

Introduction to Sociology (SOC 1101) Course Redesign at Georgia Southwestern State University

Jamie MacLennan

The following is a case study on a Gateways to Completion (G2C) course redesign in two sections of Introduction to Sociology (SOC 1101) at Georgia Southwestern State University (GSW). The course redesign is currently in year two of the process and, so far, consists of: 1. bolstering supplemental instruction (SI) and 2. the administration of pre- and post-exam wrappers. Results indicate that SI is beneficial for the small number of students who utilize it and that exam wrappers increase metacognitive skills and slightly improve subsequent exam performance.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For at least the last 20 years, there have been three faculty members teaching Introduction to Sociology (SOC 1101) each semester at Georgia Southwestern State University (GSW). All have been strongly committed to student success. Unfortunately, the percentage of students who have been successful in the class has never been as high as we would like. For instance, over the 10-year period from 2001 to 2010, the DFWI rate was approximately 35%. With some faculty turnover since that time and through the concerted efforts of those who have taught the course more recently, the DFWI rate went down to just under 20% over the three-year period from the spring semester of 2016 to the fall of 2018. Members of the SOC 1101 course-specific committee believe that this is still too high.

When we looked into the numbers more deeply (data are from the 2014-15 to 2017-18 academic years), it became evident that student success rates varied substantially based on student characteristics. Most remarkably, students who came to GSW with a high school grade point average of less than 2.5 had a DFWI rate near 60%, compared to a DFWI rate of 12.3% for those students with a high school GPA above 3.5. Furthermore, the committee discovered other, smaller, discrepancies. Specifically, men had a DFWI rate almost 10 percentage points higher than women. In addition, Blacks had a DFWI rate 5 percentage points higher than Whites. Finally, we found that first-year students had a DFWI rate over 10 percentage points higher than non-first-year students. When considering the nature of our course redesign, these were some of the inequities that we had in mind to rectify, particularly the sex and race gaps. Beyond DFWI rates, we also found it problematic that students have not been taking advantage of the various support services that are available to them at GSW. Many students also lack metacognitive and study skills.

METHODS

During the self-study phase of the G2C process (year 1), the SOC 1101 course-specific committee spent a great deal of time trying to understand the reasons for the low student success rate and brainstorming what to do about it. While we came up with many potentially fruitful redesign strategies, we decided to implement one substantial redesign element per semester (beginning with what we thought would be most impactful) in order to isolate their effectiveness. First, since we concluded that most students who struggle in SOC 1101 do not take advantage of the support services that are available at GSW, we decided that redoubling our efforts at increasing participation in supplemental instruction (SI) sessions had great

potential for increasing the performance of those students who are most at risk (i.e., those with low high school GPAs, men, Blacks, and first-year students). We introduced this redesign element in the fall of 2019. Specifically, we encouraged students in the first week of the semester to attend weekly SI sessions, reminded them each week during the semester, and gave them extra credit for attending. The instructor implementing the redesign also worked closely with the student supplemental instructor to ensure that the content of the SI sessions was accurate and thorough. Second, we have observed among many students a lack of effective study strategies combined with a lack of awareness of the inadequacy of their study strategies. As such, we implemented pre- and post-exam wrappers in Spring 2020 to facilitate greater metacognition and as an opportunity to discuss useful study strategies.

OUTCOMES

The first significant element of the course redesign involved bolstering participation in Supplemental Instruction (SI). This began in the fall of 2019, when there were 38 students combined in the two sections of Introduction to Sociology (SOCI 1101) in which the redesign was implemented. We hoped to achieve as much SI attendance as possible by offering sessions twice a week at times when most students were available as well as by offering extra credit points for attendance. Unfortunately, despite these efforts, attendance at the SI sessions was low. Only 9 students ever attended. Of those, five students attended only once, while two attended twice. Two students (one White male and one Black female) participated frequently, attending 8 sessions each. Interestingly, both of the high attending students got As in the class. While it is impossible to know whether or not they would have achieved As had they not attended the SI sessions, it obviously did not hurt. In informal conversations, these two students said that, “the [SI] sessions are really very helpful” and “I’m so glad that they are available for me to help with things I don’t understand.”

The second major element of the course redesign consisted of the administration of pre- and post-exam wrappers. This began in the spring of 2020, with 38 students combined in the two sections of SOCI 1101 in which exam wrappers were administered. The pre-exam wrapper included questions aimed at uncovering how much time each student spent studying, how they studied, and how they thought they would perform on the exam. The post-exam wrapper included questions designed to help students assess what types of questions they had the most difficulty with, how they thought they might prepare differently for the next exam, and provided them an opportunity to suggest ways that the instructor could help them better prepare for future exams. The goals of exam wrappers are for students to gain a clearer sense of the connection between their efforts and the results they achieve as well as providing a starting point for class discussions about effective studying techniques (after handing them back with the exam). The results were modestly encouraging. Specifically, the average exam score increased by one point out of 100 from the first exam to the second (n=38). That might not sound like much, but some previous semesters actually showed a decrease of up to 1.3 points from the first to the second exam. Remarkably, the average score for men increased by 8.5 points (n=8). Unfortunately, the average score for Black students declined by 3.3 points (n=12). This may, in part, be due to the fact that the average score for Black students on the first exam was above average to begin with. In addition to these quantitative results, student responses on the exam wrappers indicated an improved awareness of the connection between the efforts they made studying and their performance on the exam. Interestingly, in their post-exam wrapper responses, several students mentioned that they should attend the SI sessions in order to do better on the next exam. I did not analyze the impact of exam wrappers on the third and fourth exams because of the incomparability of scores since they were administered online in the wake of COVID-19.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

The effectiveness of SI sessions has been encouraging, albeit limited to very few students. As such, their use will be continued in future sections of SOCI 1101 while making a greater effort to encourage students to utilize these services. This may be accomplished in one of two ways: either increasing the amount of extra credit offered or requiring students who score below a certain amount on the first exam to attend SI sessions until they score higher than the threshold amount on a subsequent exam. Due to a lack of resources at GSW, we do not currently have plans to expand the use of SI sessions to more courses. That said, all courses in the general core are supported by SI and/or individual tutoring. We are enthusiastic about the prospects for improvement from the use of exam wrappers; not simply in terms of student exam scores, but as indicated by the increase in self-regulated learning. In light of this, the use of exam wrappers will be continued. Furthermore, existing research indicates that exam wrappers are more effective when a student completes them in multiple classes (Lovett, 2013). All three of the sociology faculty have agreed to implement them in their classes. In addition, we conducted a training workshop in August 2020 for faculty across GSW to encourage even wider participation.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Due to low utilization, the use of SI sessions did not make a significant impact on the DFWI rate. That said, however, even a small number of students noticeably impacts success rates in small-sized classes. In this particular case, for example, eight out of 38 students (21%) got a DFWI in fall 2019. This was right at the average for the previous 4 years. If just 2 more students succeeded (which is how many students frequently participated in SI sessions), the rate would have decreased to under 16%. Assuming that SI sessions actually help (which we believe), it is likely that taking the time to identify, encourage, and possibly incentivize those students who are struggling in the course to attend the SI sessions could further decrease the DFWI rate. With respect to the administration of exam wrappers, it is early to tell what impact they are making. The literature suggests that the cultivation of metacognitive skills through the use of exam wrappers does not happen all at once nor does it immediately translate into improved performance. The major challenge with exam wrappers is that even when students can see that their lack of effort results in poor performance, it does not mean that they will increase their effort. The same is true for SI sessions. Having them available does not mean that students will attend, even if they are struggling. Given this reality, consideration will be given to a future redesign element focused on increasing the perceived value of academic success in order to increase student motivation.

REFERENCES

Lovett, M. C. (2013). Make exams worth more than the grade: Using exam wrappers to promote metacognition. In M. Kaplan, N. Silver, D. LaVague-Manty, & D. Meizlish (Eds.), *Using reflection and metacognition to improve student learning: Across the disciplines, across the academy* (pp. 18-52). Stylus.