Virtual Sociology: The Class List Considered by Teacher, Teaching Assistant, and Student

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Abstract: This paper discusses a class list that was implemented for an Introduction to Sociology course at the University of British Columbia. The list proved popular on all sides, extending the discussion between students, teacher and teaching assistant well beyond the familiar constraints of the classroom. Yet its success as an alternative discursive space exceeded its putative intent, for it altered, not just the teaching of sociology, but the sociology of teaching and learning. The discourse about sociological knowledge, through the new opportunities and problems afforded by the list, made manifest the dynamics of the presentation and production of that knowledge: in short, a virtual sociology. Reflections on these themes are given from the three perspectives of teacher, teaching assistant, and student.

Resume: Get article discute d'une liste de diffusion qui a ete mise en place pour un cours d'introduction a la sociologie a la University of British Columbia. La liste de diffusion s'est averee un succes en poussant la discussion entre etudiants, professeur et assistant a l'enseignement au-dela des contraintes traditionnelles de la salle de classe. Pourtant, son succes en tant qu'espace discursif alternatif adepasse son intention putative en celaque la liste de diffusion amodifie non seulement l'enseignement de la sociologie mais egalement la sociologie de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage. Le discours sur les connaissances sociologiques qui est ressorti des nouvelles occasions et des nouveaux problemes engendres par la liste de diffusion ont clairement revele la dynamique de la presentation et de la production de ces connaissances: en somme, une sociologie virtuelle. Les reflexions sur ces themes sont presentees de trois perspectives, celles du professeur. de I'assistant a l'enseignement et des etudiants.

Virtual Sociology: Three Perspectives on a Class List

The list in an undergraduate introduction to sociology course

Lists are rudimentary group-oriented extensions to now ubiquitous e-mail. They are enormously popular with those on the Internet, and their subjects span the gamut from Bourdieu to female bodybuilding to *Ally McBeal.* because they are often managed through university computer networks, they are usually easy to implement on any campus. At the University of British Columbia (UBC), a one-line e-mail message to the local "majordomo" suffices. The heart of a list is a virtual post-box that is maintained on a central server (a dedicated networked computer). Each e-mail message sent to that post-box is automatically distributed as a "post" to every subscriber to the list. In a university setting, a list comprised of students, teacher, and teaching assistant(s) provides the means to an extended -

although not real-time - discussion via the Internet. Many institutions provide universal, if invariably limited, Internet access to their students. At UBC, students are automatically given ten free hours per month through their library privileges, with additional time available at moderate extra cost. Free terminal access is provided at various locations across campus, including large centers at both the undergraduate library and a central Faculty of Arts facility, as well as smaller departmental, sites. Of course, many students have their own computers and modems, and can log in at their convenience from home. So while access is universal at UBC. it is by no means equal. Owing to the popularity of the Internet, students who don't have their own personal computers often have to line up for many minutes to use a time-limited terminal at the library. Nonetheless, it is our position that the Internet is sufficiently accessible for every student at UBC to make a class list viable.

During the 1996-97 academic year, a list was instituted for one of several sections of Introduction to Sociology at UBC. Subscription to the list was highly recommended and heavily promoted, although not mandatory. 15% of the final grade was allotted to participation, but those marks could be earned outside of the list as well, through classroom participation, private e-mail with the teacher, and/ or face-to-face discussion with the teacher and/or teaching assistant. Here are a few parameters of our particular situation: of a total of 85 students registered in the course, 73 ultimately subscribed, although a few of those did not do so until very near the end of term. Every one of those 73 posted at least once to the list. 42 posted at least five times, and many posted much more frequently. The highest number of posts from any one student over the length of the course was 78. An average weekday had about seven new posts.

What follows are three reflections on this list, by the teacher, the teaching assistant, and a student who participated extensively on the list.

Subverting the Thoroughness of Sociological Knowledge: The Teacher on the List

A class list is typically figured as a pedagogical tool or technological resource, and therefore as a kind of extension with respect to the classroom. Such relegation is necessary to sustain the classroom as the definitive locus of teaching. However, our list exceeded its putative supplementarity, and by asserting its relative independence, reconfigured itself as a kind of virtual symposium. Moreover, since, in good Lacanian fashion, the virtual or the imaginary is the condition of the real, this has meant that the fundamental relation of the classroom to teaching has been transformed.

This shift was somewhat by intent, although my own real power in the matter, even as the teacher who set up and managed the list, was always limited, institutional privilege notwithstanding. By the nature of its own artifice, a list tends to exploit its potential to open up an alternative discursive space, even in the face of determined policing to the contrary. Having less of the patrol officer in me than many suspected, I sought from the beginning to advance this quasi-liberation from the classroom, and limited my explicit regulation of the list to cautions about

netiquette. No "flaming" was allowed - that is, no insults, smears, or snide denigrations were tolerated. Of course, everyone on the list knew that I would be reading everything that was posted, so over and above my modulated moderation there was always the absent presence of my surveillance. Still, I was hardly the only observer, for while any list is as much a panopticon as it is a symposium, the crucial twist is that everyone on the list can watch - or at least read$^{3}/_{4}$ everyone else. The Internet has a name for people like me, who subscribe to a list but rarely join in the discussion: a lurker. I can't know with any certainty what effect my lurking had, but I do know that the list was very well-mannered compared to others I belong to. Thankfully, no student compared any other to animal excrement, as I have seen happen on other lists.

Despite my invisible restraining hand, the independence of the list was plain, for it was chiefly there that students regularly challenged and debated what I and the teaching assistant said in the classroom. If, lurker that I was, I didn't completely disappear from the list, regardless of how deliberately reticent I was, my status nonetheless changed significantly. The list altered the social structure of the course, insofar as it provided a virtual space for an alternate, mostly acephalic structure. As a collective *logos* of a situated *socius,* it returned to the classroom to reconfigure the latter's sociology, in more ways than one.

It is by now a commonplace that good teaching seeks an interactivity of the classroom. While the truth of this commonplace is still moot, that quality is definitive of a list, because, if the teacher is truly reticent, the list is constituted as pure interactivity. It is initiated, sustained, directed and transformed by the polyvalent and mutual discourse of its subscribers. In this respect, it is nothing like a lecture or even an ordinary Internet homepage, both of which are paradigmatically articulated by one person and read by many (which may explain the growing and suspect popularity of homepages in the academy). A list works against the discourse of the Master - which means that it effects, if not some radical democracy of the classroom, certainly a displacement of the teacher's institutionalized status as *sujet suppose savoir* (Lacan's term for the "subject assumed to know"). And the displacement of the master of knowledge entails a displacement of the status of knowledge as such.

The standard UBC teaching evaluation has a question that asks if the teacher "demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the subject." The great promise of a list for me as a sociology teacher is that it offered me the opportunity to score lower on this question. Of course, I'm being rather disingenuous in saying this, for as a sessional teacher desperately hoping for contract renewal and as a PhD candidate looking apprehensively ahead to a dismal job market, I craved high evaluation marks as much as any other teacher. Nonetheless, in an impossibly ideal world, where job offers and tenure would fall like the gentle rain of heaven upon the productive and conscientious, 1 still maintain sociology would be precisely the place where the thoroughness of knowledge would be challenged.

If we take sociology seriously - more seriously, alas, than other disciplines are wont to take it these days - then we must take its oft-ballyhooed reflexivity to heart.

That is, sociology must be meet for sociological critique, and the sociology of knowledge must inevitably lead to the contestation of any body of knowledge as utterly self-consistent, objective, falsifiable, or complete. What sociology is ultimately about is the subversion of the very thoroughness of knowledge. The discourse of the institutionalized and disciplined academy is no less a social construction of reality than any other social phenomenon, and therefore no less contestable or resistible.

Postponing, for now, any dive into the deep and treacherous waters that this proposition opens up, let me close by merely noting that the theoretical prominence of language has been the engine of much of the best social theory of the *newfm-de-siecle.* From that perspective, the singular power of the list is that it is discourse distilled down to language. On a list, only words appear on the computer screen. The list is therefore effective sociologically because it is articulated, in both senses of the word: it is enunciated in language and it is coupled in ways that allow flexibility, jointedness, movement and intellectual life. A list is much less linear than its name implies. It exemplifies what John Fowles wrote of language itself: it is "like shot silk; so much depends on the angle at which it is held" (1969, p. 457-458). In the sociological inquiry into the social, what matters most is the sometimes deft, often clumsy, but always ongoing manipulation of such angles, whose different lights illuminate precisely the shortfall of thoroughness of discursive knowledge. The list simply provides that other and critical space by which the real articulation of sociology is made possible.

Teaching in the virtual community: The teaching assistant on the list

The classroom electronic discussion list. A medium over which I enthused, and in which I lost myself too often. What a great idea, I thought- until, that is, I began to consider my role vis-a-vis the list, as the teaching assistant in the class. How should I use the list, and for what? Should I be a presence on it at all? If I am to be involved, how much should I intervene? Should I respond as a fellow cyber-being? Should I maintain a distance? Was I a peer? Should I ask questions to facilitate direction and sociological thinking?

A recent discussion on an electronic list of college and university based sociology teachers (TeachSoc) had provided many examples of classroom discussion list experiences and not a few suggestions for their future use. Few teaching assistants, however, posted on the topic. The role of one had been merely to record the number of posts per student (anonymous post, 1996), whilst another conducted discussions and

On our list, the virtual community slowly swelled as students came on line. Some were lurkers, some gained the courage to enter into the discussions. Some posted often, others hardly at all. A fairly large group was vociferous from the very beginning. The quality of on-line interaction had concerned several members of the TeachSoc list. They had found that little critical thinking occurred, even when structured questions to encourage this were posted. Those questions tended to be answered somewhat inadequately and discussion did not result as expected. Individual creativity and group dialogue were limited (Scarce, 1996). This was not so in our case. Timidity, at least in expressing one's ideas, did not seem a factor, even for those for whom a list was a new experience. Discussions of newly introduced sociology concepts quickly took off. Discussions weren't limited to textbook concepts, but instead extended to other texts, such as those of poetry and popular culture, as well as brief student narratives of life experiences. Not everyone agreed with others' positions, and the sociology of the list was happily evidenced in vigorous debates. Posts often concluded with questions that were simultaneously deferential and inviting: "What do you guys think?" "Any comments?" "Am I way off track?"

I loitered for a while before subscribing to the list, and once I did. I too lurked. At first students contacted me via personal e-mail about administrative issues or to request advice on essays. Over the course of the term, many continued to use this route. My first forays into what was fast becoming a virtual classroom thus occurred off the list, in my providing of references and suggestions. My feelings about the list itself remained somewhat schizophrenic: I agonized over unintended consequences of directive approaches, yet still wanted to be a full participant. Ironically, my procrastination turned out to be a saving grace, preventing what could easily have become a flaming row between one of the students and myself.

On one day, oppression and privilege were fresh on everyone's minds, because that had been the topic in class. I had used myself as an example to illustrate the consequences of group membership and the power relations between various groups. One student had posted the following immediately after class:

> This brings me to Raewyn's comment about herself being part of a majority, but also part of a minority. She declared herself female and therefore in a minority because of job limitations. Again people make of their life what they want to and for all of those who feel they are part of a minority, GOOD, it allows for more opportunities for us who feel we are part of a majority. I guess the new president of this university has not effected *[sic]* the outlook on women and their job limitations.

I read this as a personal attack, and it was all I could do to keep my fingers from scurrying across the keyboard, tapping out an instant response. Had I failed so miserably in class instruction that one of my students continued to believe that social structure had so little to do with the shaping of our lives? At a more personal level, what of the accusation that I, as an individual, was to blame for life circumstances that was now being constructed as undesirable? Taking netiquette seriously, I waited a few days before replying. In the meantime, many of my

students eloquently intervened, in some cases speaking on my behalf, in others pointing to the sociological aspects of this misadventurous message.

Once the list established itself, the class came to consist of two collective cultures: a virtual community and an IRL ("in real life") community. The latter was an aggregation of personae interacting through words and stories, stripped of the nuances of voice and intonation, of glances, shrugs or smiles. A virtual classroom is one of asynchronous conversation, where multivocality becomes explicit and enhanced, in which those silenced in other circumstances may perhaps participate more fully and aggressively (Maxwell, 1996). This too was noted on the TeachSoc list, and several of those subscribers observed that some of the most thought-provoking comments on their lists came from students who didn't speak at all in the IRL class (Scarce, 1996; Brewer, 1996; Wood, 1996).

All participants could produce messages at once in the virtual community of the list if they so desired. Students entered into and out of the community at will, and subject matter that had apparently faded on the list could resurface at any time. Several discussion threads occurred simultaneously, and not only was there group multivocality, but also individual heteroglossia.

In contrast, it was an IRL community that met to learn in a physical classroom. Characterized by oral language, it was for the most part, a space in which only one person could speak at a time. The teacher became the orchestrator of turn-taking protocol, and group attention became a scarce commodity. Those members of the group most accustomed to wielding power, or the most competitive, usually got the largest share of this resource. IRL communication is based on visual identifiers, whereas in cyberspace, everyone is in the dark (Rheingold, 1993).

The two communities did not, however, exist separately. Discussions oral and virtual opened new discursive spaces, creating new opportunities for learning. Face-to-face classroom discussion was picked up and extended in the virtual classroom, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Students became noticeably more vocal in the IRL classroom, possibly buoyed by having thought through and tried out their ideas on-line. Other teachers have noted that a class list encouraged an emerging sense of "groupiness," which fed into class morale and identification (Wood, 1996; Rosenwein, 1996).

Computerized learning in sociology has been hailed in the literature as beneficial to students in a variety of ways. Whether seen as simulating the fast changing, high tech environment in which their futures lie (Magnusson-Martin, 1995, pp. 1, 6; Hartmann, 1991, p. 54), or legitimizing the discipline, or providing an alternative learning style to a visually-oriented student population (Magnusson-Martin, 1995, pp. 1,6), the use of computers in sociology classes has been enthusiastically lauded. Teachers vigorously applaud the more creative and independent work-style among students, the classroom high in enthusiasm and engagement with the material, and the students' fast-developing critical thinking skills, motivated by the teacher's new found and enhanced ability to deliver instruction (Hesse-Biber and Kesler-Gilbert, 1994, p. 19). Whilst not referring to electronic discussion lists per se.

many of these same benefits have accrued in the interaction between the physical and the virtual communities of the introductory sociology class.

Misunderstanding as a way to sociology: A student on the list

I felt angry and decidedly misunderstood. I was close to tears as I sat in front of my dull computer screen and stared at the most recent message. The class list had been discussing the notion of culture when I had responded to another student's comment. I thought that my post was in good faith, framed with the respectful decorum expected on our list; nevertheless, this student had come back with a sharp and obviously annoyed retort. After making considerations of my tendency to be overly sensitive, I remained surprised and hurt. Not only had she completely misunderstood what I had written, she also thought that I had personally attacked her. It seemed that 1 had become her enemy and 1 didn't even know why.

I was so perplexed that 1 scanned through my out-box and brought my original post up on the screen. How could she have come to the conclusion that I had specifically challenged her. when I couldn't even recall mentioning her name or questioning the validity of her views? I knew that I had been careful to avoid stridence in all of my posts and rereading them confirmed it. After all, I had been thoroughly trained in the norms thought appropriate for undergraduate students. Academic discourse, I had accepted, always sought to uphold the virtues of mutual respect and maturity. In this spirit, I tried to sift out what had led to her evident irritation.There was nothing. Annoyed myself now by her flagrant misinterpretation, I shut off my computer and vowed to never again submit to the list. That determination lasted less than a day, however, and I was back on the list trying to justify and explain my previous assertions about culture. I had more than one reason to want to resolve that miscommunication. Just a few days before, I had agreed to join my teacher and our teaching assistant in a joint presentation on the merits of a course list. How could I extol the virtues of something that had just proven to be so problematic and irritating?

Until this point in the course, I had recognized the list as a literal space in which I could freely participate with my peers, so that its challenge for us all was one of self-expression and articulation. After this confrontation, however, I began to see the list as a more dynamic and less coherent community, one that often required clarification in its language as it negotiated the uncertain relations between its participants. I quickly learned that my previous assumptions about the list did not capture its totality. The list was not simply a discussion of sociology, but also comprised the kind of social group that sociology took as its object of study. When we argued about sociology, we were reflexively enacting sociological process, and either complying with or resisting the norms of our group. Submitting to the list, therefore, had both literal and metaphorical meanings. Likewise, misunderstanding became both a failure in the process of understanding and a simple disagreement or quarrel.

Regardless of my increased awareness about the list, why this misunderstanding had to rear its ugly head at me was beyond my own reasoning at this point. Wasn't

I the same clear and articulate writer that my high school teachers had praised? Wasn't I the conscientious and agreeable student that I had always striven to be? After some reflection, the paradoxical answer I discovered was that I was and I wasn't. As the debates, rebuttals, clarifications and misunderstandings on the list continued, I began to realize that language did not always function as an effective and objective tool of communication. Not because it isn't a tool, but because it is much more than that.

In fact, these subtleties and discrepancies in the use of language seemed to have somehow transmuted from being problems of communication to the very force, which drove the list. Although these occasional frustrations and misunderstandings first appeared to be nothing short of trivial disagreements, they kept the list alive and open - they thwarted the terminal effects of closure. Misunderstandings required clarification, evoked passionate responses and ultimately furthered the discussion.

Frustration became my teacher. When I was faced with the seeming misunderstanding of my classmate, my frustration pushed me to become aware of the ways in which the incongruities of language could provide alternate ways of approaching a particular issue. The point was that I was still the articulate writer that my teachers had praised, but simply being articulate wasn't always enough. Even clear writing misfired and I was forced to recognize, in good sociological fashion, that such misfires were inseparable from the social locations of myself and my classmates and the social differences between each of us. Consequently, I had to be sociological enough to reinvent my discursive self on the list. When I sat down to respond to my classmate's comments, I had to approach them differently and momentarily deny the "proper" perspective in which I had been schooled so well. As Saul Bellow writes, I was necessarily "drawn back to the periphery in order to return to the center from one of [my] strange angles" (1989, p. 54). It was in this way that I began to grasp how the list paradigmatically challenged the notion that knowledge can be completely embodied between the covers of a textbook or the minutes of a lecture hour. Sociology, I had been taught, prided itself on its reflexivity; it seemed the necessary consequence of the list's distinct reflexivity was the destabilization of sociological knowledge itself. Our experiences on the list began to establish an important sociological lesson about the nature of language and discourse.

In a sense, the list necessarily had to fail in order to succeed. Void of these misunderstandings, the list would not have a life of its own, but rather be a regurgitation of debates we had already read in the text or heard from our teacher. I witnessed how the best sociological discussions were initiated when a student on the list felt passionately about an area of knowledge and had invested an obvious amount of personal interest in it. After all, we had been told that sociology is about discovering why we have these investments in certain knowledges. My frustration with the misunderstanding on the list consequently uncovered my attachment to a specific school of thought. It causes me to return to my opinions

and question why I was so desperately trying to defend them. What knowledge was 1 so concerned about that a simple misunderstanding could bring me to tears? In answering questions such as these, we were all forced to not only talk about sociology, but observe it in our own lives.

My experience of misunderstanding in it multifaceted sense mirrored the discourse on the list, a discourse that indeed depended so much on the angle at which it was held. This and other misundersandings on the list challenged particular perspectives and developed and sustained a thorough contestation of knowledge, one approached from every student's own personal angle.

The Sociology of Virtually Not Communicating

These have been three very subjective and limited perspectives on the ramifications of a list in a sociology class, and it would obviously be poor sociology to extrapolate substantial general conclusions from them. Instead, we will conclude by simply explicating a theme shared by these reflections: the sociology that emerged on and from the list derived less from any communicative efficacy than it did from the way that communication misfired. Each of us was affected by that common and conflicted emergence in our individual ways. For Doug Aoki, the instructor of the course, the list materialized the immanently doubled sense of articulation. That is, the list demonstrated how social discourse consistently and irreversibly moves in various ways beyond the strictures of any communicative intent. It is a sociological truism that the pedagogical discourse of sociology is itself a variable social production, but sociology instructors can always profit by being reminded of that fact, and one asset of the list is how it never ceases to make that reminder. The implication is any consistent sociology must teach the inevitability of its own inconsistency, it's own thorough lack of epistemological or pedagogical mastery. For Raewyn Bassett, the teaching assistant, the list delivered two related lessons on pedagogy and sociology. First, the interactivity of the list means that any teacher can be confronted with the impossibility of communicative mastery- as crystallized for Raewyn in that awful moment when she had to ask herself, "Have I failed so miserably in class?" Second, the list, because it is both interactive and multivocal, and can at least partially recuperate that impossibility as pedagogical success. Raewyn also discovered that the peculiarly reductive nature of identity on the list forced her to reconsider her identity in the classroom. It is in such ways that the virtual continually returns to the "in real life." The sociology of identity was also a critical issue for Angela Pridmore, as a student on the list. Miscommunication there unexpectedly pushed her into an engagement with sociology at a personal level, with an intensity that unproblematic communication never could have accomplished. In a way, she discovered herself through the list precisely because she resisted how others interpellated her on the list. Her identity, and thereby the production of identity, were revealed as deeply social and discursive, and these were no mean sociological lessons.

Self-knowledge and the inconsistency of knowledge; teaching and its confrontations; language and its complications$^3/_4$ these are all aspects that we hold

to be vital to sociology and its pedagogy. One of the large benefits of the list that we each experienced, albeit in different and differently located ways, was its ability to make these aspects tangible and thinkable, even if always virtual. We have therefore come to believe in the value of such a list for a certain special capacity: it allowed us to not communicate.

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