

Making Introductory Rural Sociology Interesting to a Non-Interested Audience



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Abstract

Teaching a subject matter related to rural society and agriculture at a predominately urban university presents unique challenges. Although The Ohio State University is a land-grant institution, its students mostly grew up in cities. Since Rural Sociology 105 is cross-listed with Introductory Sociology 101, and most students can enroll in either one, the background of its students is reflective of the university as a whole. Over the years, professors and teaching assistants have developed a number of practices for making Rural Sociology 105 interesting to students who initially only enroll in the course to fulfill a graduation requirement and many of whom have little or no rural or agricultural background. Thirteen practices identified by professors and their teaching assistants are described, each of which has been employed independently by at least two of the instructors. Effective practices used to create interest in the course include: (1) application to the real world; (2) attendance encouragements; (3) critical thinking exercises; (4) custom tutoring; (5) demographic data exercise; (6) experiences and personal examples; (7) field trips; (8) guest lectures; (9) neighborhood analysis exercises; (10) survey exercise; (11) testing hypotheses; (12) theatrics and gimmicks; and (13) visual sociology.

Introduction

The title of this manuscript is slightly misleading. There actually exist a few students who enroll in Introduction to Rural Sociology (also known as "Rural Soc 105") at The Ohio State University because they truly are interested in a sociological treatment of issues related to agriculture, the environment, and rural society. However, it is quite

safe to say that based on the collective experiences of the authors for this paper, the large majority of students have no interest whatsoever in Rural Soc 105 when they stroll into class on that first day of the quarter. Instructors of Rural Soc 105 regularly ask students on the first day to indicate how many "really want to be here?" Only a few hands are raised. Our job is to change that perception because it is important for all students, from agricultural education to zoology majors, to understand that the quality of life of rural people and rural communities is important.

The purpose of this article is to describe the best practices of Rural Soc 105 professors and their teaching assistants. The situation of Rural Soc 105 is not unique. Many other courses offered by the various disciplines within Colleges of Agriculture must deal with the convergence of low initial interest, large numbers, and many students with little or no rural/agricultural background. Our experiences are instructive for other teachers who must confront these same issues.

Methods

Much is written about teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Knobloch, 2003). Boiled down to its essential characteristic, self-efficacy is a belief that teachers make a difference in the lives of their students. To be sure, good teachers impart new knowledge, encourage independent thinking, and guide critical analysis of key issues (Bandura, 1997), but these general principles are always specific to the context in which a course is taught (Finkel, 1999; Rocca, 2003).

The methodology for this paper was simple and straightforward. It is based on the principle that effective college teaching is based on the self-efficacy of the professors and teaching assistants in terms of

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what they believe works for them (Knobloch, 2003). Each of the authors was surveyed about best practices that make “Rural Sociology more interesting for uninterested students.” Common themes were reviewed by the first author, and then shared with the next three authors on the list. The best practices reflected in this list were based on the independent experiences of at least two instructors primarily responsible for teaching various sections of Rural Soc 105 during the past three years. In turn, their opinions were based on their perceived performance, student comments, and student evaluations.

In Rural Soc 105, the teaching assistants (TAs) take notes, assist with classroom management, maintain the grade book, and occasionally guest lecture. The TAs observe the class from the point of view of students, and are closer in age to the undergraduates than they are to the instructors. Their advice to instructors is crucial, as so much of the material in Rural Soc 105 is related to current events and contemporary popular culture. Although the instructors keep up primarily with current political events, the fads and foibles of contemporary culture is a different matter, especially as it relates to the latest episode of a T.V. reality series; rock, hip-hop and other forms of popular music; and the latest news from Hollywood featuring today's young icons and stars. The TAs help bridge the generation gap (perhaps generations) between instructors and students. The TAs reviewed the list of best practices, confirming, revising, and possibly disagreeing with those on the initial list. Although no practice on the initial list was eliminated, modifications to all occurred. Hence, the testimony of the TAs confirmed the impressions of the instructors about what makes Rural Soc 105 interesting to an uninterested audience.

The Context of Rural Soc 105

Times have changed in the U.S. Nineteenth century America was largely rural and most rural people were farmers. Today, only about 20% of the U.S. population is rural, and less than 2% of all Americans live on a farm (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2005). The Ohio State University is reflective of that change. When founded in 1873, it was called the Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College. In its first academic year, there were 24 students, and agriculture was a large part of the university, the backgrounds of those two dozen students, and their career aspirations. In this new century, the number of undergraduate and graduate majors in the various academic units housed within the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CFAES) accounts for less than 4% of all students on the main campus (CFAES, 2003), which is between 48,000-52,000 students in any given year, and always ranks amongst the largest in student population on a single campus (The Ohio State University, 2005).

The Department of Human and Community Resource Development (HCRD), and HCRD's Rural Sociology program, are housed within CFAES. Currently, the Rural Sociology program consists of 8 faculty members who teach classes at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. By far, its largest undergraduate class is Rural Soc 105. Rural Soc 105 is a 5-quarter hour introductory course which: (1) fulfills a basic education requirement in the social sciences at OSU; and (2) is equivalent to (i.e., “cross-listed”) the introductory course offered by the Department of Sociology. In a typical academic year, (OSU is on a quarter system), Rural Sociology faculty teach eight sections of Rural Soc 105, with a total enrollment of 900 to 1,200 students.

The first introductory Rural Sociology course was offered at Ohio State in 1913. It has been taught continuously ever since (Flinn, 1991). One of the first Rural Sociology textbooks, *Introduction to Rural Sociology* (D. Appleton Company of New York), was written and published in 1917 by Paul Vogt, then chair of the Department of Rural Economics (in which Rural Sociology was administratively located). Ironically, the foundation for an introductory Rural Sociology course at Ohio State occurred during the very decade when American society changed from a majority rural to a majority urban population. In 1910, about 54% of the US population was rural, but by 1920 the rural proportion had declined to 48% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005).

Physically, OSU's main campus is divided by a small river, called the “Olentangy.” Most CFAES departments and faculty are located on the west side of the Olentangy River, and central campus is situated on the east side. This creates a social and cultural divide in that the west side of campus is known as the “Agr. campus” and many students are unwilling to hop on a shuttle bus in order to participate in classes there. Rather, they prefer the more tightly packed cluster of classroom buildings on central campus. Located on central campus are the main library and 22 branch libraries, plus the “Oval,” which is the social, cultural, political, and architectural focal point of OSU.

In response to the consequences wrought by the “mighty” Olentangy River, five of the eight sections of Rural Soc 105 are offered on central campus, and three on the “Agr. campus.” Typically, about 80% of students in Rural Soc 105 are freshmen or sophomores.

The urbanization of both the nation's and Ohio's population during the 20th century is directly reflected in the profile of students who enroll in Rural Soc 105. A survey administered the first day of class from 8 recently taught sections of Rural Soc 105 asked students where they grew up. Their responses illustrate the extent to which students who enroll in Rural Soc 105 no longer come from agricultural and rural backgrounds. Of 1,118 students, 18.1% said that they grew up on a farm, 15.2% in the open-

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country, 17.6% in a town (<10,000 persons), 15.8% in a city (10,000 to 49,999 persons), and 33.4% either in the central city or a suburb of a metropolitan area. Although, Rural Soc 105 continues to attract students from farm and rural backgrounds and those who are agricultural majors, clearly at least half of the students have urban backgrounds. Further, many agricultural majors themselves no longer have farm and rural backgrounds. About one in five Rural Soc 105 students who have declared an agricultural major indicated that they had grown up in a metropolitan area, and another 9.6% grew up in a city larger than 10,000 persons. The remainder of agricultural majors were from a farm (32.6%), the country (non-farm) (20.2%) or a small town (<10,000 persons) (15.3%). Even by one indicator of popular culture, Rural Soc 105 students are mostly urban in their orientation. One professor distributes a short survey on the first day of class. Five questions on the survey ask students about their musical preferences. Rock music is by far the most popular genre, followed by hip-hop, and then country/western. Only classical music and jazz keep country/western out of last place.

A Baker's Dozen Ways for Making Introductory Rural Sociology Interesting to a Non-Interested Audience

There is an assumption behind each of the "Baker's dozen" suggestions: It is incumbent on the Rural Sociology program at Ohio State, and of the other social sciences (i.e., agricultural education, agricultural economics, agricultural communications, and extension education) across the country to improve their undergraduate programs, both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, the goal is to provide an educational service to students by which they discover that the discipline is useful in the development of their careers, understanding social and cultural issues, and enhancing the quality of their own lives. A second goal is that students should emerge from an introductory rural sociology course recognizing that the sub-discipline of Rural Sociology is involved in some of the most exciting and cutting-edge issues confronting the environment and the development of rural communities in US society and around the world.

The following 13 suggestions are arranged alphabetically, and not by any order of importance.

1. Application to the Real World: All Rural Soc 105 instructors rank practical application as one of the most important ways to increase interest. For example, one instructor compares and contrasts major sociological theories through a simple application familiar to the overwhelming majority of college students. Adjacent to every large (and most small) university are places that provide services to students, mainly in the form of drink, food, and entertainment. High Street is the name of the thorough-

fare which separates the main campus at Ohio State from this area. After explaining the sociological version of functionalism, which is a theory that posits society as operating like a system and in which each part has a function, the professor asks the students to apply the theory to "places of entertainment on High Street." A discussion of the functions of these places follows, with the professor listing the various functions on the blackboard. The next day, conflict theory, which begins with the premise that groups compete based on economics and other forms of vested interest, is explained. The same question is asked, but this time in terms of how High Street's entertainment places exploit students as customers to make a profit and how these places often reveal real differences in social class inequality and amongst groups by race, ethnicity and lifestyle.

The third day focuses on the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism, which explains how human interaction is based on the active use, interpretation, and manipulation of symbols. Once again, places on High Street become the application, as students discuss how aspects of verbal and non-verbal interaction are expressed and utilized within the context of these places as ways to demonstrate status and meet other students with similar interests. Despite the focus on places of entertainment, even those students who come from religious and family backgrounds who possess strong norms against alcohol consumption find no difficulty in participating in the discussion.

2. Attendance Encouragements: Attendance is probably the biggest problem confronting instructors of large enrollment and required courses (Rocca, 2003). Non-attendance in a required course is due to a variety of reasons, the most important of which include conflicts with practice and game schedules of student athletes and with activities/events of student organizations, illness, and the simple fact that some students pursue a life of leisure and partying over class attendance and scholarship. One way to address this issue is through a well-stated course attendance policy, which simultaneously helps students keep up with class assignments. A strategy used regularly by all Rural Soc 105 instructors is that a certain proportion of the final grade is determined by "unannounced quizzes." Unannounced quizzes are limited to material covered over the previous (or two previous) class meetings. Typically, the quizzes are administered at the beginning of class, consists of 5-10 multiple choice questions, and requires about 5 minutes to complete. Depending upon the instructor, unannounced quizzes represent between 20% and 40% of the final grade. In the syllabus, the number of unannounced quizzes, a description of the quizzes, and their weight in determining the final grade are stated. All instructors adopt a policy of dropping a student's lowest quiz grade. This allows for one unanticipated absence, and maintains morale by allowing students to "blow" one quiz. In addition,

the students are humanely informed by all instructors that the “first unannounced quiz is tomorrow,” giving everyone a chance to experience the instructor’s style for asking questions. However, all succeeding quizzes are truly unannounced.

3. Critical Thinking Exercises: One team exercise that works well in any introductory sociology course is the critical analysis of an issue. One variation on this employed in Rural Soc 105 is the analysis of an agricultural or environmental issue through the use of internet sources. Students are randomly assigned to teams of 2, and asked to determine an agricultural or environmental issue that they would like to examine. Instructions for this exercise include the requirements that they summarize the “beliefs, values and opinions” expressed in two internet sources that are as polarized on an issue as possible. Students are instructed to suspend their own beliefs and values, and are encouraged to analyze (without judgmental criticism and derogation) the side of the issue with which they more strongly disagree. Students also are informed that interjecting their own political opinion or who denigrate the opinions, beliefs and values expressed on a website will be graded down. The exercise is meant to encourage critical thinking from a sociological point of view. To get this point across, the analogy is made to what a professional football coach does to prepare for a “big game” with the team’s traditional rival, which is to watch the films of the opposing team.

4. Custom Tutoring: Many international students, and many domestic students as well require tutoring. This can be very time-consuming for professors and TA’s alike. One solution in a large enrollment class like Rural Soc 105 is to schedule several special review sessions, held outside of regular class time. Experiences of Rural Soc 105 instructors indicate that as many as 20% of students attend these sessions, however, a disproportionate share are international students who must contend with English as a second language. It is customary for the TA’s to conduct the review sessions, which also serves to give them the equivalent of classroom instructional experience.

An alternative to review sessions is the following practice. If the professor teaching Rural Soc 105 is responsible for two sections in the same quarter, there is usually a one to two hour break in between. Typically, both sections are taught in the same classroom. Rather than return to the office, it is more convenient to “set up shop” in a nearby building with a cafeteria or coffee shop. An announcement is made in class that the professor (and the TA’s) will be at this location on certain days of the week, and are available to answer questions. Over a cup of coffee (and a donut, if the professor is not on a diet), students are free to stop by and ask questions about any aspect of the course. Sometimes, the professor even buys the coffee.

5. Demographic Data Exercise: The purpose

of a demographic exercise is to give students the experience of looking up, recording and analyzing data from the Census. A convenient reference point is the county of residence, data for which is easy to access via the Census web page. The typical information students are asked to analyze includes a breakdown of the population by rural and urban status, sex, age, major race/ethnic groups, and the proportion of the population living below the poverty line and in substandard housing. For some international students, similar Census information is available, but for most, an arbitrary assignment to a place in the U.S. is necessary.

It is important to stress to students the utility of the demographic exercise. One way to accomplish this is to point out that most of them will be employed by a business which relies upon Census information as a primary basis on which analyses of the market for goods and services is conducted. A second way is to point out that local governments and a great many locally-based volunteer organizations, and political parties as well, make use of Census data for the purposes of planning. A third utility of Census data is that the students can learn valuable information about trends in a society and about the cultural, economic and social contexts of important issues.

6. Examples and Personal Experiences: Students, no matter their background, need to learn more about the diversity of peoples, cultures and societies. There is nothing better than a good example to accomplish that task. Several variations on the use of examples to teach sociological principles and concepts are available to instructors. First, rely on personal experience. Most Rural Sociology professors (and TA’s) have international experiences, ranging from the Peace Corps to visiting professorships, and many grew up in some other country. One TA assigned to help with Rural Soc 105, for example, was raised in a rural village of Sierra Leone, providing an opportunity for this individual to bring in a variety of artifacts and stories representing local beliefs and customs as part of a guest lecture. Students were particularly interested in the comparisons of those who adhere to animist, Muslim and Christian beliefs (or some combination thereof), plus unique beliefs, such as the TA’s story about a “Christmas devil.” At Christmas time, groups of people in the same village will get together, put on masks to depict the Christmas devil, and will go from house to house scaring (lightly) the children, but also collecting money for local community development projects. The TA described this event as akin to transferring part of Halloween to Christmas.

7. Field Trips: There is no better way to teach the principles of Sociology than a field trip. The problem with field trips is that they do not fit neatly into 48 minute sessions, and must be conducted on a “volunteer” basis. This means a good amount of attrition, both among students who have no interest in the focus of the field trip, and students whose work schedules conflict with the time of the trip. However,

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field trips remain a great way of making Rural Sociology interesting to a non-interested audience. One Rural Soc 105 professor organizes a field trip about problems faced by Ohio's rural poor, homeless, and elderly. It is called a "beyond the freeway tour" (i.e., Interstate 270, which circles Columbus) of food banks, homeless shelters, and county welfare offices in rural communities. The tour is organized with the support and cooperation of a local advocacy group for the poor whose headquarters are in the Columbus area. Despite the volunteer nature of the field trip, over one-third of the students participate. Another professor organizes a field trip to a large Amish community in Ohio, where students can talk to a bishop and a farmer, visit a Amish owned manufacturing company and makes horse-drawn farm equipment, and have lunch at an Amish home.

8. Guest Lectures: If the instructors cannot take students to the field, then bring the field to the students. Guest lectures by professors and practitioners with specialized rural-based knowledge and experience on issues related to the discipline of Sociology provide great learning experiences. For example, a lecture by a former drug addict is one way to introduce a discussion with students about the costs and benefits of proposals to legalize marijuana and other drugs. The presentation by a volunteer group who arranges free medical services for the poor vividly illustrates the day-to-day survival strategies of those who live in poverty. Another advantage of a guest lecture is that it adds variety, that is, the students get to hear from someone other than the professor. The key to making guest lectures work as an effective teaching tool is the question and answer session that follows the guest's remarks. The instructor has a vital role to play as a facilitator, not unlike the chair of a paper session at professional meetings.

9. Neighborhood Analysis Exercise: In most sections of Rural Soc 105, professors ask students to conduct an analysis of the neighborhood where "they mostly grew up." One instructor has refined this exercise so that it gives students the experience of not only doing research, but reporting the results in a way that is both interesting and increases students' confidence in their writing skills. Students are assigned the task of writing about everyday life in their neighborhood, and then, submitting it for publication in their local newspaper. The results have been extremely positive. Almost all community newspapers are enthusiastic about submissions from a local student who now attends Ohio State, and frequently will include a picture of the student as guest columnist. Some will write about their experiences at Ohio State, comparing lifestyles in metropolitan Columbus (the area includes 1.3 million persons) with those of the urban neighborhoods, smaller towns and rural communities where they grew up. Obviously, parents are quite proud that their daughter or son wrote a column for the local paper, and students gain a measure of self-esteem. In addition,

the articles give the University, CFAES and the Rural Sociology program a certain amount of visibility.

A variation on the neighborhood exercise is possible through the internet using Claritas.com, a webpage summarizing basic demographic and consumer information for each zipcode in the U.S. Students are asked to use the internet to access the Claritas.com webpage, enter their zipcode, and from the five market profiles provided for each zipcode, select the one that best represents their image of where they grew up. Students submit short 1-2 page summaries of the lifestyles of their neighborhood, with most remarking in amazement at the accuracy with which they, their family and their neighbors have been described.

10. Survey Exercise: One way to pique students' interest is by proudly announcing that Rural Soc 105 will help them build a stronger job resume. How? By participating in an exercise, in which small teams of students will develop their own survey, analyze the data, and write a short report. Since a great deal of marketing is concerned with surveys of consumer preferences, experience with conducting a survey becomes a useful skill to learn, and it can only be learned through practice.

With this rationale in hand, students are assigned randomly to teams of 4 or 5, depending on the size of the class. Once or twice a week, the instructor asks students to meet with their other team members for the final 25 minutes of class (at Ohio State, class sessions are 48 minutes in length) in order to plan and conduct their survey. On the day of the class assignment, students are given a handout that defines a survey, the uses of surveys, and the steps in the survey process. At the first team meeting, students are asked to determine the focus (i.e., research question) of their study, and to write it down in a single sentence or two. The instructor hurries about the classroom, engaging in brief conversations with as many teams as possible, approving some of the research questions and asking other teams to reconsider what they want to do. Regardless, all other teams are directed to send to the instructor their research question by e-mail in order maintain a full record of group project subject matter. At the second meeting of the teams, surveys are drafted. At the third team meeting, a sampling strategy is planned. At the fourth team meeting, students develop a plan for analyzing and writing up the results in a short report. Before each of these in-class team sessions, the instructor delivers brief lectures about how to compose survey questions, primary types of sampling frames (random, stratified, cluster, non-random), and how to perform a cross tabulation. During the 25 minute period that teams meet, the professor scampers about the classroom, "trouble-shooting" with as many teams as possible.

Teams are quite creative in their research questions, with surveys ranging from the quality of bus service on the OSU campus to attitudes and

beliefs about crop circles and UFO's, to examination of various environmental and agricultural issues, such as attitudes about GMO's, factory farms, logging in State and National Forests, oil exploration on the north slope of Alaska or offshore, etc. There are conditions, however. First, surveys about certain behaviors, including under-age drinking, drug use and sex, for example, are not allowed. Second, there is no time in a quarter system to have in-class surveys reviewed by the university's Human Subjects Committee. Teams are instructed that administration of the survey should be restricted to other students enrolled in Rural Soc 105, setting up quite a network of reciprocity among students within each section of the class and frequently between teams from different sections. Some groups will ask friends, roommates, and other students in their dorms to fill out the survey as well. Third, grading is divided into three equal parts in order to reduce the "free rider" issue, that is, the problem that an unproductive member of the team receives the same grade as those who really did the work (Brooks & Ammons, 2003). The three parts are: (1) attendance at in-class sessions; (2) average contribution to the project based on ratings provided by other group members; and (3) a grade assigned equally to each team member based on the quality of the final report. If the group project is worth 15 points, therefore, 10 points are based on the individual's attendance and contribution to the group, and only 5 points is given collectively.

11. Testing Hypotheses: Hypthesis testing is an exercise that promotes both team-building and lessons on how to design research. Again, students are divided into teams of four or five. Each team is given a short set of related hypotheses, and then asked to develop a research plan for testing them. Examples include: "rural people are more satisfied with their communities than urban people"... "large scale farms have a less positive impact on rural communities than smaller scale farms"...and "students from rural areas who enroll in RS 105 are more likely to rate their political orientation as conservative than students from urban areas." Students have developed a number of creative ways of "testing" these hypotheses and reporting their results.

12. Theatrics and Gimmicks: Too often in the past, the use of theatrics and other gimmicks to catch the attention of students was considered beneath the dignity of so-called "serious" university educators. Of course, this claim has no basis in reality, but its arrogance surfaces occasionally, much like an "urban legend." Certainly, jokes must be appropriate and sensitive to issues of diversity, and theatrics of any kind must have a specific educational purpose.

Here is an example for which one instructor of Rural Soc 105 has developed a considerable (and positive) reputation as the "candy man." Stuffing suit pockets with Reese's Peanut Butter cups, the professor begins the second day of class by asking students

to define what the word "social" means. Eventually, one student will attempt an answer. The professor discretely gives the student a peanut butter cup so that only nearby students can see the reward-giving. Then the professor asks students to give more examples of social behavior. With each answer, peanut butter cups are distributed, but with increasing visibility. Finally, the professor turns around and writes on the blackboard a basic definition that social behavior is "repeated or patterned behavior," and that patterned behavior forms the "structure" of any society, large or small. Then, the professor poses the question: "What new structure have I initiated in this class?" The answer is obvious, and students answer as if in one voice, "we answer your questions, you give us candy." At this point, given the unanimity of response, the professor digs deeply into his suit pockets, and throws large handfuls of candy randomly about the classroom.

This behavior is used to illustrate the concept of deviance, and its relationship to behavior that is "normally" expected amongst members of a society. For the remainder of the quarter, about once or twice a week, the professor brings in more candy for distribution to those who arrive early for class and speak up in class. At a recent final exam, students were distributed toothbrushes provided by the College of Dentistry's outreach program, which served as both a self-spoof of the candy-throwing and a way to reduce tension prior to the commencement of the exam.

13. Visual Sociology: Rural sociology is a great topic for the visual presentation of materials. There is a remarkable number of documentary videos that are excellent for introductory Rural Sociology. Two popular examples of rural-located religions are "The Holy Ghost People" and "In the Devil's Playground." The former video portrays a fundamentalist Christian group in Appalachia whose members handle poisonous snakes during their service. In fact, toward the end of the video, a church leader is bitten by a copperhead he was holding in his hand. The latter video follows the real lives of 5 Amish youth who are involved in extreme forms of "rumspringa," which is Pennsylvania Dutch for "running around," a period during teenage years when some Amish youth are allowed to experience the world before they decide whether or not to be baptized into the Amish faith. In this video, drinking and drug use are shown, as well as Amish youth liberally using the "f" word. Other videos about domestic and international agricultural and environmental subjects, rural poverty, and a host of other issues are plentiful, and help illustrate social issues and social problems in the rural context.

Technology provides new opportunities for making Rural Soc 105 interesting to an uninterested audience. There is nothing "avant-garde" about the use of Powerpoint anymore, but this technology does provide a vast array of opportunities to increase the

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visual appeal of an introductory sociology course. Specifically, for classroom use only, it is appropriate to use still pictures obtained through an “image search” on the web. For most Rural Soc 105 topics, there are literally hundreds of pictures available to instructors. As well, video streaming provides a wide avenue of possibilities for illustrating sociological concepts and their application to a rural context.

Results and Discussion

Times have changed for college teachers of subject matter focusing on agriculture and rural society. The majority of students today come from urban backgrounds; even a considerable portion of those whose major is a field traditionally associated with Colleges of Agriculture. This adds a new set of challenges to teachers in all the agricultural disciplines, but especially to those who teach Rural Sociology and the other rural social sciences. For a course like Rural Soc 105, which many students initially see as another “boring” requirement foisted on them by the bureaucracy of the university in order to earn a 4-year degree, the shift of students' background from rural to urban potentially exacerbates the situation. However, with the right toolkit of specific actions, exercises, and course policies, the instructors for Rural Soc 105 have developed a variety of ways to make the course interesting, even to those whose interest level was initially very low. Student evaluations for Rural Soc 105 are very high. For example, for courses of a similar size, based on a 5-point (5=high; 1=low) scale, the university average for over-all rating of the instructor is 4.3 and 4.2 for the CFAES, compared to ratings ranging from 4.5 to 4.8 for instructors of Rural Soc. 105. Likewise, student ratings of Rural Soc 105 for specific aspects are higher than both university and college averages, especially for “intellectually stimulating,” “instructor interested in helping students,” “created a learning atmosphere,” and “communicated subject matter clearly.”

This paper has described a set of 13 practices, based on the collective experiences of professors and teaching assistants. Although the professors and teaching assistants for Rural Soc 105 frequently discuss issues and problems related to the course, each assumed that individual teaching styles determined the manner by which the same subject matter is taught. All the instructors were surprised to learn that their experiences with various practices to make the course more interesting to students were very similar. This likely is due to the similarity of context

of the course, regardless of personalities and teaching styles (Finkel, 1999; Rocca, 2003). This is a valuable lesson, for it states a basic sociological principle that can be applied to all courses taught in the agricultural disciplines, and beyond as well, to all institutions of higher learning. Simply put, this sociological principle states that the social structure of society and the place of the individual within that structure largely determine behavior. In this case, the structure of the little society called Rural Soc 105 as described above creates a specific and similar set of environments for both instructors and students, regardless of personalities and individual traits. In this system, reactions are similar or patterned; hence, it is possible to determine best practices for courses like Rural Soc 105, and to consider how they can be applied to other courses, given their particular circumstances.

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