

Editorial

Training Models and Practices in Sociology

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At the possibility of this special issue, one of us recollected a situation that occurred some 25 years ago when he was about to have his first contact with Sociology, at the beginning of his first year as a Bachelor's of Sociology student. In a social chat in an extra-academic context, someone asked him what his field of study was, and the well-audible answer was given with enthusiasm: "Sociology". The reply was: "Very good, surgery is very important". The then-Sociology freshman was silent and this part of the conversation ended here. However, the young student never forgot the discomfort he felt on realizing that he himself did not know what Sociology was or exactly what it was for. As a result of this episode, this young man resolved to learn what Sociology really was, so as not to feel this sense of limitation in his knowledge. Later, throughout his professional academic career, this now less-young man has sought to clarify this issue with his students.

We dare to consider that, with variations, many of those who teach and learn Sociology can identify with the episode described above. Indeed, the world of Sociology is fascinating to sociologists. However, it is not always accessible to those who are not, as it focuses on social practices and representations formed by shared mind-sets that appear to be purely "natural", "normal", and unavoidable. Added to this is the fact that Sociology is a multi-paradigmatic science. At the same time, it also has great methodological diversity, which is often not taught in an integrated and meaningful way whereby the student can foster his/her increasingly sociologically-based criticism [1]. This raises several hindrances in achieving learning in which

"The first set of learning goals involves designs, methods, and techniques. Students learn to select and follow procedures of empirical inquiry, and hopefully to question, disrupt, and innovate these procedures. The second set of learning goals focuses on theories, and involves identifying major theories in their original historical contexts and then experiment with reapplying them to contemporary phenomena. This approach helps students to observe and explain social reality, and to assist them in seeing what has changed and what has remained the same" [2]. (p. 5)

There is the need for space to approach the topic of the teaching and learning of Sociology, both in a theoretical dimension and in an empirical and/or reflective dimension, focusing on several dimensions of this problem in different learning contexts, so as to better understand and improve the educational practice of the teaching and learning of Sociology.

From all this and more, this Special Issue of Societies on Training Models and Practices in Sociology is presented, which seeks "to reflect on Sociology training processes, and their impact focuses on how to teach Sociology (either as introduction or general, or in its specialties)" [3].

Four papers can be read in this Special Issue of Societies, these being two essays and two articles.

The essay “Challenges in the Teaching of Sociology in Higher Education. Contributions to a Discussion” [1], by Carlos Miguel Ferreira, from the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences—CICS.NOVA, the Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco, and the Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies, Portugal, and by Sandro Serpa, from the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences—CICS.NOVA and the University of the Azores, Portugal, has the explicit purpose of contributing to open the discussion of this special issue, through a reflection on the teaching and learning of Sociology in higher education. To that end, four framing principles are presented and discussed: the need to permanently mobilise sociological imagination, be multi-paradigmatic, be receptive to a heuristic interdisciplinarity, and foster reflexivity both on social reality and on sociological science itself, through the promotion of pedagogical strategies that stimulate student participation in his/her own learning. These four principles, while not original, are, for these authors, critical to shaping the teaching of Sociology in any educational context.

The article “Learning Outcomes in an Introductory Sociology Course: The Role of Learning Approach, Socio-Demographic Characteristics, Group and Teacher Effects” [4], by Péter Miskolczi, from the Budapest Business School, Corvinus University of Budapest, and by Márton Rakovics, from the Eötvös Loránd Science University, Corvinus University of Budapest, both from Hungary, addresses the learning outcomes in an introductory Sociology course in a specific context of higher education, focusing on the effects of several variables, such as family background, major area of study, and teachers’ gender, concluding, among other results, that “higher parental education is not in a clear relationship with learning outcome, and certainly cannot be said to be positively related to it; students who had female seminar instructors were deeper learners; students of political science had a higher chance of becoming surface learners; and university entry score (an indicator of previous achievement and, perhaps, ability) did not have an effect”. As acknowledged by these authors, while there are no universal recipes for an effective teaching and learning of Sociology, this research contributes to a better understanding of factors involved in it, with results that can be mobilised, in a critical way, in the improvement of this teaching.

The article entitled “Scaffolding Rubrics to Improve Student Writing: Preliminary Results of Using Rubrics in a Sociology Program to Enhance Learning and Mechanical Writing Skills” [5], by Linda Carson, from Department of Government, and Criminology and Sociology, Lander University, and by Daniel Kavish, from Department of Social Sciences, Southwestern Oklahoma State University, both from the USA, aims to study the “Scaffolding rubrics [that] were used within Sociology courses to specifically address both student learning and mechanical writing skills”, considering the importance of writing in undergraduate students’ learning, also within Sociology. These authors conclude that “a graded rubric and scaffolding within a discipline will increase writing skills for future writing assignments” if applied in a pedagogically intentional way (as explained in the article) and in connection with the surrounding institutional context.

Finally, the essay entitled “Sociology’s Role in the Teaching of Organizational Behaviour in Higher Education. The Case of Hospitality Management” [6] by Jorge Ferraz, from the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences—CICS.NOVA, Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies, and CITUR—Centre for Research in Tourism, Portugal, seeks to question and discuss the relevance of sociological teaching in the learning context of the organisational behaviour curricular unit, in which “Teaching in universities, especially in management schools, is today orientated to solving problems and operational skills’ development, short-term productivity gains and to a vocational perspective”, which limits the learning of critical skills. The author proposes “teaching the social and macro dimensions that contribute to explain organizational structuring and behaviour” and “enhancing reflexivity and contextualization on the practices and discourses of all social actors involved and disassembling the dominant ideological, naturalized and simplistic individualized view on the reality of labour, employment and organizations”, which may be critical to a good understanding and performance in the practice of hospitality management in a complex societal and organisational reality.

These four relevant contributions, in their diversity, raise the quality and significance of this Special Issue, focusing on some of the challenges that the teacher faces in his/her classes. This Special Issue acknowledges the need to deepen the topic of the teaching and learning of Sociology in the sense of its increasing improvement in order to obtain a better understanding of several dimensions, including institutional, curricular, professional and academic aspects, in the (de)construction of students' ideas about society, the study programme that they are enrolled in, and, specifically, Sociology.

As guest editors, we thank Dr Gregor Wolbring, Editor-in-Chief of the Societies journal, for the trust placed in us, reflected in his invitation, which deeply honours us. The reviewers played a very important role, inasmuch that, with their excellent and generous constructive evaluation work, they contributed, in a vital way, to the final quality of the published manuscripts. The professionalism of the Editorial Office of the Societies journal and the quality of its Editorial Board were significant for the final result. In a very special way, we would like to thank all the authors who submitted manuscripts for evaluation, some of which were not accepted because, in our opinion, they did not fit the topic in question or due to lack of quality. To all, we would like to express our appreciation.

As a concluding synthesis of this Special Issue on Training Models and Practices in Sociology, it may be considered that it sought to question the teaching of Sociology through the fostering of some principles that apply more appropriately to Sociology. The influence in the learning process of socio-demographic characteristics and group and teacher effects is considered; a strategy for improving the writing skills of Sociology students (an essential competence for successful learning) is deepened; and finally, the importance and contribution of a sociological stance in the learning of critical thinking practice in the field of organisational behaviour management is discussed, thus contributing to the learning of a "sociological literacy" [7].

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