Teaching Social Inequality Through Analysis of Hidden Assumptions in Non-Academic Publications

Pidi Zhang

Author's Reflexive Statement

When I first began teaching, I was puzzled by how students would demonstrate mastery of a particular sociological perspective learned in class and then struggle to apply that concept or theory to real-life social issues. Rather, time and time again, I saw students return to individual explanations for social phenomena. One particular event really sticks with me. I had a student, struggling to complete their school work while laboring at two minimum-wage jobs, yet who was adamant that increasing the minimum wage would hurt him and others like him. He believed that such a policy shift would cause inflation, compel employers to hire fewer workers and reduce work hours, and, as a result, hurt the minimum wage earners. Another time, a senior sociology student expressed that an online "article" they read—which purported that there was virtually no poverty in the United States—was "eye-opening". Experiences like this convinced me that something must be changed about how we teach critical thought and data analysis to students.

With rapidly expanding access to information, resultant over over-information, the prevalence of misinformation and overt distortions in the information system are overwhelming to our students. It is no wonder that they are often confused with the world around them. As high school students, their critical thinking skills remain incomplete—they are used to trusting what they read. As a result, upon entering college, students are not prepared to attune to the information they need and screen out harmful misinformation. I have found that, college students need tools to help them process information and news they encounter in their every day lives.

P. Zhang (✉)
Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, USA
e-mail: pzhang@georgiasouthern.edu

Introduction

Professors teaching about inequality report various reactions from their students upon first learning about economic inequity, ranging from outright denial to moderated resistance (Davis 1992; Forbes and Kaufman 2008; Hedley and Markowitz 2001; Kleinman and Copp 2009), from feeling overwhelmed to expressing intense rage (Davis 1992). Students enter classes having been socialized with ideologies at odds with the sociological perspective on economic inequity (Forbes and Kaufman 2008). The situation may be worsened by the acceptance of the notion among college students that all views are equal (Benton 2008). To some extent, these attitudes are byproducts of the American democratic process which holds dear the tenet that people should be allowed to think and express themselves freely on any subject, even when speaking against the idea of democratic society (Postman and Weigartner 1969). However, this tenet is not typically paired with its essential twin: the intellectual power and perspective to critically examine the popular texts they encounter.

In practice the power elites use schools to promote their own interests and claim that as a part of the democratic process (Postman and Weigartner 1969). Schools and universities serve as political instruments that legitimize and conserve the existing system that benefit elites by maintaining a commonsensical understanding about a class meaning system. Bourdieu (1977: 169) calls it "a system of euphemisms, of acceptable ways of thinking and speaking" that describes the dominant system as natural, self-evident and undisputed and rejects heretical remarks as blasphemies. This meaning system produces unquestioning agents who in turn help maintain the dominant system (Bourdieu 1977; Chabrak and Craig 2013). Wysong et al. (2014) discuss the opinion-shaping information and entertainment industries funded by the superclass and the involvement of these industries in the reproduction of the dominant system.

Given that students are products of the existing social structure and their cultural upbringing, professors are faced with the difficult task of teaching critical thinking and the sociological imagination. Postman and Weigartner (1969: 3) pointed out nearly half a century ago that,

> Our intellectual history is a chronicle of the anguish and suffering of men who tried to help their contemporaries see that some part of their fondest beliefs were misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions, and even outright lies. … We have in mind a new education that would set out to cultivate just such people – experts at "crap detecting."

Nardi (2006: 286) translates "crap detecting" into the more familiar "critical thinking," a skill college professors find rare among present day students. In this chapter, I discuss methods for teaching students to distinguish between information and misinformation in non-academic publications and introduce a two-step strategy for instructors to help students develop the critical thinking skills needed to accomplish this task.

Over-Information and Misinformation

Mills (1959) discusses the "Age of Fact," the contemporary reality in which people, though in need of information to understand the rapidly changing world, are overwhelmed and dominated by the information to which they are exposed. The situation has only worsened in recent decades. The amount of information and misinformation from cultural products such as movies, televisions, the Internet, radio, music, DVDs, video game, newspapers, magazines and books that "reflect and influence the content of American culture" has grown at an unprecedented rate (Wysong et al. 2014: 262).

Wysong et al. (2014) demonstrate that corporations, foundations, and the wealthy fund think tanks, which produce messages heavily used by the information industry. The information industry operates via three interrelated control processes: the mainstream ideology process, the opinion-shaping process, and the spin-control process. These processes shape the ethos of the existing economic system as legitimate, upper-class behaviors and lifestyles as desirable, and existing inequality as fair. Chabrak and Craig (2013) illustrate the impact of the ethos on accounting students in a study of their responses to a disastrous business practice that contradicts their own values but is in line with the evolving ethos of capitalism. The authors find that most students compromise their own values and adopt behaviors consistent with the dominant meaning system because of the persuasive power of capitalist ideology (Chabrak and Craig 2013).

It is a challenge for students to detect flawed arguments skillfully crafted to misinform and mislead them. For instance, students in my Inequality class were given an online article to analyze and critique about poverty in the United States. The article (Rector and Sheffield 2011) provides statistics showing that 99% of American households have refrigerators or televisions and other amenities. The statistics are used to support the argument that poverty in the United States is grossly exaggerated by academia, government, and the media. Most students were convinced by the statistics presented in the article of the argument that poverty did not exist. One student who regularly did well in other class activities even exclaimed that the article was "eye-opening," as she "never realized that there was actually so little poverty in America!"

This article is an effective vehicle that shapes opinions about poverty even though access to refrigerators, televisions, and other amenities is not valid evidence of poverty. Similar publications sponsored by powerful interest groups appear online and in print. They add to the growing amount of overinformation and misinformation that often becomes conventional wisdom. Educators cannot afford to ignore the powerful influence of non-academic publications in shaping students' ideologies and perspectives about the world. Attention must be directed toward helping students develop effective working strategies to "debunk the social fiction" in non-academic publications and make "a first step toward freedom" (Berger 2011: 75).

Limitations of Academic Sources

Information from academic sources and knowledge gained in sociology classes constitute a tiny fraction of what students encounter compared with the amounts of information they come across from other sources. Few students acquire information and knowledge about social issues through reading academic publications unless required by professors. Most students do not care to fully understand what they read (Horowitz 1987). Although academic sources provide information that meets rigorous scientific standards, social scientists normally do not highlight sources of biases that would otherwise flaw their research and therefore do not alert readers of various potential methodological defects they guard against. In that regard, academic sources do not constitute an effective counterweight against biases in non-academic sources. Educators must play an active role in helping students develop critical thinking skills (Chabrak and Craig 2013). One specific strategy that can be used by instructors is to provide students with tools they can use to critique information and uncover misinformation.

Analyzing Hidden Assumptions Versus Providing Counterarguments

The strategies I propose in this article seek to pinpoint defects in arguments through identifying and analyzing their hidden assumptions rather than providing counterarguments. For example, the Rector and Sheffield (2011) article, while never operationalizing the concepts of poverty or economic status, successfully persuades many readers into accepting its argument that the United States has very little poverty mainly because readers unknowingly accept its implicit assumption of access to refrigerators, microwaves and other common household amenities as valid indicators for a household's economic condition. Readers without a rigorous training in social science methodology are likely to take the data for granted and get hoodwinked into accepting the intended message.

A common student response to the problematic argument is raising counterarguments. However, juxtaposing arguments against one another without analyzing the validity of their evidence fails to undermine misleading arguments and may leave students even more confused. The strategy discussed in this chapter, instead, helps students recognize and critique the hidden assumptions of problematic arguments. Returning to the example at hand, when asked whether access to household appliances is a valid measure of economic status or poverty, most students are able to recognize the measure's deficiencies and suggest more valid measures. Directing students' attention to the invalidity of the hidden assumption helps them debunk the seemingly plausible but truly misleading argument of the article.

As mentioned, most students have not been trained to question the validity of a measure. Roberts and Roberts (2008: 125) note that, in high school, students are taught "surface learning" rather than "deep learning". Surface learning involves repeating factual information while deep learning prepares students to "make meaning and construct a strong argument." Identifying the hidden assumption about evidence usage entails deconstructing and reconstructing meaning. The key is to help students develop the ability or the habit of searching for hidden assumptions when reading online, news, or academic articles. The following section introduces a two-stage method of analyzing hidden assumptions. The first stage is to use the sociological imagination and identify an article with truly problematic arguments. The second stage is to identify and analyze hidden evidenced-based and reason-based assumptions.

The General Approach

The Sociological Imagination

A few years ago I designed a writing assignment in which students were required to identify and critique a seemingly plausible but misleading argument in a non-academic publication. Over half of the class found articles with largely sound arguments and mistook them as misleading. American society's propensity toward micro level thinking makes it difficult for students to think sociologically and the students' faulty selections were due to this fact that Americans are accustomed to thinking in individualist terms, at odds with the sociological imagination. Thus, armed with an understanding of macro-level perspectives and the sociological imagination, students are less likely to select articles with sound arguments to criticize in this activity. The activity below, titled "Identifying Problematic Arguments", provides a list of questions I ask my students as they examine the arguments in articles to help them employ their sociological imagination and, thereby, a macro-level lens.

Identifying Problematic Arguments

Pedagogical Goal of Activity

Given the increase in access to information with the expansion of the Internet and social media, along with a decrease in lessons about critical thinking in K-12 education, college students are in need of learning to critique the information they read. This activity seeks to help students critically analyze an argumentative article.

Assignment Description and Instructions:

Step 1. Have students bring a news or academic article to class.
Step 2. Verify that the article is argumentative using the following questions. For example, one could have students read two articles, one by James Sherk on minimum wages and the other by Rector and Sheffield, and answer the following for each:

1. Does the article describe or report something without making any specific argument?
2. Does the article make a specific argument?
3. What is the argument? Specify.
4. What does the article use to support the argument? Mainly evidence or reasoning? Specify.

Many non-academic publications are descriptions or reports that do not have a clear argument. Such articles should be excluded in this first step. The questions listed above crosscheck potential selections and verify the selected article has an argument to meet the basic requirement.

Step 3. Step three involves using the sociological imagination and ensures that the argument of the selected article is not sociological. This is verified by whether the selected article takes a structural or individualist approach and whether the article makes an argument that denies a problem. Students should be alerted to think and recognize why denying a problem is tantamount to denying the structural causes of a problem. The tool helps identify two types of arguments that may not be mutually exclusive: evidence-based and reasoning-based. Students would need assistance to make sure they identify an article with problematic arguments. The instructor should keep a list of problematic articles for them to choose from.

Apply the sociological imagination. Ask students the following questions to help them see the role of micro-level and macro-level analytic claims.

1. Does the evidence provided in the article specify or point to individual motives as major support to the argument? Specify if any.
2. Does the evidence provided in the article specify or point to individual behavioral factors as major support to the argument? Specify if any.
3. Does the evidence provided in the article specify or point to something beyond individual thinking, feeling, preference or behavior as major support to the argument? Specify if any.
4. Does the evidence provided in the article specify or point to any social, historical, societal, or cultural factors as major support to the argument? Specify if any.
5. Does the reasoning in the article specify or point to individual motives as major support to the argument? Specify if any.
6. Does the reasoning in the article specify or point to individual behavioral factors as major support to the argument? Specify if any.

7. Does the reasoning in the article specify or point to factors beyond individual thinking, feeling, preference or behavior as major support to the argument? Specify if any.
8. Does the reasoning in the article specify or point to any social, historical, societal, or cultural factors as major support to the argument? Specify if any.

Validity Check for Evidence-Based Arguments

Problematic arguments based on evidence can be scrutinized with a construct validity check (Singleton and Straight 2010). As mentioned, the argument of Rector and Sheffield's (2011) article is that there is virtually no poverty in the United States. The major concept used in the argument is poverty. Measures used as evidence include access to a long list of amenities such as refrigerators, televisions, stoves and ovens, and microwaves, etc. The construct validity check asks the question: "Is the instrument measuring the intended concept (or construct), or can it be interpreted as measuring something else?" (Singleton and Straight 2010: 140). The activity below, titled "Teaching Students about Argument Validity", uses the Rector and Sheffield article as a case study and provides a tool for instructors to use when helping students conduct a "validity check" regarding arguments and their evidence. Identifying the hidden assumption about the validity of the evidence usage entails reconstructing meaning and reveals the defect of an argument's construction. In turn, a students' analytical power and their ability to build strong arguments is strengthened.

Teaching Students About Argument Validity

Pedagogical Goal of Activity

These questions seek to help students examine the validity of arguments made in scholarly and news articles they encounter.

Instructions

Have students select an article related to poverty, economic inequality, or capitalism. Then ask them the following questions about the article.

1. What is the main argument of the article?
2. What is the key concept in the argument? Focus on the argument for a few minutes and you will find out the concept.
3. Specify the evidence or measures the authors use in the article as support for the argument. (Tables and graphs may contain such information as well.)
4. Do the authors discuss how appropriate the measures of the concept reflect the related concept (poverty)?

5. If the authors do not discuss the appropriateness of the measures, do they assume that the measures correctly exemplify the concept?
6. Evaluate whether the measures as evidence sufficiently exemplify the concept. (For example, evaluate access to refrigerators as a measure for poverty status, etc.)
7. According to published information you know of or based on your own knowledge, what may be important measures that appropriately exemplify the concept (in this case, poverty or economic status)? Make a list.
8. Compare your list with the author's measures, discuss their appropriateness (validity) or lack of it.
9. Synthesize the above information and draw a conclusion about the authors' argument.

As an instructor, you will likely need to help them with question number six, as students often fail to see when measures do not 'measure up' to the claims made by authors.

   After completing this activity, discuss the articles as a class and uncover all or any bias in the claims made by authors.

Detecting Bias in Reason-Based Arguments

Many articles, columns, or editorials online or in print are discursive and based on reasoning that is intended to persuade the reader into accepting their arguments. A misleading argument based on reasoning may appear appealing to uncritical readers. However, the flawed nature of the claim may be revealed in the argument's connotations, which, upon analysis, may highlight the problematic messages of the argument. In these cases, instructors should direct students to detect bias in the connotations of the arguments rather than flawed use of evidence.

   For example, in my "Inequality" course, I ask students to critique the article: "Raising the Minimum Wage Will Not Reduce Poverty" (Sherk 2007). The author uses three reason-based arguments to support his claim. First, he argues, the only workers who benefit from a higher minimum wage are those who earn that higher wage. Others are detrimentally affected as raising the minimum wage reduces many workers' job opportunities and working hours. Second, he claims, few minimum-wage earners actually come from poor households, many are teenagers. Third, Sherk claims, most poor Americans do not work at all, for any wage, so raising the minimum wage does not help them (Sherk 2007). The author also uses existing research findings (Neumark et al. 2004) as supporting evidence for the reasons why minimum wage policies do not reduce poverty. I then employ the following activity, "Examining Reasoning-Based Articles: Detecting Bias in Reason-Based Arguments", to support students in analyzing reason-based arguments.

Examining Reasoning-Based Articles: Detect Biases in Connotations

Pedagogical Goal of Activity

These questions seek to help students examine reason-based arguments in articles to detect biases.

Instructions

Have students read "Raising the Minimum Wages Will Not Reduce Poverty" by James Sherk. Then ask students the following questions:

1. What is the main argument of the article?
2. Describe the motives, reasons or reasoning the author uses in the article as support for the argument.
3. Find out connotations of the argument or reasoning that the author does not explicitly discuss but that may appear at odds with the values of mainstream society. The connotation must be logically related to the reasoning of the argument. Admonishment: The purpose is not to show the argument is invalid (impossible for reason-based arguments), but to reveal less acceptable or unacceptable implications of the argument.
4. Deliberate the (social, political, economic) importance of the connotation and how it comes into conflict with society's values and even with the way the author's argument appears. For example, Sherk (2007) in effect argues against increasing the minimum wage because it does not reduce poverty, and because most people who benefit from it are not poor. One connotation of the argument is that it is reasonable or acceptable for the small proportion of poor people who need an increase in minimum wages not to have it. This connotation may go against some basic human values of modern society and is surprisingly different from the innocent appearance of the argument that minimum wages do not reduce poverty.
5. Compare the unacceptable connotation and the author's seemingly plausible argument. Draw a conclusion based on all the above.

Following this initial discussion, have students attune to the following arguments made by Sherk and pose the following questions to shift their thinking about the veracity of his claims.

Sherk's reason: "First, the only workers who benefit from a higher minimum wage are those who actually earn that higher wage. Raising the minimum wage reduces many workers' job opportunities and working hours."

Suggested Questions:

1. Why does the author seem to suggest that the increased minimum wage for workers who benefit from it indicates something negative?
2. The author discusses that raising the minimum wage reduces workers' job opportunities and working hours but does not discuss whether the same amount

of work would be done with the fewer workers and reduced work hours. What could be the moral or legal implications of that practice?

Sherk's reason: "Second, few minimum-wage earners actually come from poor households."

Suggested Questions:

1. If minimum wages help many people who do not need help, does that mean it is reasonable or acceptable to deny those of the help who do need it?

Sherk's reason: "Third, the majority of poor Americans do not work at all, for any wage, so raising the minimum wage does not help them."

Suggested Questions:

1. If the minimum wage does not reduce poverty, does that indicate the increase is not large enough?
2. Why does the author not point to the need to further increase it?
3. Does the author seem to suggest getting rid of it?
4. Would getting rid of the minimum wage solve or worsen the problem?
5. Based on the sociological perspective bring up a hypothesis about a condition that causes poor Americans not to work.
6. Based on the above analysis, reevaluate your initial conclusions drawn from the article.

Intellectual Challenge About the Real World

The need for "crap detecting" Postman and Weigartner (1969) envisioned nearly half a century ago continues to be relevant today as the information to which students are exposed online consistently reflects capitalist bias and ideology (Wysong et al. 2014; Berners-Lee 2017). James and Brookfield (2010) note that deep learning occurs when people suddenly see unexpected patterns emerging. The strategies discussed in this paper are a useful toolkit that should enable students to "detect crap" that they encounter on a daily basis.

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