**Gillis Sociology of Education Syllabus Usage Notes**

**Abstract**

This sociology of education syllabus is based on the following three learning objectives: 1) Analyze the education system’s role in reproducing and mitigating inequality, 2) Apply sociological theory and research to solving education problems, and 3) Reflect on your own experiences in the education system in a sociological way. Students achieve these goals through six units that move chronologically through the education system, moving from early childhood to elementary to secondary education to the transition to higher education to attending higher education and concluding with beyond higher education. The course uses the books Negotiating Opportunities and Paying for the Party as case studies, and additionally uses journal articles, book chapters, newspaper articles, and videos. Students are required to take daily reading quizzes to ensure they come to class ready to engage with the material. Additionally, they write five unit reflection papers and then a final assessment that tackles the major question of the course: does the US education system increase, decrease, or maintain existing inequality?

**Where does this course fit into a sociology curriculum?**

This course is designed as an elective 200-level course such that students without any prior sociology exposure would be capable of succeeding. At both institutions that I have taught this course it was cross-listed in the Education department, as well as counted for a Social Science general education requirement. Additionally, with its emphasis on inequality, it could be appropriate for a diversity general education requirement, depending on your institutional requirements.

**What is my approach to the course? Why do I set up the course this way?**

My approach to the course is to focus on race/class/gender inequality. The organizing question of the semester is “Does education increase, decrease, or maintain existing inequality in the United States?” Education is often thought of in the American imagination (and students' minds) as the great equalizer, the one institution in the United States that works to equalize opportunities for students so that through hard work any student can succeed and perhaps achieve social mobility. Of course, sociologists of education are appropriately skeptical of this thinking, and a sociology of education course provides a perfect venue through which to explore the true impact of the education system on inequality and discuss policies that could perhaps bring us closer to that ideal.

Unlike most sociology of education courses that organize thematically, I organize the course chronologically, reflecting a child’s experience through the education system over time. Unit 1 provides the theoretical introduction to the course through a discussion of what the education system should ideally accomplish (through Horace Mann’s foundational writing about education as the great equalizer) and then introducing the debate about how well it really does mitigate inequality in today’s society. Unit 2 covers early childhood and elementary education, moving from before formal education to preschool to elementary school. By examining how inequality between students exists before they enter school, we lay the foundation of the problem the education system faces as the gap only grows over time. Unit 3 covers secondary education, including topics such as tracking, discipline, and school choice. Unit 4 covers the transition to higher education, including how students make their post-high school decisions and how the college admissions process is structured to preference advantaged students. Unit 5 covers attending higher education, using *Paying for the Party* to examine inequality within college and then a variety of journal articles and book chapters to examine inequality across different types of colleges. Finally, we conclude in Unit 6 with a unit beyond higher education, as well as the limitations of the education system to truly impact the inequality in the United States under our capitalist economic system.

After teaching the course this way for five years, I believe that the cumulative advantages and disadvantages of the education are more intuitive for students to grasp when structured chronologically. When students see the initial gaps grow over time, sending American children on to widely different trajectories, the students are prepared to analyze how inequality changes over time and are excited to explore possible policy ideas that could reduce this tendency toward cumulative advantage.

For more information about how I teach this course see my forthcoming article "Sociology of Education," an invited manuscript in *Handbook of Teaching and Learning in Sociology*, edited by Sergio A. Cabrera.

**How do I use my syllabus to strike a balance between a contract between professor and students while still being inviting to the course learning experience?**

I strike this balance by clearly articulating class policies while also encouraging a growth mindset. Many students are nervous that their peers will be better experts on this topic, as for many this is their first course on education or their first sociology course. Thus, I dedicate the first page of the syllabus to course goals and how we will learn in order to welcome all students into the classroom, by stating that it is a classroom for all students, regardless of their reason for enrolling and by encouraging them to share their diverse perspectives throughout the semester. However, I also clearly lay out all class policies regarding extensions, quizzes, assignment due dates, email policies, and many others. This way, students know exactly what they are signing up for and they can make an informed decision about whether they want to take the course. Additionally, it goes beyond the standard university “accomodations” to ensure that students know that they are encouraged to talk to me about any issues that are preventing them from doing their best, even if they do not fall under official university accommodations or do not have an officially diagnosed learning disability.

Additionally I have a student support section, also known as a basic needs statement, that explicitly states that students may be dealing with issues such as food insecurity, housing insecurity, sexual harassment/assault, among others. This section of the syllabus lists specific local resources and how to access them, and it makes clear that I am willing to help connect them to resources if they would like. I left my local examples in the syllabus so that others could see the types of support information I included. However, it should be adapted according to your campus needs. For instance, my campus requires students to live on campus all four years, and so housing insecurity would be due to a campus problem; thus I encourage them to talk to our university’s housing whereas non-fully residential campuses would need additional support for housing in a statement like this.

This statement is inspired by sociologist of education’s Sara Goldrick-Rab’s work:

Goldrick-Rab, Sara. 2020. “Beyond the Food Pantry: Spreading the Word-Supporting Students’ Basic Needs with a Syllabus Statement and Welcome Survey.” *The Hope Center*. <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/BTFP_SyllabusStatement_WelcomeSurvey.pdf>

**What are my learning objectives? How do I achieve those goals through my course structure?**

As articulated on my syllabus first page, my three learning objectives are:

1. Analyze the education system’s role in reproducing and mitigating inequality
2. Apply sociological theory and research to solving education problems
3. Reflect on your own experiences in the education system in a sociological way

These goals are achieved on a daily basis through each class reading and format, as well as through the semester assignments.

Goal 1: As described above, the course is designed in such a way that students can see inequality grow over time in students’ educational trajectories. Almost all readings in the semester explicitly discuss inequality in their writing and I always include questions in their daily reading quizzes about the implications for inequality based on the reading. Additionally, by priming students with the big course question about inequality, they come to class prepared to discuss inequality. I use role-playing activities and small and large group discussions in order to explore how inequality manifests through individual actions, institutional constraints, and policy decisions. I have published two sample activities previously in TRAILS if you would like to see an example of how this learning goal is achieved in a typical class period:

Gillis, Alanna. 2018a. “School Choice and Inequality: Choosing Schools Activity.” Class Activity published in TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology. Washington DC: American Sociological Association. <http://trails.asanet.org/Pages/Resource.aspx?ResourceID=13554>.

Gillis, Alanna. 2018b. “Class School Board Debate Activity: Should Tracking Be Reformed?” Class Activity published in TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology. Washington DC: American Sociological Association. <http://trails.asanet.org/Pages/Resource.aspx?ResourceID=13573>.

Goal 2: The second goal is achieved through the readings, daily quizzes, the class periods, and the additional assignments. I typically choose readings that discuss policy implications in the discussion/conclusion and I often ask a reading quiz question about the suggested policy implication. Thus, students are primed to start thinking not just about the inequality problems, but also how we can possibly work to overcome them. Additionally, the structure of a typical class period for me generally concludes with students brainstorming relevant policy recommendations based on the information discussed in the day’s class. Additionally, students are required to recommend a policy recommendation as part of the final assessment and several of the unit reflection papers.

Goal 3: The goal of analyzing their own experiences in the education system sociologically is typically achieved through the class formats and the unit reflection papers. Because I tend to use qualitative fieldwork or interviews, students already tend to come to class thinking about the topics in relation to their own lives, as the qualitative work feels personal. I offer additional opportunities in class discussions to reflect on their own experiences, such as factors they considered when applying to college when we read an excerpt from Mullen’s book about students choosing colleges. Importantly, though, I never use activities like a “privilege walk” that require students from disadvantaged backgrounds to share their struggles for the purpose of enabling advantaged students to realize their privilege--as that is not an inclusive teaching practice and it preferences the learning of the privileged students. Instead, students are invited to share their experiences in small groups, never required, and the course material provides the primary comparison points. Additionally, this goal is achieved in the unit reflection papers, as 20% of each paper’s grade is based on the student successfully incorporating a personal experience into their response.

**There are so many different topics we could cover in a sociology of education course. How did I decide these particular readings/topics are the best to achieve my goals, including being appropriate for the student level and purpose of the course?**

Because the intended audience for this course is a 200-level elective that may or may not have a prerequisite sociology course, my goal in choosing readings and topics were to choose topics that students would find engaging and fit my learning objectives, and finding readings that could serve a good foundation for class discussions and activities. My goals for readings were to choose ones that the typical student in my course would be able to understand the basic ideas before class and that we would use the class time to discuss greater nuance. To this end, the vast majority of empirical articles, books, or book chapters are from qualitative studies that are written in a more accessible format. When I chose articles that are written with too difficult of jargon, theoretical frameworks, or methodologies, I indicated on the syllabus sections that students should skim rather than read, in order to allow them to focus on the parts they should be able to understand on their own. Then, if I believe the theory, jargon, or methodology is critical to unpack, I can create class activities or discussions to cover those topics.

Additionally, I supplement academic books, book chapters, and articles with occasional newspaper articles and/or videos. These are often useful when I want to assign two readings for the same class period. Students have reported that they really enjoy getting to watch the occasional video or read the occasional newspaper article in the course.

**How is this syllabus different than other sociology of education syllabi already available on TRAILS?**

Despite sociology of education’s relative popularity among students, there are sadly few resources on TRAILS. As of May 2021, the most recent sociology of education syllabus was published in TRAILS in 2014, but it was policy focused and community based learning, thus not a general syllabus, and at this point missing many recent important works. Thus, the primary value added of this syllabus is an incorporation of more recent work. The vast majority of my readings were published since 2014.

However, it also offers a new framework with which to organize the course, chronologically rather than thematically. For reasons articulated above, I believe that this chronological order is particularly useful for teaching cumulative advantage in the education system.

**Additional Notes:**

* This syllabus is designed as a twice a week 1.5 hour course, though I have also taught it effectively as a three times a week 50 minute course.
* This particular syllabus is from Fall 2021, a semester in which I was teaching in person but knew that depending on COVID cases on campus, I might have to switch to remote formats (which I did several times). In other semesters I have included other assignments, including requiring students to lead discussions, as well as a multi-stage research paper. However, with the uncertainty and changing circumstances I did not think either was appropriate for the pandemic conditions. I have found that the assignments included here work quite well to achieve student learning.
* I have only taught this course at selective universities with overwhelmingly traditional aged students (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and St Lawrence University). While I do cover variation in student experiences, such as community colleges, for profit colleges, and HBCUs, I would recommend that you tailor your own syllabus to your student body’s background and experiences. I tailor in this way to help achieve my learning goal of having students reflect on their educational experiences in a sociological way while still ensuring they have exposure to the variability of experiences and institutions that exist in the US education system today.
* The class size for this course has ranged from 19-48. Because the daily quizzes are taken online through a learning management system and are overwhelmingly multiple choice and true/false questions, they can be autograded by the computer and make grading more feasible, so that the instructor can focus grading time on the other course assignments.
* The participation system in this syllabus is described and analyzed extensively in the following article: Gillis, Alanna. 2019. “Reconceptualizing Participation Grading as Skill Building.” *Teaching Sociology* 47(1): 10-21.