

# THE STUDENT JOURNAL AS A TEACHING AID

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*This note cites the advantages of the student journal as one way for undergraduates to relate concepts in sociology and anthropology to their everyday lives. The journal enables students to be in closer touch with their social worlds, helps sharpen observational skills, provides material for class discussions, and helps to integrate scientific insights with personal values.*

How can we help students grasp scientific concepts and make these relevant to their everyday lives? One technique I find useful—at least in introductory sociology and anthropology classes—is the use of a “student journal,” a notebook where students can record their reflections of the material taken in class. A stenographer’s notebook will suit this purpose. On the left-hand column of the notebook, labelled “Observations,” students write down incidents which they have witnessed or experienced in their everyday lives, past and present; on the right-hand column, labelled “Principles,” students interpret each observation in terms of a concept, insight, or theory taken in the preceding class.

I do not fix the number of observations and principles to be made for each class; other teach-

ers, however, might want to set it at two or three per class. Whatever the number, it is important that students acquire the habit of jotting down observations and principles, and in so doing, develop a capability to reflect continuously on the subject matter. I collect the notebook at regular intervals, read and comment on the entries, grade them, and whenever appropriate, discuss some entries in class to review a concept, illustrate a new idea, or start a discussion. I am careful to keep the confidentiality of the journal entries, especially those items which students mark as “confidential” or those which I consider too personal. Hence, I pre-select the entries I read in class, or ask students to choose which entry to present before their classmates. Here are sample entries written by students after lectures on Philippine cultural values:

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## *Observations*

I once had this roommate who had the nasty habit of slamming the door behind him everytime. This really bothered me especially when I am studying or sleeping. But I could not find it within me to tell him directly that I minded his habit very much. What I did instead was to place a sign just above the door-knob. This sign, which was not directed to him but to everyone in the room, read: NEVER, EVER, SLAM THIS DOOR, MAN! It worked!

After a quarrel with Dad, Mom left the house, bringing with her my kid brother and some clothes. It was very tense at home. After two days, my father’s eldest sister asked my Mom’s friend to talk to my Mom and tell her that my Dad got sick. The friend did. Soon after, my mom packed her things, and with my kid brother, returned home.

My dad was surprised one evening when he saw a bowl of hot chili on the dining table. My mom told him the bowl came from our neighbors, and quickly added that she asked our help to deliver paella to them in return for the chili. My dad said, *Oo, tama’yun. Nakakahiya sa kanila.*

## *Principles*

This incident illustrates the value Filipinos place on “smooth interpersonal relations.” I have been living in the dorm for the last four years, and have always found adjusting to my roommates quite a difficult process. This is perhaps because I put so much value in pleasant interaction and do not want to create trouble with my roommates.

One Filipino practice is the use of “go-betweens.” In this instance, the go-betweens are persons close and socially acceptable to both parties. The use of go-betweens prevents direct confrontation between the aggrieved parties. One also feels less embarrassed in talking with third parties.

Filipinos place importance on “reciprocity,” as evidenced by my parent’s readiness to return the favor granted by our neighbors. Failure to do so warrants censure, or in this example, my dad’s concern for what others will say. “*Nakakahiya naman sa kanila,*” he said.

What do students learn from this journal? My experience suggest three important lessons. First, students learn to relate scientific concepts with their everyday lives, or to phrase it more elegantly, to be in closer touch with their social worlds. As a result, the understanding of the

science is both intellectual and personal. Everyday experiences are not simply commonplace events; they also acquire sociological and anthropological relevance. Consider these entries related to the topic of social institutions, specifically the family, religion, and education:

#### *Observations*

My father, who is now deceased, was the chief supporter of our family. My mother also worked, and although my father allowed this, he didn't permit my mom to accept promotions offered to her. He allowed her to work not so that my mom won't get bored at home, but so that we could have discounts on air fares whenever we travelled. In decision-making, my father always had the last say. When he died, my mom had a difficult time adjusting to the drastic change. She wasn't used to making decisions.

While riding a bus bound for school, I saw a passenger, an old man, carrying what appeared to me a sleeping two-year old girl. The girl seemed to be sick for the old man was constantly putting his hand over the child's neck, perhaps feeling the girl's temperature. A few minutes later, the man took out a rosary and put it around the girl's neck.

I have a very idealistic and very nationalistic professor for my class in Corporation Law. One time, during a class break, the professor and some students (including myself) were chatting about general things. I felt it was my chance to impress him and so I started talking about graft and corruption in the government. He *loved* it! Our conversation was so interesting that out supposed 5-minute break became a 25-minute break as both of us discussed the "plagues of society."

Second, the student journal permits training in the scientific method; it sharpens the student's observational skills and teaches them to think in an inductive manner. While the student journal is no substitute for a formal course in research

#### *Principles*

Authority in my family is patriarchal and autocratic. Whatever my father said was followed. He was the head of the home, but he left the rearing of the children and matters concerning the household to my mom. The sex-role division can also be seen, with the male having more power than the female in making major family decisions.

Religion provides comfort and hope to its believers. When we think that things are beyond our control, we leave the situation to God's will and hope for the best. Symbols like the rosary are seen to possess magical or supernatural powers, and are used to seek God's favor. These views are consistent with the functionalist theory of religion.

Clearly, I was using *impression management* to get in good terms with my professor. I was controlling the signals I was emitting to him, and showing him that I was also as idealistic and nationalistic as he was. I was also showing off my "front stage" behavior, dealing with him in a formal manner and using words like "social elites" and the like. I liked what we discussed, but I hoped more to get on his good side, i.e., he would find me to be a favorable Filipino.

methods, it alerts students to basic principles in social science methodology. The sample entry, a lengthy one, below reveals an appreciation of a scientific disposition, one which the student relates to his chosen profession.

#### *Observations*

As part of my pre-med training, I was asked to assist a physician in a district hospital. One day, a man who was half-conscious was wheeled into the emergency room. His head was struck by a bolo and was bleeding profusely. I put on a pair of gloves and helped the physician to stop the bleeding. Then I

#### *Principles*

Like sociologists and anthropologists, physicians need to acquire a sense of objectivity and detachment in their work. It's a state of mind which suspends, at least for a moment, emotional attachments, biases and fears. What determined the force of my pulling the bone was the necessity of sliding it back in the right

thought: this man is losing so much blood and his family that's just outside expects us to save his life, and here I am making a messy job of it all. The thought affected me. I lost control and turned pale. I had to be replaced. Later that day, I took hold of myself. When a boy with a broken humerus was brought in, I helped the doctor position the arm in place. Though sedated, the boy was screaming his head off. I concentrated on placing the bone correctly, not on his cries of pain. It worked. With a different frame of mind, I was able to heal.

Third, the journal allows students to learn from each other. By reading their own entries in class, or by having the teacher preselect entries to be read in class, students can discuss how well their observations fit a particular concept or principle. The teacher, as facilitator, guides the discussion and moves on to the next topic until an adequate understanding of the principle is reached. The following observations provided good material for class discussions:

My mother and my sister got into an argument today. My sister, Karina, wanted to call up her boyfriend. My mother said this was improper, saying that girls should not call boys unless it's important. Karina asked my Mom why this was so, and my mother couldn't answer. This led to other things. My mom also forbade Karina to ride the bus or the jeep even though she is already a high school senior, while my brother and I have taken public transportation since we were in elementary school. (Concepts: *sex roles, social control, family, power.* )

Today I got a perfect score in my Theology long exam. I consider this one of the world's greatest miracles. But what was more surprising were the reactions of my classmates to my perfect score: "Walanghiya Ka!" Pare, paano mo ginawa 'yun?," Pare, hayop na tsamba. (Concepts: *limited good, levelling, conformity* )

I have a friend who lost his left eye from a horrible car accident, I would always kind of stare at his class eye and made sure that I didn't say any "blind man" jokes or even mention anything about blindness. As we got to know each other more, I began to overlook the fact that he was blind in one eye. Nowadays, I see him as a person first instead of "that guy with one eye." I also don't have to watch what I say anymore. I've learned to look at this guy for what he's really like, not

place, not the boy's tolerance for pain. I could not see the boy as a "kaawa-awang" soul, but as an object (of the operation). A similar sense of objectivity, or a bracketing of biases, is necessary in doing sociology or anthropology. This attitude will help understand the phenomenon for what it is rather than a mere reflection of the researcher's biases. Socio-anthro, like medicine, is a science.

what's wrong with him. (Concepts: *deviance, disavowal, stigma, stigma management.* )

One of my foremost anxieties as an aspiring priest is that I will not have a wife and family. But since I am a human being, there's no reason why I shouldn't and couldn't admire or love someone from the opposite sex. It's difficult for me to integrate these human feelings with celibacy. There are times I want to interact more with girls, but something's holding me back. (Concepts: *socialization, role conflict, reflexive self.* )

Another set of observations highlight some difficulties in achieving social change in Philippine society. These observations were elaborated for class discussion, or referred to in class lectures:

Just recently, the Sanggunian set up a registration table for students to sign up as the school's representatives for the February 25 EDSA rally. Much to many people's dismay, only a meager 22 students officially signed up for the rally. What makes us so indifferent to mass actions and mobilizations? (Suggestion: *relate the discussion to theories and stages of social movements.* )

During the recent transportation strike, jeepney drivers stopped plying their routes to protest the rise of fuel prices and the non-adjustment in fares. Many passengers were stranded in the streets as a result of the strike. But some drivers did not join the strike because they needed to earn money for their family. As much as they wanted an increase in fare, they had no choice but to ply their route and earn something for the day. (Ask students: *what would you suggest to enlist the participation of this second group of jeepney drivers in the strike? How can a strike an effective tool for social change?* )

I went to a rubber shoe factory to observe a union meeting. Representatives from various labor alli-

ances were present that day. I noticed that representatives of the moderate labor groups were well applauded by the audience after they spoke. In contrast, when representatives of the leftist group spoke, the audience greeted them with boos and unpleasant remarks. (Discuss: *what was the program presented by the leftist group? Why did people react negatively to the program or the ideology of this group?*)

I watched a news coverage of a land reform meeting attended by farmers, landowners, and government officials (including the Secretary of Agriculture himself). I particularly noticed how these different groups were positioned during the meeting. The government officials were in front, the landowners were seated at the center, and the farmers (distinguishable by their looks and clothes) were standing at the back—a strange position considering their grievances were supposed to be the agenda of the meeting. Moreover, English was used as the medium of communication during the meeting. It was obvious the farmers were left out of the discussion. (Suggestion: *relate to the notions of structured social inequality, impression management, and mass media.*)

A batch of observations and principles, accumulated in the course of one semester, does not constitute a coherent piece of sociology or anthropology. A synthesis of sorts is necessary to pull together the string of insights about everyday life. To accomplish this, I ask students at midterm, and more importantly towards the end of the term, to compose an essay (still written on the notebook) based on a general theme. A theme like "Society in Me, Me in Society," for example, asks students to demonstrate from their own experience how Philippine society—its norms, values, and social structure—shapes their lives and how they, in turn, manage to shape the society they inhabit. This essay not only helps to bring together the students' earlier observations. It also enjoins them to integrate scientific understanding and personal values.

Consider this excerpt from a student essay:

The pace in which society is proceeding right now demands that we be relevant. Individual roles are changing and our responsibilities are becoming more and more demanding. We may learn from past experiences, but more understanding is needed to face future trials. To me, being a Christian is both personal and social. By personal I mean we have to acquire the right values and remain morally upright. But personal transformation and conversion is not the only important task to carry out. The other task, a social one, is to make the spoken word meaningful in our lives and in the lives of other people as well. Part of that social task involves critical observation, exploration, analysis, evaluation, and vision-setting.

The student journal aims for a personal encounter with abstract scientific or theoretical concepts. It is simple to implement, and encourages students to write down their own ideas. But since the journal is another writing task over and beyond the usual exams, quizzes and term papers, it is advisable to use this method judiciously and to supplement it with other techniques which will achieve similar results. Focused group discussions, field work exercises, role-playing and other theater-related activities are some examples of these supplementary techniques.

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#### Notes

I wish to thank Benjamin C. Bernales and Henry R. Robles for reading a draft of this manuscript and for sharing their experiences on the use of the student journal in their classes. I also wish to thank the students who wrote the observations and principles featured in this paper.