot back away from my responsibility in fulfilling the honor contract.

**Raccomandazioni per 380**

I felt very well prepared to teach for the first time, and it help make the first experience excellent. From providing teaching tips to discussing active learning to focusing me on key issues in teaching, I was ready for these classes. Recently I attended a CTL retreat during which I met graduate teaching representatives from almost every discipline. We discussed how each department trains its graduate instructors, and I saw that our teaching seminar ranks as one of the most thorough curricula that UNC’s graduate programs offer. Some only provide faculty mentors, a figure with whom to discuss teaching issues but not from whom graduates receive structured training. Some departments do nothing. I needed training and guidance, and I am a better teacher for it. I only hope that our department’s commitment to this program greater than the commitment of the single, brave individual who teaches it every year, so that it can continue well into the future.

My suggestion for future generations of the teaching seminar focuses on preparing instructors to address academic fraud. We examined how instructors can anticipate and prevent cheating opportunities, and looked at several good examples of well-structured assignments. We discussed honor code violations and our responsibility to report potential violations. The honor process, however, remained hidden and mysterious. Anecdotal evidence of bad cases and questionable honor decisions circulate from graduates to graduates, and even from professors to graduates. They leave strong impressions on new instructors. 380 can be a chance to confront
these perceptions and give instructors more knowledge about how the honor court works. I witnessed the honor process work fairly, respectfully, and justly. I also learned that the honor process affects instructors, intensifying any doubts that they have about themselves and their teaching methods. Graduates need to learn how to speak openly and frankly about the honor process with the students, and be comfortable doing so. Every graduate student can begin their graduate teaching ready to deal with problems if their training can demystify the honor process. To do so requires strong course and exam design skills, and confidence in both the salience of the honor code and the fairness of the judicial process. It will help them reduce opportunities to cheat, give them the strength to cope with problems, and the knowledge that they have done all they can.
Appendix I: Student Evaluations

As you are aware, the University has no formal course evaluation program now. Thus I have no summary statistics to include here. I did use an Instructor and Course Evaluation Form from CTL, and I also created a short survey with open-ended questions. I have enclosed copies of these forms with this appendix.

In general, the course evaluations are excellent, and I am flattered that my students enjoyed my classes as much as they did. Few students talked to me about the class throughout the semester, so I could only presume that the class was proceeding well; these ratings confirmed what I was sensing. I consistently received scores of 4 and 5, rating especially high on demonstrating enthusiasm about teaching, encouraging critical thinking, and organization. I scored somewhat lower on conveying expectations of student performance and on providing timely feedback. I believe that I can do better in making my evaluation techniques explicit, but I suspect that turnaround time will remain slow as long as I teach 50 students.

Their comments were equally as flattering, but also more enlightening in how to improve the course for the future. Echoing their first answers, many students wrote that what they most enjoyed about the course was the enthusiasm I showed:

[I most enjoyed] the teacher’s enthusiasm, confidence, and innovative ways of approaching the subject of society and its effects. I learned the most from thinking about the subjects instead of bland memorization.

[This was a] very interesting and thought-provoking class; Chris was an enthusiastic teacher that puts great effort into everything he does in class, grading, preparation, etc.

I liked this class a lot and I’m glad I took it. You are a very dedicated, enthusiastic teacher and that comes across in class.

4 In the future I plan to gauge this by using anonymous feedback cards more regularly.
Chris was an excellent teacher and I would love to have him in another class. I looked forward to his enthusiasm every week.

Many expressed how the computer and web technologies enhanced the class:

It was neat using the overhead and the computer like he did. It was great having notes and things covered in class posted on the web.

I enjoyed the visual aides, demonstrations, and enthusiasm. The active use of the computer was a huge plus.

Students almost universally agreed that I assigned too much reading. Some described readings as simply “boring,” while others argued that they had little bearing on the class discussion. I suspect that this stems from my failure to integrate the readings from *Social Things* by Charles Lemert into the class. I advertised it as a central component to the class, but students believed the book to be impenetrable, and only tangentially related to class work.

Surprisingly, a fair number of students indicated that they did not agree that I provided constructive criticism of their work.

The grading can be a little harsh. I know he has high expectations, but sometimes they prove to be too high.

The instructor berates his student’s work if he doesn’t agree with them.

I felt that I was attentive to highlighting excellent work, and to respond to problems with solid suggestions. On journals in particular, because I gave them the opportunity to disagree and argue with me if they chose without fear of grade penalty, I also felt that I could respond assertively. It would appear that this at times came across as intimidating, and I must address this in the future.

Finally, evaluations revealed three things that I already knew. First, everyone loves to dance, and will remember social roles for their lives. Second, I end all sentences with “OK” when I’m a little nervous, and it appears to have interfered with the concentration of some students.
And third, my handwriting is terrible - perhaps one day I’ll have TAs to write my comments through dictations.

In general, their evaluations overwhelmed me. Many of my students indicated that they wanted to take classes from me in the future. Given the grievances many students share about teaching at UNC, I took this as the highest compliment.