The challenge of the social sciences: The impact of Sociology among first year students

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Abstract

Sociology invites transformations among first year students which go through at least three distinct levels. At the conceptual level, three basic concepts, debunking, relativizing and system-relating, challenge public opinion modes of thinking. But students in this course go beyond explicit course examples and perform these notions in a more implicit way. While these shifts are predominantly cognitive, there are, in addition, important psychodynamic currents which underlie them. So, relativizing and the ethnographic perspective (following Gadamer) lead from angry, pathologizing projection to tolerant, theorizing empathy, from monsters to forbearance. System-relating (following Jung) entails a diminution of an inflated ego, a move from grandiose hubris to humility. Debunking and critical theory (following Fanon) relate to the change from victimhood to effectuality, from self-negation and self-negativity to initiative and positive self-identity.

. . . the logic of the human sciences is a logic of the question (Gadamer 1989, 370).

The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said (Geertz 1973, 30).

FIRST YEAR SOCIOLOGY’S AGENDA

In this article I shall argue that the explicit cognitive aims of an introductory sociology course brought about three important transformations among first year students. (See Table 1 below.) Peter Berger argues that sociology has three main aims, those of debunking, relativizing and system-relating (Berger 1966). Debunking is calling the bluff of the way in which both individuals and organizations present themselves in public. More conventionally, it is what critical theory calls ideology critique, the exposure of the ways in which the powerful succeed in legitimizing their positions of societal privilege. Relativizing entails putting into comparative and historical perspective what society accepts as naturalized, normal and unchangeable, it exposes as random what
is regarded as permanent and inevitable. System-relating connects the micro- ‘in here’ with the macro- ‘out there’. It shows the connections between ‘private troubles’ and ‘public issues’, in C Wright Mills’s famous formulation (Mills 1959).

Table 1

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<th>The Sociological Imagination</th>
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<td>Cognitive - Explicit</td>
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Now, these concepts were presented to students via a specific set of pedagogic explanations and diagrams, and backed up by particular examples and exercises. In their grasp of these terms one might expect the average students to stay quite close to the original formulations, examples and exercises. This is what I have called, in Table 1, the cognitive-explicit level of understanding.

What was interesting in this course was that students, in their brief comments on course evaluation forms, were going beyond this. They had imbibed the spirit of these concepts and gone significantly beyond the original conceptual formulations. One common response, for example, was to say, ‘This course has been an eye-opener’ (much of the work in this project was in excavating the further levels of this term, eye-opener). I shall show further on how one can relate these expressions of excitement to each of the three key terms, debunking, relativizing and system-relating. The point to underline here is that we discovered, to our surprise, that sociology was indeed achieving what it claimed to achieve in a broad and cognitive-implicit fashion, and that is no small matter.

In subsequent interviews and focus groups it became apparent that certain students were also experiencing affective shifts related to these three concepts at a psycho-dynamic level. I will use Fanon to show in some detail how the conventional process of empowerment targeted by critical theory has further effects of confidence, robustness, self-identity and enterprising optimism. I will use Jung and Gadamer to show more briefly how the process of system-relating fringes into that of deflating hubris, into being ‘pulled up short’. For Jungians this is an important step on the road to individuation. Finally, I show how relativizing connects to the Freudian process of reclaiming projections, of humanizing stereotypes and monsters, of transforming punitive and pathologizing anger into empathy and tolerance.
Sketching the transitions between these three levels of analysis, especially in tabular form, makes things sound much neater than they actually were. I will argue later on that this is an ideal-typical classification in the Weberian sense, but even then it has quite rough edges.

What were the explicit aims, then, of a first year sociology course taught at the University of Cape Town in 2004? In the language of Peter Berger, the sociological imagination aims to do three things. The first of these is to debunk the public images which individuals and social entities present of themselves (Berger 1966). This parallels critical theory’s goal of unveiling and undermining the subtleties of power in society. It entails particularly the unpicking of the mechanisms by which power is legitimized to become accepted hegemony.

But it is also, for students, a process whereby they break free for the first time of the opinions of teachers, parents and older people. Before, they were taught to respect and repeat the views of the guardians of the doxa. The social sciences calls on them now to formulate from the beginning their own views, to write essays in which they analyse and reflect.

Examples used in the course were:
(a) the awful ‘sweatshop’ conditions which often lie behind, and pay for, glossy advertising;
(b) the excessive salaries paid at times to global corporate CEO’s compared to those of their unskilled workers;
(c) Marx’s depiction of religion as being, in a disguised form, ‘the opium of the masses’;
(d) Marx’s analysis of the compulsions and coercions which are concealed under the ideology of the ‘free’ market; it is anything but free.

The second aim was to relativize opinions which see themselves as unique and absolute by comparing them with equivalent cultural phenomena in other times and other societies. This breaks down into two contrary moves. One is to de-familiarize things that seem very ordinary and banal. The other is to familiarize what seems foreign and outrageous.

On the first move, de-familiarization, we broached the well-known example of a can of Coke or a cup of coffee by showing their oddness and curiousness. This is a quote from the textbook.

What kind of activity is it when, for example, people sit around a table, talking, “having a cooldrink”. And how would the social situation change if they were “having a smoke” with a cigarette in their hand instead of a cooldrink? People “having a smoke” are different from people “having a cooldrink”. And they are different again from people “having a beer” or those “having a cup of tea” or those “having a glass of champagne”. (Graaff 2001)
The other task in relativizing was to familiarize what seems foreign and outrageous. One example here was the torture of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, prominent in the press at the time of the course. The media at the time had made a great deal of these incidents, of the hypocrisy of the US invasion on the pretext of bringing democracy and human rights to an erstwhile oppressive dictatorship, of the outrage at the abandonment of just those human rights and the Geneva Convention dealing with the treatment of prisoners.

In lectures I questioned the implication that the US was unique or singularly evil in perpetrating these atrocities. After all, war is war. Soldiers are taught to hate their enemies. This is the way war has always been, back through thousands of years. What did one expect? Which is not to condone the violations, just that, when ordinary members of society, ‘like you and me’, are put in situations of violent conflict, that’s what happens. Under extreme pressure, anyone can quite quickly lose the semblances of civil, decent behaviour.

It is at the end of this particular lecture that a student approaches me. ‘Isn’t sociology dangerous?’, he asks. I reply, ‘What does that mean?’. ‘Well’, he says, ‘it takes all people’s ordinary beliefs and turns them upside down’.

From another angle, relativizing presents alternatives to truths which believe themselves to be unique, universal and absolute. Where there was one holy book with a single truth, there are now many. Where there was one culture, one nation, one ideology which was inviolable and flawless, there are now many, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Where there was clear and absolute truth, there are now grey areas of ambiguity. In these circumstances it is difficult to sustain beliefs which are based on unsubstantiated exaggeration, that is, stereotypes. In discussion of theories, for example, this process happens on an implicit basis. Students discover that no theory is perfect, that all have their flaws and their benefits, that theorizing is very much a matter of debate and weighing up rather than an easy black-and-white judgment.

Up to this point I have considered two legs of the sociological imagination, debunking and relativizing. The third leg of the sociological imagination is to show how seemingly free-floating entities connect up into wider societal systems and theoretical frameworks, what I have called system-relating. One way to do this is to show how apparently impersonal phenomena ‘out there’ have very tangible personal effects ‘in here’, how what is intimately personal has systemic connections to what is universal and ancient. So, in the case of globalization, lectures focused at the micro level on the new religions, psychopathologies, identities, and entertainment which accompanied the macro-‘juggernaut’; how religious fundamentalism flows from the identity threat posed by cultural globalization; how, in the case of Durkheim’s suicide, very private distress and anomie are the product of unseen broader social systems like religious affiliation, urban or rural residence and marital status.

At another level, theoretical explanation was presented as a case of pattern-building, of the interconnectedness of system parts, of how apparently disparate elements influence each other behind the backs of individuals. Thus, both functionalism’s notion of
latent function and Marxism’s notion of false consciousness indicate the unacknowledged systemicity of society, how small pieces fit into bigger puzzles in ways that individuals are unaware of.

**COURSE EVALUATIONS: EYE-OPENERS AND I-OPENERS**

Below I consider student responses to this curriculum by means of a distributed course evaluation questionnaire. This entailed a set of statements to which students gave responses. Among these were open-ended questions asking, ‘Which particular topics made the greatest impression on you? And why?’ and ‘Did this course change your mind on some things?’.

As data-gathering instruments course evaluation questionnaires run a gamut of distractions. They typically occur in batches at the end of the semester when all courses are carrying out their rule-determined duties. The questionnaires are then understandably subject to boredom (‘I’m only doing this course as a filler’), cynicism (‘This course didn’t do much for me’), humour (‘Jenny, will you please marry me’), or attention-getting. But some did take the questions seriously.

Here I show how these responses relate to the attributes of the sociological imagination: debunking, relativizing and system-relating. I do this first by categorizing the questionnaire responses.

**Debunking**

Among the sub-headings below, Critical Thinking, and Challenges, are closest to the strict meaning of Debunking. Independent Thinking is not yet the unveiling activity which ideology critique intends, but it is an important step on the way. The closest response is one which says ‘I don’t take things at face value any more’.

1. **Independent Thinking**
   1. “I can now formulate my own opinions.”
   2. “It made me think more critically and on many issues I never had an opinion but now I’ve developed an opinion for myself.”
   3. “I never felt as if I had anything to do with Affirmative Action in fact I didn’t even know anything about it.”
   4. “I didn’t really have any strong opinions, but this course showed me new concepts, and developed my understanding.”
   5. “Sociology helps me to think for myself.”

2. **Critical Thinking**
   6. “. . . I know not to believe everything I see and hear. ‘Question what you know’ will always stay with me.”
7. “It challenged my ‘shallow’ and uninformed opinions and made me realize how little I really know and think about real issues. I feel my ways of thinking have matured.”
8. “…it taught me to have a thorough knowledge on something before drawing conclusion”.
9. “I don’t take things at face value any more, more critical, try to look at situations from all points of view.”
10. “It gave me an informed view, I’m more interested now on where things come from and why.”

3. Challenges
11. “…challenging to our everyday thinking”.
12. “The theories in these sections defied stereotypes and provoked much thought.”
13. “…it makes you think about things that you don’t always want to think about”.

Relativizing
The two sub-categories here only partially cover the range of relativizing. There is, for example, no response which indicates that ordinary things have become strange, although this aspect appears in the interview with Linda below when she says, ‘And the whole world just unravels in front of you’. The most dramatic shift is when someone says ‘I had not realized . . . that criminals need my support and care’. When a student says below, ‘I am now neutral about apartheid’ I understand her/him to be saying ‘I do not consider this to be uniquely evil’.

1. Absolute vs Relative Truths
14. “I realized I had narrow perspectives on some topics.”
15. “I have a more open mind when it comes to issues such as affirmative action and crime.”
16. “I do not have absolute truths.”
17. “…everything is not black and white. Things have grey areas too.”
18. “I am now neutral about apartheid, AA and the role of criminals.”

2. Empathy
19. “I changed my mind as to how I see people, and as to the influence of society on why people do what they do.”
20. “…u realize that circumstance plays a huge role in people’s lives”.
21. “I had not realized that a criminal can be anybody and that criminals need my support and care . . . I now look at the homeless and other marginalized groups differently.”
22. “It made me empathize with (some) rapists and understand where deviant people are coming from.”
23. “Taught me not to judge people too harshly, made me see criminals differently.”
24. “It was made apparent that there could be some justifications for why people commit crime, especially things like rape.”

System-relating

The two sub-categories below align quite neatly with the two meanings of system-relating, social embeddedness, and explanatory theorizing.

1. Social Embeddedness
   25. “I have been tak(ing) (X) . . . as things that does not affect me . . . as other people’s responsibilities. I have now realized that I am part and parcel of everything that happens.”
   26. “It made me look at how much society influences my actions daily.”

2. Explanations
   27. “Affirmative Action. Well it didn’t change my mind but I now know the reasoning so it makes more sense.”
   28. “. . . now I have some of the explanations on things that I did not have answers for”.
   29. “(I got) . . . rounded scientific insight into our everyday life’s”.
   30. “. . . each section gave me deeper, more informed and intelligent view of society which I found immeasurable useful”.

Now, it is clear that there is no precise overlap between student responses and the three basic sociological categories pursued in the course. What we have here is a selection of those responses relevant to these categories, and some patching to compensate for lack of fit. But what is of interest in this classification is how well they do manage to coordinate with the concepts consciously pursued by the course. One might expect where lectures had pursued these ideas, given specific examples and exercises around them, that students would reflect these in a fairly explicit and literal way. They might use the same stories that a lecturer had told in class, repeat the same theoretical points. But what is happening here goes beyond that. In effect, the processes of debunking, relativizing and system-relating have happened in a much wider, substantive and unconscious sense. Students have undergone changes without knowing it. More interestingly, sociology is, in some measure, doing what it claims to be doing. That would be a quite banal statement if courses did not so often fail to achieve what they manifestly aim to do.
PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Up to this point I have shown how sociology’s three-part claim regarding debunking, relativizing, and system-relating, finds purchase in student experience at a cognitive level. Students do not only learn what the course intends them explicitly to learn, but they also take that message on board in a more implicit way. In the following section I want to take that perception one level deeper into the affective sphere. I want to show how each of these three principles has counterparts in the emotional realm. I will connect debunking with Fanon’s notion of empowerment and optimism, relativizing with the Freudian process of reclaiming projections (of encountering the Other), and system-relating to the Jungian notion of deflation.

Let us begin with the process of, *debunking*, which speaks, as I have indicated, to the process of unveiling the hiding places of power. At a first level this is a process which addresses a condition in which the authority of others over oneself is accepted as legitimate through ideologies of divine providence, or of racist biology, or of historical tradition and birth. It can be a situation of victimhood, of hopelessness and of depressed stuckness. Marx’s notion of false consciousness is one mechanism which justifies a position of exploitation, discrimination or of domination.

Fanon takes this one step further by describing the conditions of intracommunal violence, crime, self-hatred, superstition and passivity which arose under French colonial domination in Algeria (Fanon 1968). He goes on to show how contact with native intellectuals and the membership of the nationalist resistance movement transformed communities, effecting a healing process in self-image, optimism, energy and creativity. But this process does not entail only the transformation and healing of the ‘wretched of the earth’, the rural peasants. It needs also the transformation of the native intellectuals, those who had been educated at European universities.

For Fanon, these intellectuals go through a three-stage process. They start, following the thrust of their racist colonial education, in denigrating their own origins and identifying completely with European and Western culture. They assume a self-destructive position of ‘black skins, white masks’. Their second step is to reject Western culture and idolize pre-colonial or African culture. For Fanon, this second step is as sterile as the first. It is only when they take a third step that they assume their own true identities, and are able to play a meaningful role in the resistance movement. In this situation Western culture and native culture fuse to solve the practical and immediate problems of survival and resistance among impoverished peasants. It is here that intellectuals enter the ‘zone of occult instability’ where they are called on to use their full creativity and imagination (Gibson 2003).

Now, Fanon is here describing quite a complex process involving peasants and intellectuals. The process whereby university students in South Africa (many from rural backgrounds) meet academic modes of thinking and analysis, and themselves become intellectuals, draws on elements from both of the poles in Fanon’s peasant-intellectual dialectic. For our purposes, the interesting moment of transformation occurs when
self-negation, depression and stasis changes to initiative, optimism and combative-ness. This is an interesting moment on the path to reintegrating the Other. It is not yet that point of empathy where a previous victim can now see the seductiveness of oppression. But it is a crucial moment where self-blame changes to anger, and where helplessness changes to action. Confronting and battling the Other is a key step on the way to reclaiming projection.

The second principle of our sociology course concerns relativizing and its connection to reclaiming projections. Following Stuart Hall, the process which students undertake in this course can be seen as the movement from stereotype to empathy, from anger to understanding, from repression and projection to a meeting with the Other (Hall 1992). Stereotypes function to essentialize, reduce and naturalize. That means that they reduce a phenomenon to one or two characteristics which are said to represent the whole. Stereotypes simplify and exaggerate. They work to exclude all those characteristics which do not fit the essence. And those characteristics are fixed. It is an attempt is to anchor a world in which foundations feel unstable, vulnerable to the temptations of precisely that which is being exorcised (Hall 1992, 257; Pickering 2001, 79). In practical terms, some students start by saying of rapists that they are monsters who are consumed by lust and sadism, and should be tortured, castrated and branded. They end by saying ‘I understand that criminals also need my empathy’.

Sociology, then, challenges those attitudes which are angry, individualizing, pathologizing and punitive, and presents an alternative which ascribes causality to society rather than the individual, and is tolerant of difference. It replaces a sense of innate evil with a sense of causation, it replaces a sense of blaming and judgment with one of understanding. Emotionally it is less charged and less heated.

Another mechanism which confronts stereotypes is the encounter with the detail of real lives. Being driven by strong emotions of fear, disgust, and disapproval/outrage, stereotypes tend to construct exaggerated and monstrous images. Confronted by ‘real’ people who do not conform, stereotypes are challenged. In this course students read accounts of individuals who were rapists, the communities they came from, and the cultures which produced them, what they said about themselves, and how they explained their actions. Rapists suddenly appeared as ordinary and small compared to the enormity of the stereotypes. In these cases students could begin to feel a measure of sympathy with criminals, they could begin to feel for criminals. The final and most dramatic shift occurs when individuals can acknowledge that stereotypes are suppressed parts of themselves and recognize the criminal or the monster in themselves, they can themselves feel the temptation to commit crime. This is the true case of empathy. Here they begin to feel with criminals.

The third principle to consider is that of system-relating. This principle has the function of emphasizing the social embeddedness of individuals, the degree to which individuals are unable to choose who they are, the hidden nature of much of their social behaviour, and the degree to which they cannot carry full responsibility for who they are. In psychodynamic terms it serves to deflate the importance of the ego, and the belief
that the world can be planned and controlled. It serves to underline the inscrutability
and unpredictability of the unconscious to which they are bound. Jungians speak here
of a sense of inflation, of *hubris*, of grandiose pretension which is brought down to
earth (Edinger 1972), or in Kerdeman’s terms, of ‘being pulled up short’ (Kerdeman
2003). Being pulled up short is to puncture a condition of self-inflation which fails to
recognize the limitations of being human.

What a man (sic) has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but
insight into the limitation of humanity . . . into the absoluteness of the barrier that
separates man (sic) from the divine. (Gadamer quoted in Kerdeman 2003, 297).

Jardine speaks of ‘returning life to its original difficulty’ (Jardine 1992). The Icarus
legend of what happens to overly ambitious and grandiose high-flyers explains this
principle in mythic form.

In the final section of this article I work through a detailed face-to-face interview
as a way of taking the analysis to another level. Up to this point we have looked at the
explicit agenda of a first year course, we have seen how students responded to that at
a more implicit cognitive level. From there we considered the psychodynamic under-
pinnings of each of the cognitive goals. In this final section I look at a case-study of
how these principles play themselves out within the context of a particular individual.
It is a much more contextualized analysis of debunking and system-relating. It shows
the various and particular forms in which these principles express themselves, and it
relates them to the complex circumstances of a particular person, a specific coloured
activist woman in 21st century South Africa. Put differently, the principles of debunk-
ing and system-relating are filtered through a quite complex situation, and they play
off each other in quite specific ways.

**LINDA: ‘AND THE WORLD JUST UNRAVELS IN FRONT OF YOU’**

This is a face-to-face interview with an older (29 years old) ‘Coloured’ woman whom I
will call Linda. She has been a community worker, an activist, an actress. Her family is
strongly political. Her mother is also a community worker, mayoress of a town, a writer.
She is much concerned about ‘Coloured’ identity. I introduce the topic of the interview,
saying I want to pursue ‘the bits that struck you’, ‘the kind of things that perked you
up, got your eyebrows raised’. She responds enthusiastically and with energy.

She speaks about her community work, that it made her feel that she had no frame-
work, no ‘intellectual basis’. She felt frustrated. I push her to elaborate on the words
she uses. She responds, ‘I just found myself struggling more because I couldn’t put
my finger on what it was that I needed to focus on – and coming to the university and
doing sociology, archeology, anthropology and drama put it all into perspective’; ‘. . .
I felt like I couldn’t go any further, intellectually I couldn’t go further because I
didn’t . . . and I was grasping at straws, I would read books and *I couldn’t put them*
into context with anything because I didn’t have a grounding, and then I realized that I need to come to university; ‘... I couldn’t argue, I couldn’t debate, I couldn’t write ... When I wrote a report, I struggled, because I couldn’t substantiate ...’.

Coming to university made a significant difference. It did many of the things she wanted it to. And things start to change for her, connections are made, things fit into broader historical and theoretical perspectives. She says: ‘... I mean, (sociology) is not only a subject, it’s something which you can apply every day in your life. You open newspapers. You read articles. I mean the articles may not say that this is Weber or whatever, but if you know the thing you can apply it, and the world just unravels in front of you’; ‘... I am excited about learning ... and I don’t get depressed any more because I am realizing that if you educate yourself you can make the difference ... You can change it as you go along.’

Here is the experience of coherence for Linda. Things that were confusing and random start falling into place. They make sense in a theoretical perspective. This is a strong experience of system-relating. But more than that, she sees the implications for action which seemed to be blocked before. ‘You can change it as you go along.’

Being at university gave her a lot of confidence. She tells this story. ‘I put up my hand (in one of the lectures) and said “Um, I’m sorry, I don’t like the use of the word, coloured, in class”, and he was like “But, but, but, you know, we use it all the time”. And I said, “Then, no, you should change it, this is the place where you change words. A university changes words.” And then afterwards he was so scared. Every time he used the word, coloured, then he searched me out. (Laughter) So this is what university has done for me. It’s made me put up my hand and say “Listen” and you don’t have to be aggressive about it.’; And then again later, ‘Ja, (university) gave me confidence ...’.

Here is the fruit of the empowerment that academic authority gives to Linda, here is the substantiation that she was looking for. She is able to confront in quite a robust way a senior academic in a public arena. Academia gives here ‘voice’ is a most powerful way.

In a later essay discussing Fanon’s notion of violence, Linda writes: ‘His theory preaches for the need for colonial people to shake off colonial oppression by force and violence, not merely as a military technique but as an essential psychological precondition to independence. ... (Violence) not only frees the native from his inferiority complex and restores his self-respect.’ In her own moment of revolution, challenging a senior academic, Linda herself breaks through the limits of academic etiquette. She commits social violence as an expression of her self-respect and settled identity. She finds a different identity, particularly coloured identity, at university. She moves away from the values of the acting world, and embraces those of community work and political activism: ‘... I went into acting. I discovered that actors are very selfish, self-absorbed’; ‘I literally rebelled, drank, went clubbing ... And then I think coming to university was the culmination of me finding my space in Cape Town ...’.

In her community she has a programme teaching children about their cultural history and origins. ‘They need to understand why they lack pride. And in understanding why
they lack pride, it just covers the historical aspects of it, the psychological aspects of it, the geographical aspect of it, because our forefathers didn’t come from here – they were brought here . . .’.

In teaching children, Linda is teaching herself. She is showing them and herself the opportunities for action against racial prejudice and discrimination. The world of acting was, in a sense, an expression of melancholy and self-negation, a cul de sac. It was an important part of her, but the encounter with the social sciences puts acting into a different perspective, its brings her down to earth, pulls her up short. Political activism gives her direction, optimism and the capacity to act on the world, to penetrate and understand the Other which is apartheid. It gives her through theoretical diagnosis, the power to treat the disease. She has found a way to battle the Other, to strategize, to formulate an array of options. Here there is the possibility of making a difference, of changing her own situation, there is the prospect of ‘winning’. This is very close to Fanon’s notion of a fighting culture. She experiences the same enlivenment and engagement as the Algerian peasants did, the transformation of their self-hate, depression and intra-communal violence. Both implicitly and explicitly, the engagement with Fanon’s version of critical theory is a revelation for Linda.

In brief, coming to university (from acting) for Linda means the movement from pessimistic stasis to optimistic and theorized action. And that movement flows through two of the legs we have identified: one through system-relating – seeing the interconnectedness of the world, understanding how it fits together, and where she fits into it; the other, through debunking, the undercutting of ancient structures of racial power which have seeped deep into the psyches of coloured people. She takes the first steps in the move towards encountering the Other. Confronting and battling the Other is, as I have indicated, not yet reintegrating the Other. This will be a further and more complicated step but an important journey has begun.

At a broader level the interview also shows an intriguing narrative structure. It stitches together four fragments. First, Linda, in her telling, starts with nagging feelings of incapacity and frustration. ‘I couldn’t argue, I couldn’t debate, I couldn’t write’, she says. Second, and alongside this, she struggles with her own identity. She tries out being an actress. ‘I literally rebelled, drank, went clubbing’. These are her points of departure, setting the stage for the journey and transformation to come.

Then, thirdly, being at university in the social sciences brings about exciting changes for her. She discovers theory and what it can do for her, ‘and the world just unravels in front of you’. And, finally, she rejects acting, ‘actors are very selfish, self-absorbed’, she discovers her own voice, her own confidence in confronting her professor. Here is the fulfillment of the journey, the denouement of a budding process (Gergen 2001).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY?**

A question which often gets asked of this kind of research is what it means for improving our teaching. Can we see pointers which indicate roads to better pedagogy? What are
the things which lecturers can do to make a difference? All these are difficult questions to answer. At one level, I do not think it is possible to show causal connections here. At another level, and given the interstitial stage in which many students find themselves, the emotional consequences of teaching are extremely unpredictable. And it was the aim of this article to investigate learning rather than teaching. (Elsewhere I have tried to spell out some of the pedagogic implications of Gadamerian hermeneutics.2) Kerdeman also has extremely interesting things to say about the kind of teaching which induces a condition of ‘being pulled up short’ (Kerdeman 1988, 2003).

It is important to underline that the progression that I have traced, from cognitive aims to implicit outcomes and then to emotional underpinnings, is a deceptively simple one. One might be tempted to think that this is what all students do, that each student moves seamlessly from one dimension to the next, that what students said in course evaluations and interviews all conformed to this neat itinerary. One only has to pose this question to see immediately how flawed the picture is. I have indicated at various points in the course of the article how messy the categorization is. Also, course evaluation questionnaires are difficult research instruments, and I have excluded those responses which are irrelevant to my purposes. Likewise the interview with Linda is an example of one particular response from a range of responses within a series of individual and focus group interviews. Even as an extract, it does point to some of the complexity involved in individual responses.

But this is the nature of qualitative and ethnographic research. This is, in Weberian terms, an ideal typical classification which connects up a quite specific inner logic from within the variety of social phenomena. It is both a conceptual clarification and an elaboration of associated conditions, rather than an interrogation of causal sequences or a full inventory of an infinite empirical universe. All of this makes it more rather than less difficult to draw conclusions and indicate precise guidelines for the black box which is good teaching. But ethnographic studies add considerable colour and richness to the black box, sharpen sensitivities and empathies, tune the ear to finer listening. These are, in Clifford Geertz’s terms, the ‘answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given’, in the headquote of this article.

ENDNOTES

1. This is an essay from a second year course which I also taught in the following year, 2005. It comes therefore six months later than the original face-to-face interview, but it continues themes that were already apparent at the start.

2. Those with a discerning eye will have sensed the spirit of Hans-Georg Gadamer floating over many parts of this article (See Graaff 2004; Graaff, Reed and Shay 2004).

REFERENCES


