Scribo Ergo Cogito: Reflexivity through Writing

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One of the most famous statements of the Western world is the Cartesian dictum, *cogito ergo sum*: I think therefore I am. Even those who are unaware of the Latin origins of the phrase or who have never heard of René Descartes may still be familiar with a version of this statement. I believe an argument can be made for a parallel dictum, *scribo cogito sum*: I write therefore I am. Writing gives us the ability to do many things and it serves many purposes, all of which reflect and shape who we are. Writing may be therapeutic and help make us whole through the process of journaling and writing autobiographies. Writing may be a liberating tool for social change when we craft advocacy letters or statements of protest. Writing may have emotional elements such as when we pour our hearts out in a love letter. And writing may be aesthetic when the beauty and essence of the world is captured though literature. In all of these instances, the act of writing helps define the writer and gives meaning to one’s everyday existence.

In addition to the affective and instrumental dimensions of writing in which our sense of self is crafted though the written word, writing also plays a significant role in the process of thinking. Writing is not just the act of putting words on the page through pen or keystrokes; writing is a cognitive act in which we must exercise our brains to express ourselves through words. Before we can craft sentences and phrases we must consider not only what words and phrases we intend to use but also why we intend to use some words and not others. In this sense, writing and thinking are inextricably linked. One cannot engage in the process of writing without simultaneously engaging in the process of thinking. In effect, the relationship between writing and thinking can be expressed with a third Cartesian-inspired dictum, *scribo ergo cogito*: I write therefore I think.

The notion of “writing as thinking” has long been recognized by scholars from a range of disciplines (Dickerson 1978; Kovac 2003; Oatley and

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**Abstract**

This article builds on the concept of “writing as thinking” by describing an in-class, cumulative, peer-writing exercise that helps foster reflexivity. Reflexivity is understood as a process of seeing and a process of being. To be reflexive means that we are fully conscious of the lenses through which we view the world. It suggests that we understand both our situationality and our positionality. In this sense, reflexivity is an essential component of the sociological imagination. Three themes of reflexivity commonly arise from this exercise: developing reflexivity, reinforcing reflexivity, and resisting reflexivity. These themes are discussed and illustrated with full-length excerpts of students’ work.

**Keywords**

classroom-based exercises, sociological imagination, student writing
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Djikic 2008; Stoehr 1967). The general sentiment is that writing allows us to express ourselves symbolically and concretely. It provides us the space for internal dialogue about issues with which we may not have fully formulated our ideas. Putting words down on paper or on the computer screen harnesses our agency to produce and reproduce our feelings, attitudes, and beliefs in myriad ways. In this sense, as Bean (2011:xvi) argues, writing is key to our academic and intellectual development:

The most intensive and demanding tool for eliciting sustained critical thought is a well-designed writing assignment on a subject matter problem. The underlying premise is that writing is closely linked with thinking and that in presenting students with significant problems to write about...we can promote their general cognitive and intellectual growth.

Even before this special issue of Teaching Sociology, there has been a growing literature on the use of writing in the sociology classroom, and a prevailing theme in this scholarship is the extent to which writing and thinking are linked (Althauser and Darnall 2001; Hudd and Bronson 2007; Hudd, Smart, and Delohery 2011; Kebede 2009; Macy 2006; Massengill 2011). These authors offer insightful recommendations for incorporating writing into the sociology curriculum as a way to foster critical, higher-order thinking. Much of this work focuses on two themes: the construction and implementation of writing-intensive course (Grauerholz 1999; Malcom 2006; Massengill 2011) and the use of graded writing assignments (Althauser and Darnall 2001; Bidwell 1995; Hudd and Bronson 2007; Kebede 2009). Missing from this literature are writing activities that can be implemented in a single-class session. As Massengill (2011:372) suggests, well-crafted writing exercises have the potential to help students “develop habits of mind that encourage deep thinking.” Although Massengill (2011) does not specifically discuss one-day exercises, such succinct classroom activities may be an important mechanism in this process of cognitive socialization.

In this article, I build on this idea of writing as thinking by detailing an in-class exercise I use to help students become more reflexive through writing. Reflexivity has been a consistent theme in the teaching sociology literature as both a topic to teach and an intellectual perspective to impart (Erickson 2001; Friedrichs 1987; Hsiung 2008; Jenkins 1995; Long 1995; Stevens and VanNatta 2002; Vera 1982; Walzer 2001). When I speak of reflexivity I am referring to a process of seeing and a process of being. To be reflexive means that we are fully conscious of the lenses through which we view the world. We understand both our situationality and our positionality, our circumstances and our locations. Reflexivity is an important component of the sociological imagination in that it requires a deep awareness of one’s biography and history (Mills 1959).

One of the first sociologists formally to discuss reflexivity was Gouldner (1970:490), whose simple statement still resonates today: “A Reflexive Sociology means that we sociologists must—at the very least—acquire the ingrained habit of viewing our own beliefs as we now view those held by others.” This understanding is similar to Bourdieu’s notion of reflexivity in which we thoroughly analyze the “unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought” (quoted in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:40). For Gouldner and Bourdieu, as well as numerous feminist researchers who echo many of these themes (Doucet 2008; England 1994; Hertz 1997; Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002), much of the focus on reflexivity centers around avoiding methodological pitfalls. If we are unable to see past our own prejudices and perceptions, then we may sully the conclusions we draw. An unreflexive approach also negates the potential influence of the researcher over the research subjects and consequently ignores the power relations between the two. Being reflexive may lessen these tendencies because it necessitates “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (England 1994:82).

The essence of reflexivity is to understand how our worldview is both shaped and constrained by our own subjectivity. In this sense, the importance of being reflexive extends far beyond the methodological realm. Developing “self-critical sympathetic introspection” and the ability for “self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self” are closely analogous to what Mills (1959:5) refers to as the first fruit of the sociological imagination: that individuals...
must recognize where they stand in society and examine themselves closely if they want to fully comprehend their experiences and opportunities. As sociologists we are generally quite skillful in the critical introspection and analytical scrutiny of others. Even introductory students can readily recognize the biases and prejudices of others’ views and actions. However, we are not always so adept at being conscious of who we are (our biographies), where we have come from (our histories), and how these factors influence our own views and actions.

In his discussion of teaching reflexivity, Jenkins (1995:26) drives home this connection between sociology and reflexivity: “Seeing the world sociologically demands that we must learn, to some extent, to stand back and look at ourselves sociologically.” A contemporary example of this is the focus on intersectionality. As Collins (2000) and Weber (1998) point out, in order to grasp the simultaneity of the matrices of oppression we must recognize how we are victimized and how our “thoughts and actions uphold someone else’s subordination” (Collins 2000:287). The challenge and benefit of imparting reflexivity to students is in helping them “understand that there are no pure oppressors nor oppressed people, and that each of them must reflect on their own privilege as well as on their experiences of oppression. . . . Recognizing their own multiple locations can open them to the complexities in the lived realities and experiences of others” (Weber 1998:29).

Cultivating reflexivity is no easy task. In a society characterized by individualism (Callero 2009), conversational narcissism (Derber 2000), victim blaming (Kleinman and Copp 2009), and conspiracies of silence (Zerubavel 2007), getting students to analyze critically their biographies and histories can be difficult. Fostering reflexivity through writing can be doubly problematic given some students’ resistance to the written word. Despite these obstacles, the writing exercise I discuss in the following has proven to be an effective means to help students embark on the path of reflexivity. No single activity will instantly make someone self-consciously analytical; however, class-based exercises such as this one can provide important building blocks for a reflexive stance. These building blocks are crucial because they provide students with the stability to withstand the anti-reflexive societal impulses and they offer students a beginning perspective to see the subjective reality of their seemingly objective experiences.

**THE EXERCISE**

The exercise can be done in a typical 75- to 90-minute class period (or adapted for a shorter class period) and is applicable to almost any course in the sociology curriculum. I have used this writing exercise successfully for many years in courses such as Introduction to Sociology, Sociological Theory, Social Interaction, Education and Society, Social Change, and Sociology of Sport. What makes this exercise so adaptable is that it can be used with any theme that might be connected to issues of reflexivity such as race, gender, sexuality, social class, religion, ability, and nationality.

I begin the exercise by having students take out a full piece of paper. I tell them that I am going to ask them a question and they will have 10 minutes in which they may write a response. I point out that there are no right or wrong answers. They are just being asked to write their thoughts and opinions. They are not being graded on what they write and they should not put their names on the paper (to ensure their responses are anonymous). They need not worry about perfect grammar or word choice. The only requirement is that they try to write as legibly as possible because they will be passing around their papers and reading each other’s responses. I then give them the question by saying it out loud, giving it to them on a sheet of paper, or writing it on the board. Examples of prompts I have used in the past (and the courses I used them in) include:

- Has your education been affected by gender and/or sexuality in any way? (Education and Society)
- As we read in *Fraternity Gang Rape*, Peggy Reeves Sanday (2007) argues that college fraternities degrade and exploit women. What do you think of this assertion? (Education and Society)
- Has the war on Iraq affected your social interactions in any way? If yes, how? If no, why not? (Social Interaction)

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• As we read in *Silent Racism*, Barbara Trepagnier (2010) argues that it is not accurate for white people to identify as racist or not racist; instead, she suggests a continuum of less racist to more racist. She is suggesting that all white people are at least somewhat racist: All whites are “infected” and “no one is immune to ideas that permeate the culture in which he or she is raised” (p. 15). This silent racism could be manifested in people’s thoughts, images, assumptions, and perspectives. Do you agree with Treganier’s (2010) assertion that no white person can accurately claim to not be racist? Explain your answer. (Social Interaction)

• As we read, W. E. B. DuBois (1994:9) famously wrote: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Is this statement still true for the twenty-first century? (Sociological Theory)

• Has physical ability affected your experience with sports in any way? (Sociology of Sport)

• Do you think the use of Native American mascots in sports should be abolished? (Sociology of Sport)

After students have had 10 minutes to write their responses they pass their papers around the room (it is best if the class is seated in a circle or square for this), read the response in front of them, and then write a response to it. After another 10 minutes, we repeat the same process: Pass papers around the room, read the two responses on the sheet in front of you, and then write a response to what you read. I generally continue this format until there are three or four paragraphs on each piece of paper (the original response and two or three cumulative responses). We then pass the papers around one last time until everyone gets back their own paper (deduced by their handwriting and what they wrote initially). Students then have 10 minutes to read all of the responses and write a concluding response.

Before examining examples of how this in-class activity fosters reflexivity it is useful to highlight briefly four distinctive writing components of the exercise. First, this exercise is contemplative in that it provides the time and space to allow the mind to wander and ponder. There is a growing body of literature across all levels of education that points to the benefits of incorporating contemplative practices into the classroom (Brady 2007; Hart 2004; O’Reilly 1998; Zajonc 2006). Engaging in contemplative writing is particularly useful for developing reflexivity because it helps learners to “see themselves within context and to develop skills that will be of use in understanding the world” (Huber 2011:6). The question or prompt that begins the exercise is not one to which most students will have a quick and easy reply. As a result, students need some time to meditate on their response. This contemplative space is especially important if we are using writing as a process of thinking and developing reflexivity.

Second, this is an exercise in free writing (Elbow 1998; Singh and Unnithan 1989). It is not the point in any of the stages of the exercise to produce polished, mistake-free, well-constructed prose. Instead, students should be encouraged to “just write” for the 10-minute segments and free themselves of the compulsion to edit and delete their “mistakes.” Students have been socialized by the red pen to fear any errors in their writing. Consequently, they often resist putting anything down on the page unless they think it is correct. This self-monitoring is not only detrimental to the writing process; additionally, this compromises the thinking process because by self-correcting, students not only get rid of “bad writing” but they also “edit unacceptable thoughts and feelings” (Elbow 1998:5). Without identifying thoughts and feelings that may seem objectionable, our ability to be reflexive will be compromised.

A third and related component of this exercise is that it is an anonymous writing activity. Anonymity is important because it softens the urge to self-censor thoughts and feelings that may be construed as misguided, ignorant, or even offensive. By being able to write freely and anonymously, students will be able to produce material that reflects what they think, who they think they are, and what they imagine the social reality to be. These themes are all
crucial to becoming more reflexive. If students are worried about how they will be judged based on their written responses, then it is unlikely they will get to the point where they can engage in a sympathetic, yet introspective, analysis of their positions and situations. Not having their identities tied to their responses allows students a safe space to write their reality without the fear of being stigmatized, ostracized, or criticized.

The final noteworthy component of this activity is that it is a cumulative, peer-writing exercise. Students are not just writing for the typical audience of two, student and professor. Instead, writing is approached as a conversation (Grauerholz 1999) whereby each member of the class engages with and responds to the thoughts of others (I usually participate in the exercise as a member of the class). Moreover, as Roberts (1993) and Hudd and Bronson (2007) point out, writing is not linear. This exercise reflects the circularity of writing by having students revisit not just their own written work but the comments and written work of others. In terms of fostering reflexivity this component of the exercise is crucial. It is one thing for a professor to offer students a definition and even some examples of reflexivity. It is quite different, and significantly more powerful, for students to read, respond to, and learn from the reflexive and unre- flexive perspectives of their peers.

THEMES OF REFLEXIVITY

The examples discussed in the following come from an Introduction to Sociology class I taught in spring 2012. The class was comprised of 35 students. About 50 percent of the students were taking the course for their major or minor, one-third of them were taking the class to fulfill a general education requirement, and the remaining students were taking it as an elective. The overwhelming majority of the class was first- and second-year students. The exercise was conducted around the midpoint of the semester on the first day we were beginning to discuss race. The reading for the day consisted of two chapters from Schwalbe’s (2007) The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation (“Differences and Inequalities” and “Understanding Power in Social Life”). As the exercise was serving as our introduction to the topic of race, the prompt was intentionally succinct and open ended: “Has your life been affected by race in any way? If yes, how; if no, why not.”

In using this writing exercise the past few years I have identified three themes related to reflexivity that are most pronounced in the students’ responses: developing reflexivity, reinforcing reflexivity, and resisting reflexivity. Although these are not the only themes that arise, they are the most common regardless of the topic or prompt that is used. To gain a full sense of these themes, and more importantly to capture the essence of this exercise, I will include full-length excerpts from the students’ work. All students signed consent waivers to have their anonymous responses used in this article. Obvious spelling and grammatical errors have been fixed for clarity.

Developing Reflexivity

It should not be too surprising, especially in lower-division courses, that the most common theme is that of developing reflexivity. Arguably, most students have not been encouraged (at least in their education) to be self-consciously analytical. The discourse of reflexivity—even without using this term—is not a theme in the social studies curriculum of most high schools. For students who grew up in homogenous settings and who enjoyed the privilege of being members of dominant groups, the prospect of acquiring this critical introspection is even less likely. Nevertheless, even for those students who seem to be lacking a sociological imagination, this exercise provides an opportunity for them to quickly develop their reflexivity. The following example is representative of this process.

Student 1: I have to say that I grew up with very little challenges in my life, especially pertaining to race. I came from a middle-class white family and grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood, so my race never affected me, or my lifestyle.

Student 2: I think because you grew up in a middle-class white family that race did affect you. The very fact that the majority of suburbs are white and urban centers are black is an effect of society and race.
Maybe race didn’t hinder or challenge you as your identity, but it did shape and mold you into society. It also may have created stereotypes about you and how you view others. Perhaps race never directly affected you, but we all suffer the effects of race in this society.

Student 3: I agree completely with the response made. I personally think everyone in this world is somehow, someway affected by the issue of race—whether we realize it or not. I would say maybe you just weren’t really aware of how race was played into your life. I think it doesn’t also have to directly affect you, but in other ways could have been present. Also sometimes, we think because we don’t “see” things, it doesn’t exist.

Student 1: Both of you are completely correct, after I passed my paper there were so many other things that I wanted to write. I feel like I sounded very ignorant and privileged in my statement. But yes, it did shape me into the person I am today, and I am aware of the advantages that my race has for me. Accurately, yes, I have been stereotyped as the “rich-white” girl because I grew up in ______ and am fortunate enough to have been able to go to school my entire life and college. But, I am by no means rich, or act like many other races perceive me as; I like to think of myself as open minded and appreciative of what I have.

In addition to demonstrating the development of reflexivity, this example also highlights the process of writing as thinking. In Student 1’s first response she did not have much to offer in the way of content or substance. As someone who grew up in a relatively privileged and insular environment, she was probably never challenged to think critically about race. As such, it is not surprising that she expressed the view that race had no effect on her life. But after two rounds of thinking, writing, and reading about this question, her perspective seems to have changed considerably. Her follow-up response is full of detailed content and reflexive substance. Now, she expresses certainty that race has had a significant impact on her life and she recognizes the advantages she gained through her structural advantages. It is also notable, and a further indication of her reflexive turn, that she feels somewhat embarrassed by the lack of insight in her initial response.

Even for those students who may be somewhat knowledgeable about social processes such as inequality, understanding how they are personally connected to these issues requires a different level of analysis. As noted earlier, students who are in positions of privilege or who have status in the dominant group may be particularly hard pressed to articulate the ways in which they are affected by social categories such as race. The following example is a good illustration of this. Student 1 knows that race must have an effect but cannot get to the point of self-critical introspection in order to identify how. Much like Student 1 in the first example, it is after reading the responses of others that this student is better able to acknowledge, and subsequently able to write about, the impact of race.

Student 1: Because of the way our society has developed, I feel like it is impossible to say no. However, I am having difficulty coming up with any direct examples that involve me personally.

Student 2: I agree that society plays a crucial role in creating and reinforcing race. Stereotypes of races can be found all over the place in our society. I think the problem is that people can see these stereotypes in the media, but not recognize that they are there. We need to be more aware of stereotypes regarding race because they only reinforce societal norms of race.

Student 3: I think that it is strange that people can honestly say race has never directly affected them. T.V., movies, the Internet, college, etc., should all provide some feeling or reaction to our race and other people’s. I find it outstanding that whites feel like they are exempt from this “race game.” The minute we leave the country and go to a place with diversity, we are stereotyped, judged, and analyzed.
just as much as the next person. I suppose if there were less “white” districts and more intermingling, whites would be just as affected by race and labels as the rest of the world.

Student 1: Indeed. After thinking about it some more and seeing what others had to say, I guess I have been affected. Being white, I haven’t been as aware of these things as I should have been, especially coming from a very non-diverse area. As I’ve branched out, however, I’ve begun to realize just how much of an impact race has on us all.

The experiences of the students in this section can best be summed up as moving from a reflex response to a reflexive response. A reflex is an unconscious, automatic response; there is no thought involved. When asked to comment on the effect of their social position, students in dominant groups often provide an initial reflex response that is impulsive and uncritical. As they engage in the cumulative activity of reading and writing about other students’ responses, these students simultaneously engage in more thinking and reflection about their own situation. This process helps them develop greater reflexivity—a greater awareness of their positionality and situationality—which they are then able and eager to write about in the closing round of the exercise.

Reinforcing Reflexivity

Not all students begin an exercise like this from the same analytical position. Some students, particularly those in upper-division courses, are further along the path of reflexivity than others. It may be from their life experiences in nondominant categories, or it may stem from previous course work in disciplines such as women’s studies, black studies, or anthropology. For these students, this exercise serves more to reinforce their reflexivity than to develop it. Still, this reinforcement is an important process. We must remember that reflexivity is not necessarily encouraged in society. Allowing these students a space to articulate their reflexivity serves to legitimize and give voice to their sociological viewpoint. Moreover, as demonstrated in the previous section, having students with this preexisting inclination toward reflexivity is key because the responses of these students provide the sparks for critical thought among their peers. The following example demonstrates this cumulative, reflexive build-up whereby the insights of the first student are embraced by and developed further by the responding students.

Student 1: My life has been affected by race, because everyone’s has whether they notice it or not. I could be white, Latina, black. Asian, etc., and still have some sort of impact from society due to my race. Since things like racism and racial profiling still exist, I could be getting treated differently due to my race. The white man’s privilege is a huge concept in my life that I probably experience everyday without realizing it.

Student 2: I really enjoyed this. If I am to be mindful I must understand my place within society and that such place may be one of privilege. It is also beneficial to understand that I play a part in perpetuating said norms. Simply by being white I continue to reap the benefits of such privilege and if I want to make a change I must show others these issues.

Student 3: It is true that regardless of one’s race that everyone is impacted by their race. For some it may work in their favor, to others it may be seen as a disadvantage. It is very disturbing to know that racism exists. Hopefully if more people take on the attitude that the person above wrote about it can be dissolved.

Student 1: I think while trying to solve disadvantages, we must keep in mind that the idea of treating one differently due to their race should not be looked down upon, if it is done right. Each culture, religious group, etc., has a way of wanting to be treated, and if we can get past the negative parts, then we can learn about each other and all feel included.

For those students who have a more developed sense of reflexivity than some of their peers, this...
exercise not only serves to reinforce their experiences but it also allows their experiences to be affirmed by their peers. Such affirmation may have a therapeutic effect by providing them with the potential for validation (Kebede 2009). This validation is for more than just feel-good purposes; it also has important analytical implications. A problematic experience that is validated by other students offers all of the students an opportunity to have their understanding of the social world authenticated. Other students learn about what it is like to be in the nondominant group, thereby strengthening their own reflexive insights. In other words, the reflexivity of one student nourishes the reflexivity of other students. And it is important to note that these problematic events (as illustrated in the following) may not be willingly offered in an oral discussion. In this sense, writing anonymously and cumulatively increases the potential for this mutual reinforcement of reflexivity.

Student 1: My life has been somewhat affected by race. I’m considered a minority and in some workplaces I’ve been looked down upon. Also, as I entered college the “majority” or “norm” was and is white. In the classroom setting I get stares or the impression that some people don’t want to work with me when class work is assigned.

Student 2: The social world will always claim whites to be the majority, which may or may not be true. But to label someone a minority and treat them differently because of that is absurd. We are all just people, just because you may be darker than the guy next to you doesn’t make you any better or worse. Unfortunately, not everyone looks at it this way, you will get those who stare, but color shouldn’t affect compatibility. I’d love to work with whomever this may be.

Student 3: Likewise—and it is sad that we still experience racism in today’s world—let alone in this class! You should know that you are a worthy individual and that you are as capable or more than your counterparts that may feel uncomfortable working with you. I am letting you know that I am happy you are here, in this classroom, in this world, and somehow, someway in my life. So thank you, for contributing your experiences and sharing your life with me (smiley face).

Student 1: Both comments put a smile on my face and made my morning. I don’t pay these things any mind, it’s what we’ve created. I just use it as motivation to keep striving to be a better me and do what everybody thought I was incapable of doing (heart).

For students who are already inclined to thinking somewhat reflexively, this exercise provides an occasion for them to develop their introspective insights further. By writing responses to their less reflexive peers, these students must think about how they may best make the point that all of us are affected by our biographies and histories. As Massengill (2011:372-73) points out, “asking students to make their own arguments is a critical moment of interaction between the writing process and higher-level thinking.” Furthermore, as demonstrated in the first example of this section, by having their own experiences affirmed and even empathized with by their peers, these students gain an important measure of validation. In short, those students who are reinforcing their reflexivity with this exercise are gaining both analytical refinement and social substantiation of their lived experiences.

Resisting Reflexivity

For some students (fortunately not too many in my experience), this writing exercise does not necessarily provide a reflexive spark. There are always some students for whom it is difficult to get to that deeper level of understanding regarding their position in society. Despite being presented with alternative perspectives (as illustrated in the following), these students resist acknowledging the impact of a variable such as race. Their responses demonstrate that they need more time to think about and process these complex themes. They may still cling to a conception of a fair and just world where everyone is judged equally and has the same opportunities. In this sense, their ability to be more introspective about their personal situations and social circum-
stances is still somewhat stunted. This perspective should not be too surprising because it is the prevailing cultural norm. Examples of resistance are particularly useful to the extent that they remind us that embracing the sociological imagination is not automatically accomplished just by stepping foot in a sociology classroom. As instructors, we oftentimes face an uphill battle in helping students become more reflexive and therefore we too need to think (and write) more about how best to help students embark on this path. The following is a typical example of resisting reflexivity:

Student 1: I don’t think my life has been affected by race because I grew up in a town that was filled mostly with people of the same race as me. Race differences became most apparent to me when I started working as a waitress. I think the biggest effect race has had on me has been that people at my job speak several different languages and sometimes it’s difficult to communicate with them.

Student 2: I think race has affected you throughout your whole life even if you are surrounded by the same race. I think lack of variety is just as powerful as great variety when it comes to race.

Student 3: I agree with the first response. Not being around individuals of a different race, I do not believe means you haven’t been affected by race. Just watching TV you are faced with the issue of race. I believe it is different when it is your own experience, such as at your job, but race affects people on a daily basis in my eyes.

Student 1: I felt that immediately my life has not been greatly affected by race. Of course everybody is aware of race and is in contact with different races but I’m not sure that I agree that it has had a significant impact on my life. I know that people around me have been greatly affected by it and I suppose on that level it does affect me, but based on my interpretation of the question I have not been immediately connected to it and your upbringing has a huge amount to do with it.

Despite being offered some definite assertions from Students 2 and 3 about how race might have an effect on one’s life, Student 1 still maintains that race is largely a nonissue. Unlike the follow-up responses in the Developing Reflexivity section in which the students expressed more self-critical introspection after reading and writing other responses, students who resist reflexivity maintain their position throughout the activity. However, there is some evidence here that the exercise could be planting seeds for further cultivation and that the resistance expressed by such students may be ephemeral. In the previous example, a close reading of the follow-up response of Student 1 indicates a greater degree of ambiguity than was expressed in this student’s initial response. Phrases such as “I’m not sure I agree” and “I suppose on that level it does affect me” suggest that the student might be rethinking this question. Moreover, the statement, “based on my interpretation of the question” could be read as a qualifying remark that points to the possibility for, or an openness to, a reconsideration of the issue. Although not all students who express resistance to reflexivity may demonstrate similar cracks in their nonreflexive armor, this example of the student’s developing ambiguity is instructive. It demonstrates the extent to which this exercise may identify points of initiation that may be used to bring resisting (and developing) students more fully into the reflexive fold. I will address both of these issues—obdurate resistance and moments of realization—in the following section.

CONCLUSION: WRITING AND REALIZING REFLEXIVITY

Throughout this article, I suggest that reflexivity is both a perspective and a presence; it is the way we comprehend and exist in the world. Reflexivity is also a skill—a special ability or proficiency to understand the world from a particular analytical orientation. As with any skill, reflexivity can be cultivated, encouraged, taught, and learned. Reflexivity is not something that is automatic, like a reflex; rather, it is something that must be realized through education, training, or personal experience. As sociology instructors, helping students become more reflexive is one of our most impor-
tant and challenging responsibilities. The writing exercise discussed in this article has proven to be an effective activity in helping students to become more introspective and self-critically aware. By engaging in this contemplative, anonymous, and peer-writing activity, students are encouraged and challenged to use the written word as a way to consider how their lived experiences are socially situated.

As illustrated in the final example, not all students are prepared or willing to think and write about their positionalities. This resistive stance may be most acutely felt in institutions where the student body is more uniform and less diverse. In these settings it may be necessary to think creatively about what prompts to use. I suggest utilizing prompts that more explicitly ask students to “walk in the shoes of others” as a way to expedite the process of thinking reflexively. For example, instead of asking students if race has affected their life in any way, one might ask students if their life would be different if they were ______ (a specific race that is not largely represented in the student body). To be even more explicit, one could specify the question further and add in other positionalities such as gender, social class, or nationality—namely, would your life be any different if you were a poor Latina immigrant? In addition to asking students to imagine their lives from a different biographical perspective, one might also ask them to consider their lives from a different historical perspective. A prompt that asks them to consider themselves in the distant past or far-off future may also help facilitate a more reflexive approach.

When I teach introduction to sociology, I sometimes use this exercise in conjunction with Miner’s (1956) “Body Ritual among the Nacirema” article and I ask students to write and respond to their own Nacirema observations. This prompt is another good reflexive ice-breaker that helps even resistive students challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions.

Undoubtedly, there may be some students who will demonstrate obdurate resistance in their thinking and writing no matter what prompt is used. Such students are actually beneficial to the exercise because they compel other students to refine their own arguments about reflexivity and articulate their convictions persuasively. But even for these students who stubbornly resist, there is the potential, I would even say likelihood, that their convictions will soften or even waiver slightly (as in the aforementioned example) as the exercise progresses. I believe that such moderation, however slight it may be, is a direct consequence of the cumulative and anonymous nature of the writing exercise. It is not so much a case of peer pressure as it is a case of peer persuasion. In reading and writing responses to perspectives that may be very different than one’s own, it is difficult not to stop and think (especially when you have 10 minutes) about how and why your view of the world contrasts with some of your peers. Although these contemplative pauses may not radically alter one’s perspective in that instant, the mere act of realizing you think differently than others is the first step on the path toward reflexivity.

As a one-day, in-class writing activity, getting students on this path is really the main objective of the exercise. It is unrealistic to expect students to become wholly reflexive through 40 or 50 minutes of free writing. It is also unrealistic for the students to develop reflexivity unless they see evidence of our “instructor reflexivity” (Erickson 2001:352). If we are asking students to be self-critically introspective, then we must be willing to model such behavior throughout the entire course and likewise become critically reflective teachers (Brookfield 1995; Kaufman 2010). Related to this, it is paramount to create a classroom environment where everyone feels safe, respected, and part of a genuine community of learners. I go to great lengths, particularly in the first two weeks of class, to foster this type of learning environment by getting everyone in the class to know each other, providing the time and space (not to mention the encouragement) for everyone to speak at least once, and reviewing and discussing my teaching philosophy. Steps such as these whereby one focuses on the process of the class and not solely on the content are especially important for the successful implementation of active-learning exercises.

Furthermore, much like the process of writing itself, this exercise should be viewed as a draft that one revisits, rewrites, and reconsiders as the semester progresses. In this regard, it is helpful to collect the responses at the end of class, read through them carefully, and make notes of
common themes or issues. It is especially beneficial to understand the concentration of students on the reflexivity spectrum: how many are in the stages of resisting, developing, and reinforcing. Having this information better equips the instructor to meet the students where they are in the formation of their sociological imaginations. This information also allows one to fine-tune or construct subsequent class sessions that address the needs of the students. In some instances, the results I gleaned from this exercise encouraged me to add another class on a particular topic for further exploration. In other courses, this exercise taught me that I could raise the discourse and push the students toward higher-order thinking.

As a final thought, it is important to emphasize that the benefits of this exercise—for both students and instructors—come about through the power of writing. The fact that writing is such an effective tool in developing reflexivity should not be too unexpected given the connection between writing and thinking. As Roberts (1993:318) points out: “The very act of putting thoughts on paper facilitates critical thinking and self-reflection.” This sentiment is consistently illustrated throughout the exercise as students continually write, read, and respond. By affording students the opportunity to think through their writing, and simultaneously giving them the space to write down thoughts that they may not feel comfortable expressing verbally, the exercise promotes the type of self-critical introspection that is the hallmark of reflexivity.

NOTES

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1. I wrote a brief note about this exercise in another publication a few years ago (Kaufman 2008), but I did not elaborate on how it fosters reflexivity through writing nor did I offer examples of students’ work.

2. A brief statement of my teaching philosophy, that I include on all syllabi, is available at: http://faculty.newpaltz.edu/peterkaufman/index.php/teaching/teaching-philosophy/.

REFERENCES


BIO
Peter Kaufman is an associate professor of sociology at the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz. He received his BA from Earlham College in 1989 and his PhD from Stony Brook University in 1999. In 2011 he was awarded the State University of New York Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching.