

COMMENTS AND REPLIES

COMMENT: YAMANE ON *PROFSCAM*

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I WAS PLEASED THAT YOU PUBLISHED DAVID Yamane's (1994) lively and carefully crafted rebuttal to the earlier *TS* reviews of *Profscam*. In his brief comments he manages to hit upon what I consider to be the main features of the problem. The conversation section promises to be what journals are supposed to be about, but seldom are: dialogue about issues that are crucially important to the entire community of scholars. I would like to continue this particular conversation, because I think the debate between Yamane and the reviewers goes directly to a key issue, the apparent rift between teaching and research.

I agree with Yamane's formulation of the *problem* of poor teaching, and its *cause*, the conflict between teaching and research. I want to extend his analysis by suggesting a possible solution. I don't think that such conflict is inevitable, but is produced only by a certain *type* of research, that is, research which is oriented to what might be called problems of the discipline, rather than to the problems of the rest of the world.

Take the profession of sociology as an example (but much the same could be said for any other discipline): it amounts to only a tiny fraction of the human race, considerably less than one percent. What first puzzles undergraduates, but ultimately frustrates and bores them to tears, is that most of their course material is cast in a disciplinary format, concerned with issues that are so arcane that they are of interest only within the discipline of sociology.

The focus on disciplinary, rather than real-world problems, sets in motion a vicious circle in teaching undergraduates. Since they don't understand them, they are hostile to problems of the discipline. But teaching students who are uncomprehending, bored, or hostile is frustrating and unappealing to the teacher, leading to a further retreat into disciplinary research, for which the teacher is rewarded by his or her colleagues.

Disciplinary problems are appealing to professors for many reasons; I will mention only what I think of as the two major ones. First, disciplinary problems are not only interesting but also shareable with others within the discipline; in studying these problems, at least, the lonely scholar is a member of a community. Orientation to disciplinary problems serves as a badge of membership in, and loyalty to, an exclusive community.

Second, disciplinary problems are almost always smaller and give quicker results than real world problems. The story about the man looking for his lost car keys on his front porch at night illustrates this latter point. A friend, noting that he is not finding the keys, asks if he knew where he lost them. The man replies "On the lawn." When the friend asks why he is not looking there, the man replies "Because the light here is better."

Although undergraduates are unsympathetic to disciplinary problems, most of them are keenly interested in real world problems. They have just the opposite of the attitude that Astin (1976, quoted by Yamane) calls "academic gamesmanship," of "relieving the player or the audience of any responsibility to act on a given task or problem." This idea is the key to understanding the orthodoxy of academic disciplines. It is this orthodoxy that separates teachers and students. It is a defensive maneuver; if one doesn't even try to solve a problem, one can't be criticized for failing. The majority of undergraduates want to know the implications of what they learn for themselves and others in the real world.

By teaching undergraduates about real world problems, rather than disciplinary ones, the seeming rift between teaching and research can be healed. Teaching an interested audience is much more appealing and less tense and effortful than trying to engage a bored and hostile one. Even more to the point, teaching research which seeks to solve real world problems, transforms the classroom into a cooperative enterprise, because students are intrigued, and they are able to

contribute their own experiences, points of view, and ideas to the quest.

If students are allowed to respond, as in the discussion format, they become, in effect, the teacher's collaborators, critics, and editors. Their input is particularly useful because they don't share the assumptions of the discipline, which often insulate us professors from the real world. (For further discussion of this point, see Scheff 1992).

If my argument is sound, then the key to the problem of poor teaching lies less in giving more rewards to teaching, than in changing the kind of research that we do. I realize that this is a very large order for the existing disciplines; it would mean a radical change of direction. Perhaps if we were rewarded for even attempting to deal with real world problems, improvements in teaching might quickly follow.

REFERENCES

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- Scheff, Thomas. 1992. "Discovering Sociology." *Teaching Sociology* 20:248-253.
- Yamane, David. 1994. "The View from Below: A Student's Response to Profscam." *Teaching Sociology* 22:81-86.

REPLY TO SCHEFF

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I APPRECIATE AND WELCOME THOMAS Scheff's kind comments on my response to two reviews of *Profscam* that were published in this journal (Yamane 1994a). My "Conversation" piece was not meant to bring the debate over the relationship between teaching and research to some premature closure, but rather to stimulate further, honest discussion of the issue. Professor Scheff's essay represents the kind of continuing consideration I had hoped my own essay would provoke.

Scheff agrees with me that poor teaching is a problem in our profession, and also locates the cause of poor teaching in the conflict between teaching and research. He

extends my analysis by proposing that the conflict is not *inevitable* "but is produced by a certain *type* of research, that is, research that is oriented to what might be called problems of the discipline, rather than to problems of the rest of the world." While students are interested in and concerned with real-world problems, they are uncomprehending of, bored by, and hostile to disciplinary problems.

I think Scheff is on to something here. I have elsewhere argued that excessive focus on disciplinary concerns (narrowly defined) not only inhibits good teaching, but also creates a barrier to engagement with wider publics (Yamane 1994b). In an analysis that parallels Scheff's exactly, Robert Scott and Arnold Shore (1979) have argued that sociology "does not apply" to real-world problems because its point of departure is disciplinary interests rather than the practical concerns of those in a position to do something about the problems. Thus, the same forces that turn faculty members away from teaching will also turn them away from the type of research that would make sociology truly relevant to public issues of the day.

The choice between these two types of research, as Scheff argues, bears directly on the teaching of undergraduates. For example, one of the first choices I made when preparing to teach the introduction to sociology course for the first time was whether I would emphasize teaching students about *sociology* or teaching them about *society*. Of course, the two are related, but they are not identical, as Scheff's aforementioned distinction reveals. I chose to emphasize learning about society, and as a consequence we talk more about the reality of homelessness and poverty than about whether the "Wisconsin Model of Status Attainment" embodies technical-functionalist assumptions.

Though I have at times brought up disciplinary concerns (e.g., how sociologists are like anthropologists in their concern with culture and differ from psychologists in their understanding of socialization), these are almost uniformly the least interesting aspects of the course for students (as judged by their comments in interim course evaluations I collected). Students are most en-

gaged—and *engagement* is certainly a prerequisite for *learning*—when I give assignments that allow them to engage the social world critically. In the class, I try to build upon my students' experience of and interest in society, with the belief that if theology can be defined as "faith seeking understanding," this approach to sociology might best be described as "experience seeking understanding."

Before concluding, let me address one point on which Professor Scheff and I seem to diverge somewhat. While Scheff is correct that conflict between teaching and research is not inevitable, I maintain that there is no intrinsic, necessary relationship between doing the type of research Scheff suggests and teaching better. Teaching about society can be done just as badly as teaching about sociology (though perhaps it is easier to teach strictly disciplinary work badly).

I think the best way to describe the relationship between the practically oriented research Scheff advocates and teaching well is as an *elective affinity*. I suspect that there is an elective affinity between the disposition of faculty members who choose to do that sort of research and the disposition of those who choose to develop the ability to teach. The conjunction of these two dispositions and acquired talents in a single person is highly desirable in my view, characteristic of the faculty member who is neither a mere researcher nor solely a teacher but is a scholar. And I should say that Thomas Scheff is one of the few professors I know who can rightly bear that designation.

In closing, I would again like to express my appreciation for Professor Scheff's effort to continue the conversation on the relationship between teaching and research into which I intervened recently. Unfortunately, a dialogue between Scheff and myself cannot but come to the dead end of mutual adoration; we simply agree on too much. As much as I welcome his comments, I would welcome even more replies by Sullivan, Gilderbloom, and Donald (the original *TS* reviewers of *Profscam*), or others who agree with them. Then we might have a more provocative and sustainable dialogue. Though they declined an earlier offer to comment on my essay, I certainly do not

want to interpret Sullivan, Gilderbloom, and Donald's recent silence on this matter as indicating they agree with me. I'm sure the pages of *Teaching Sociology* remain open to them, or to their allies, should they care to carry this conversation forward.

REFERENCES

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THE LABELING PERSPECTIVE IS FAR FROM ABANDONED IN MODERN CRIMINOLOGY: COMMENT ON WRIGHT

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THE JANUARY 1994, ISSUE OF *TEACHING SOCIOLOGY* contained a lengthy review essay by Richard A. Wright on 20 criminology texts published from 1990 to 1992, and a single book review by Judith A. Harris of the sixth edition of one of these texts, published in 1993. As the author of the latter text, I found it very interesting to have my work reviewed twice in the same issue. Though both reviews were more or less positive ones, not surprisingly the authors made different criticisms and came to somewhat different conclusions.

I am obviously pleased that Judith Harris had only "minor" criticisms of the sixth edition of my text, and that she believed I had met my goal of producing a comprehensive, up-to-date, and well-referenced introduction to the field that is also interesting and challenging to students. This was good news because Wright was only mildly enthusiastic about the *fifth* (1990) edition, which he had reviewed. I work hard to improve every new edition over the