

## Stage 1 Sociology Course

### A Case study from the Inquiry-Based Learning Project

#### Sociology 111: Exploring Society

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#### Snapshot of Case & Introduction

*Sociology 111: Exploring Society* is an introductory course that had an enrolment of 291 students in Semester 1, 2007. It has no prerequisites but is required for progression in the Sociology Programme. As well as this course’s content of contemporary sociological topics such as: crime, death and dying, food, sexuality, and sports, the main goal of the course, according to Brigid Thompson, Course Coordinator, is to facilitate students’ development of thinking like sociologists.

This division of content and process in the course’s 2007 iteration was reflected in the design and delivery. The specific topics were taught by a team of lecturers, whose research interests were the topics, in large, presentation-style lectures that were offered once a week. The process of learning to think like a sociologist was facilitated through a weekly tutorial taught by the course coordinator or another tutor, and consisted of groups of 50 students. The linkage between the lectures and tutorials was through both the course content in the form of a reading pack with selections on the topics and the course assessments in the forms of an essay and final exam. In addition, students were also required to interact with each other and the Course Coordinator through online discussions on the University’s Blackboard learning management system.

Brigid, the Course Coordinator, had been a student of the course and graduate of the Sociology Programme and those experiences strongly influenced her approach to course design. She described the previous versions of the course as also being led by the team-teaching, or rather guest-teaching, approach, but without a thread to hold those sessions together. She believed that by using the theme of “thinking like a sociologist” through asking sociological questions, she would give both the guest lecturers and the students a focus for the course. Beyond just this course, however, Brigid also did some informal research with her Sociology Department colleagues to find out what they wanted and expected students to be able to do in the 200 and 300 level courses. This research supported and evolved into the

notion of assisting students in asking questions like a sociologist as reflected in Brigid's description of this approach:

"When I designed this course, what I did was talk to all the lecturers about what they were doing in each upper level [course] and what they would want an emergent second year student to have going in and then worked my way backwards. So having been a student at this University in this Department knowing the kind of transition from one year to the next, so level 3 is the beginning of research, so level 2 is actually about getting to grips with sociological theory and so, therefore, level 1 needs to introduce those things at a very inaugural level."

## **Learning Outcomes**

Materials provided to students at the first class meeting lists the course goals as:

- asking questions
- challenging taken-for-granted assumptions
- developing a sociological imagination
- developing reading, writing, reflection, and research skills

And linking these to: students, teachers, context, learning activities, outcomes.

Further, in those same materials, course objectives are described as:

"As a result of doing this course, we hope that you will gain a greater appreciation of sociology as a discipline; that you will develop a good understanding of the scope and potential of the sociological endeavour; and that you will begin to lay a foundation of reading, writing, and reflection skills that will stand you in good stead for involvement in further courses (whether within sociology or not)."

## **Description of Teaching Approach**

Data from Official Course Materials

### *Course Description*

This course is described to students in materials and through presentation on the first day. Included in those materials is this description of it:

"Welcome to SOCI 111: Exploring Society. We hope the time you spend in this course will be profitable and rewarding. Over the coming semester we look forward to sharing with you the excitement that comes from developing a sociological understanding of the social world around you. We trust you will find SOCI 111 to be a worthwhile introduction to a fascinating discipline. Many of you will no doubt go on to take further courses in our department. We look forward to that, and hope solid foundations will be laid in this course.

There are many sociologies. In this course, you will be introduced to a version that is concerned with understanding and explaining the different types of social relationships that constitute diverse social worlds, ranging from music and food to the welfare state and death. Sociologists use a variety of methods to gather information and analyse anything from major

world events to seemingly mundane everyday practices. As you attend lectures and workshops in SOCI 111 you will hopefully begin to grasp some of the excitement of this process of analysis. You will be involved as both participants and contributors in analysing some of the major trends and events of our time. You will be asked to make use of and extend the basic sociological method – asking questions – about taken-for-granted social worlds, activities and events. In the process, you will be introduced to critical ways of thinking, and we will encourage you to develop sociological imaginations. Such imaginations will allow you to make connections between personal experiences, and the social and historical contexts within which such experiences are produced. They will hopefully provoke you to raise questions that enable you to critically reflect on both the connections, and how you make sense of them. Whether you intend continuing in sociology or not, we hope you will find the course to be rewarding."

*Course Structure*

In the materials, the teaching approach is described with the following:

"Teaching input in SOCI 111 will be provided in two main contexts: lectures and workshops. In addition, there will be opportunities for interaction and discussion with lecturers and teaching assistants as required. Hopefully, the benefit of all of this teaching input will be consolidated as you complete the assignments in the course. We wish you well in this."

**Assessment**

The course assessment is detailed below in Table 1.

SOCI 111 Assessment		
Assessment	Value	Description
Online Learning Journal	5%	The Blackboard journal is an online forum designed to complement the learning you do in lectures and workshops. It is your space to work through ideas and concepts with your fellow students at your own pace and in your own time. In the first week of the semester, all students will be assigned to a small online discussion group and will be given a weekly question to consider. The response to the question will be in the form of an online journal post. Responses will be assessed (in weeks 2-12) based on: the length of post (at least one paragraph per post); quality of post (on-topic and relevant to the course material); and the number of posts (each post is worth .5%).
Comment Paper: 1000-1200 words	20%	The purpose of the comment paper is to get you thinking critically about what you read, as well as being able to provide a brief summary of an author’s main arguments. The paper should provide a summary of one of the readings from the course reader (or something else, as arranged with your tutor), and offer a sociological critique of the author’s argument. It is a good idea to choose a reading for your comment paper that you can then use as the basis for further research in your essay. A good way to think about the structure of this paper is to write it in three sections: summary (of the main argument in the article); critical evaluation (of the authors’

		ideas); and reflection (of what you found to be interesting/useful/contentious in the article.
Essay Plan	5%	To assist with planning for your essay, you are required to submit a plan of your essay which will be commented on and returned to you. The purpose of the essay plan is to get you to think about the structure of your overall argument before you begin your research and reading. To make this easier, we will provide you with a one page template that you can complete. This template has space for you to briefly summarise each of the main sections of your essay (introduction, main body, and conclusion).
Essay: 1800-2000 words	40%	The purpose of the essay is to get you to choose one of the issues discussed in the course, and then write about this issue using formal academic conventions. Your essay should include an introduction (which contains an argument statement and a summary of your overall argument); a main body (which has a number of paragraphs detailing your argument and the supporting evidence for this); and a conclusion (which contains a summary of your argument and evidence). Your essay should also contain references throughout the text (using the APA Referencing Style) and it should include a list of references at the end. The essay topics will be handed out in the lecture in the third week of term so you will have time to choose your topic before writing your comment paper.
Exam	30%	The exam is in essay format and the questions are of equal value. You can refer to exam papers from earlier years for an indication of the type of questions asked. These are available on the library homepage. The exam paper will include ten questions, of which you will select three, and write an essay of about 750 words per essay. The topics are: The story of sociology; Gender and sexualities; Sport, bodies, and ethnicity; Food and the body; Family life; Education; Death and dying; Crime and justice; Sociology and technology; Gambling.

Table 1: Assessment for SOCI 111, Semester 1, 2007.

In addition to noting the detail provided for each assessment, it is important to point out the fact that Brigid felt the need to be that detailed. In an observation of her tutorial that outlined the Essay Plan assignment, it was clear that for many students, the basic guidelines of writing an argumentative essay were new information to them. This is significant in that instructors can no longer assume that students know how to write an essay, which could hinder seeking approaches like IBL that move beyond leading students through processes in a lock-step manner.

## **Experiences of the Approach**

### *Students' Experiences*

Student feedback on this course was extremely positive, as shown in their responses (on a Likert Scale where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree) in Table 2. Students found the

course well organised and stimulating and felt they learned a great deal about the subject matter while engaging in research-related abilities.

Course Evaluation for SOCI 111, Semester 1, 2007		
Question	Mean (n=101)	College of Arts Means
This was a well organised course	4.6	4.0
This course helped stimulate my interest and learning in the subject	4.0	3.9
The overall workload in this course was reasonable	3.1	3.1
The level of difficulty of this course was reasonable	3.1	3.1
This course developed my ability to engage in research-related activities	3.9	3.4
The assessment in this course encouraged learning for understanding	4.0	3.8
There was a good balance of theoretical and practical material in this course	3.7	
The teaching methods in this course were effective in helping me to learn	4.1	
The content was presented and explained clearly	4.0	
The lectures were a valuable aid to my learning	4.1	
The (text/required reading/supplementary readings) assisted my learning	3.8	
Overall, this was a good quality course	4.4	4.1

Table 2: Course Evaluation Data, SOCI 111, Semester 1, 2007.

As can be seen in Figure 1 below, students appeared to believe they were engaging in a learning approach that aligns with IBL. The purple bars show where students described an activity as taking place often. Figure 1 demonstrates that the emphasis of learning in this course was on higher order abilities such as analyzing, evaluating, and reflecting with less focus on memorizing and applying. Students also felt they were reflecting on the meaning of what they were learning to them, their life and/or society with comments on their surveys in response to the question, what have you learned from this course, with: “thinking outside the square, not taking for granted stereotypes which society imposes” and “learning how to think critically about societies.”

Figure 1: IBL Survey, Questions 1-7, SOCI 111, Semester 1, 2007.

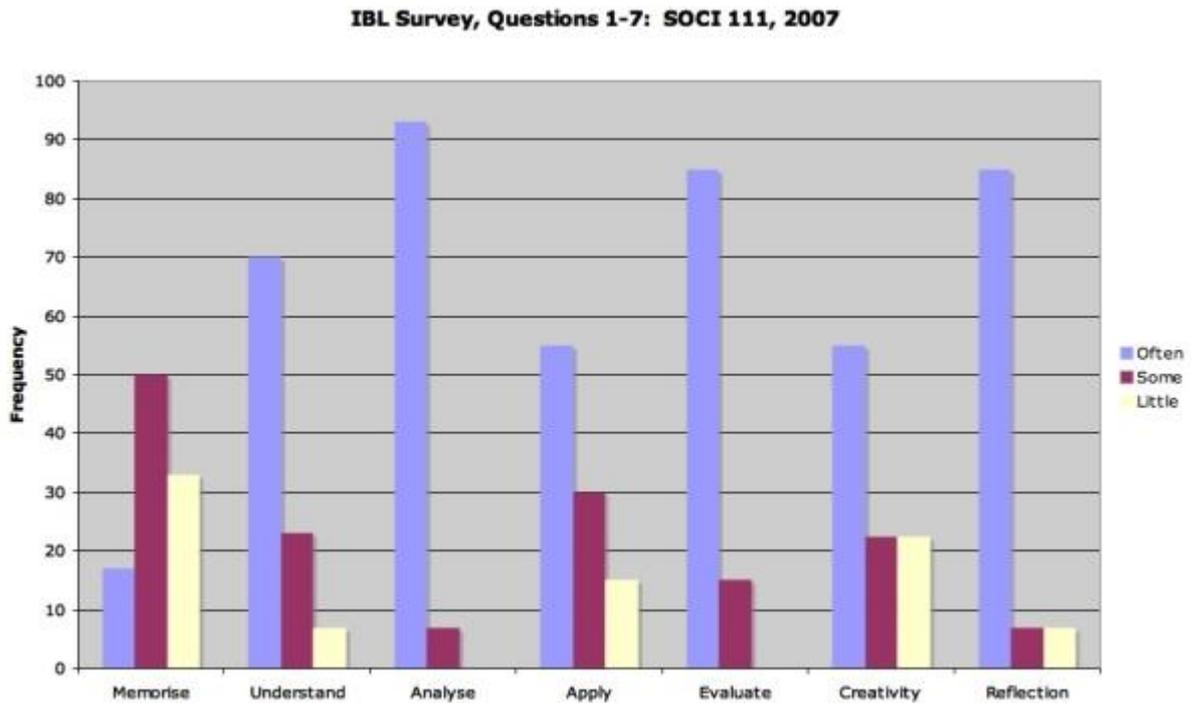


Figure 2 below shows that students described their experiences in accordance with the characteristics of an open inquiry approach whereby over 80% of students stated they were faced with multiple-answer questions and 100% thought they were often encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. While the percentage of often responses to the other questions slightly decreased, it is important to note that the responses to all questions were primarily often or some.

Figure 2: IBL Survey, Questions 8-13, SOCI 111, Semester 1, 2007.

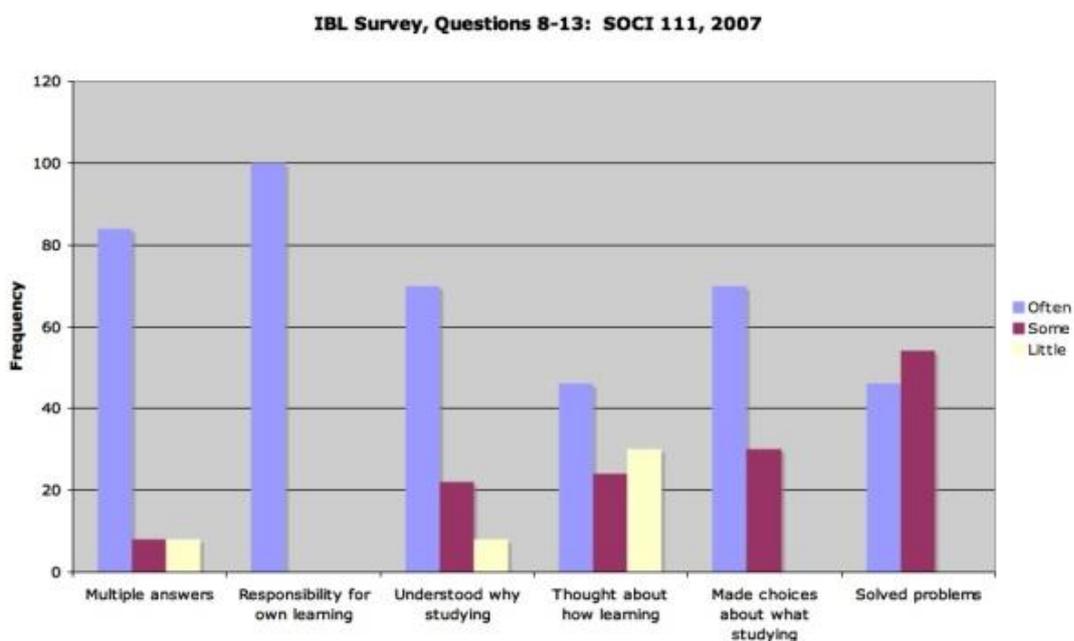
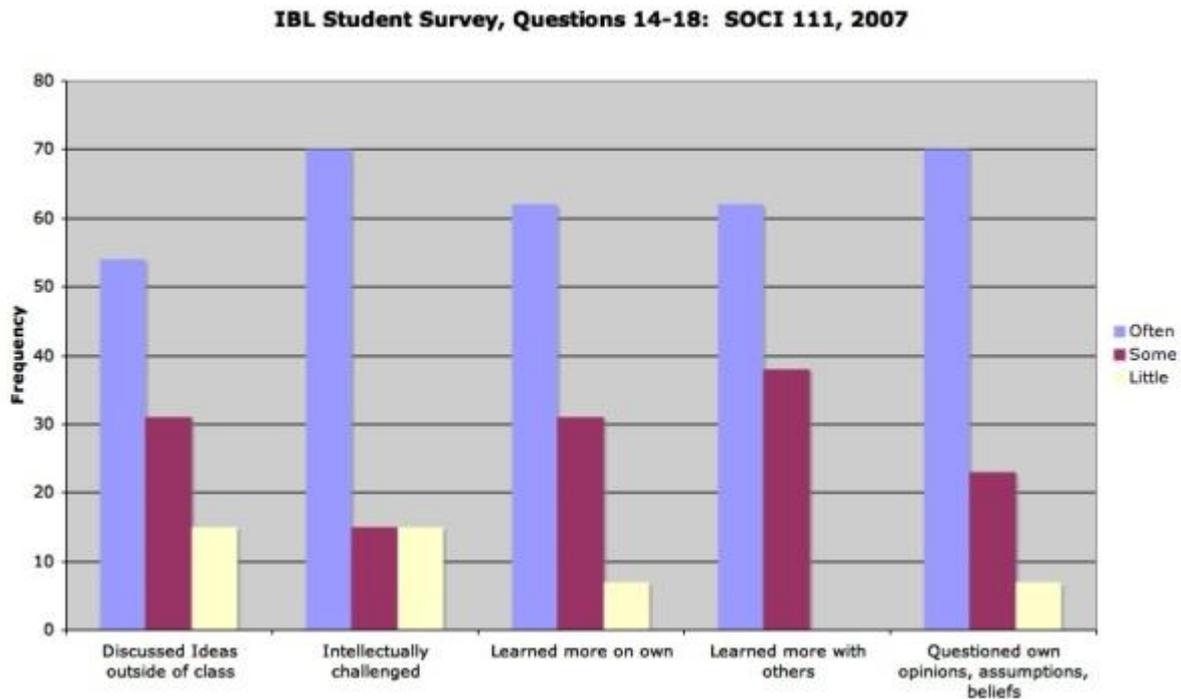


Figure 3 demonstrates that students' responses were mostly clustered on often to all of these questions. The two questions that generated the strongest often answers, with 70% each, were intellectually challenged and questioned own opinions, assumptions, and beliefs.

Figure 3: IBL Survey, Questions 14-18, SOCI 111, Semester 1, 2007.



The final question in the IBL survey asked students to list the things they had learned in the course that were particularly valuable to them. As can be seen from the students' responses below, the majority focused on changes to personal views or broader ways of thinking beyond course content or processes. Only three responses referred directly to skills learned within the course such as essay writing or workshops [tutorials].

Comments about specific skills:

- able to express my own opinions in essays – VERY VALUABLE!
- essay writing skills
- the workshops were great for clarifying things

Comments about broader areas:

- learning how to think critically about societies and why we do things the way we do
- other people's beliefs and how to understand where they are coming from
- sticking up for my own beliefs when they are challenged
- looking at death, gender, education, crime, and gambling and how society looks at them
- how to think outside the square that I live in
- thinking outside the square, not taking for granted stereotypes which society imposes
- thinking differently about society and topical issues
- not to trust media and assumptions
- evaluating others' ideas and work

- sociology as a topic
- thinking sociologically about current issues and past ideas
- how cultural ideas and beliefs shape our society

All students in the course were invited to participate in a focus group conversation and due, perhaps, to end of semester timing, one student was eventually able to provide more in-depth reflection about his experiences. This one student provided a substantial reflection on his experiences and also represents a growing proportion of students at UC, a mature student who has returned to university study after being in the workplace for 20 years.

It was clear from this student's responses that he got a lot out of the class in both the content and the process of it. While it was somewhat related to his ultimate degree concentration, Social Work, he readily admitted that he would not have taken it had it not been a requirement. That makes his statements like the following, about his engagement with the class and his perception of its usefulness all the more important:

"What I got out of it was certainly the way, the way especially Bridget taught us as how we view the world. I've always been a person who sits back and looks at how things happen, but it's actually given me so much more insight."

When asked why this required, 100 level course that is not directly part of his degree appealed to him, the student's positive response about the exam aligns with the survey responses by he and his classmates about taking responsibility for their learning and making choices:

[for the Final Exam] "There were all the subjects I've said and we picked three of the subjects. So I picked ones that meant most to me, which were crime, death and dying, and food. Food and obesity epidemic. That one I chose because I found her a really interesting lecturer and I found the information she gave me was really cool. The crime one was because of what I want to do in my degree, and the death and dying was another one that really interested me a lot and I got a lot out of it. They gave us the heading to the topic and said, 'from a Sociologist's point of view,' and then that's where the questions started. I found I had done all my research and reading, had actually enjoyed it. That's why I found it an easier exam to sit there and put on paper."

While not explicitly drawing the connection between his choices, interest, and engagement to the ease of the exam, it's fairly clear that all of those were related. All in the course for this student was not positive, although he seems to be providing guidance toward making it a more a student-centred discussion course with the following statement:

"I thought our workshops were too big to start asking questions in because we had only 50 minutes and kind of 30 odd people in each one and someone at the front would start something but the tutor would have to stop. Well, when I first started University, I thought that we would have been in group discussions like full-on, proper ones, which may come down later on in the years at Uni."

So, even within this class that both he and his classmates indicated was characterized by the tenets of IBL, he expected university study to include more of that approach, even from 100 level. Again, it is important to note that he is a mature student and this desire to be more involved in discussions during class is supported by research about adult learners' behaviours

and intentions with university study. Within this context about what the course ultimately provided him with, the student suggested that he moved from being a more passive learner to a more active researcher with:

"I kept a very open mind. Towards the end, especially when you have an essay thrown at you, that's when I became the researcher but when I first walked in I was sitting back just going, "so this is what it's all about, lets' just have a look at it." I kept an open mind throughout the entire course actually because I think that [we were] skimming across the top and that's still what I felt we did, and I am hoping next year [to get into more detail]. That's what I thought University wanted, dive in, who cares what happens. I want that to happen. I'm still waiting but as I said, it's opened my eyes, it really did."

Thus, this student appears to be leaving one of his first courses at university more ready to see himself as a researcher or enquirer and an engaged member of the academic community. Presumably, this course have put him into a favourable position for the higher level courses that are more aligned with his degree, smaller, and have higher expectations about student participation. Serendipitously, I was invited to observe a 300 level Sociology course several times and then facilitate a reflection session with the students about their experiences. Both my observations and their comments suggest that this student's desire to become more deeply engaged with discussion and debate about topics would be met in the Sociology programme. The class I observed felt very much like the 300 level version of Brigid's class in that students were working alongside the lecturer in asking questions, debating points of view, and evaluating arguments about many of those same topics provided in the 100 level course.

#### *Lecturer's Experiences*

As previously stated, Brigid, the course coordinator and main facilitator for the tutorials, applied her personal experiences as a student of the course to its revised design. In addition to seeking to create more coherence among the sociological topics through the theme of both students and lecturers asking sociology questions, she also brought her passion about the role of her discipline in the world to her teaching with:

"We focus on the idea of the taken for granted assumptions. There is a form of Sociology that would be called the natural stance that most people take, that things work as they ought to and the world is as it is and we move through the world assuming that it will work as we expect it and most of the time it does. We have an assumption that science is the way to discover facts. So the troubling of that notion is that science is based on values, so science enquiry is based on the same values that it is in all parts of our society. Science likes to think of objectivity and being culturally free. We present to them to begin with, what are some of the taken for granted assumptions, how can we start to question some of those taken for granted assumptions when we are part of the society we are questioning and the difficulties of doing that and then give them a set of cases of how they can start thinking about their own questions and then run alongside the specifics of the content, the study skills that go with that. So how do you build a set of skills that allow you start asking questions for yourself?"

By aligning both her teaching approach with her belief that the sociology discipline should be the questioner of society, IBL seems to be a natural fit for Brigid. Following the main guidelines for IBL, she stated that right from the first task in the course, students are required to embrace the notion that there is no right answer to any sociological question.

"So, after the first lecture when I introduce the idea of taken for granted assumptions, their first task is to pose questions, which they do on Blackboard and they pose questions that they're interested in the answer to but don't necessarily know the answer to. So it might be around, 'why is it that heterosexuality is treated as the norm and homosexuality is treated as deviant?' or something like that. So, they'll have their questions around other questions based on their own experience, which we ask them to do and then follow that up through the course with writing a paper that looks at this question."

As described by the student in the focus conversation, this approach of inviting students to pursue topics of interest to them was intended by Brigid to provide students with an opportunity to become engaged inquirers and researchers into their own lives. While this would seem to be an automatically engaging class for university students – investigating contemporary topics through readings, lectures, and discussions and having some choice in what to focus on for assessments – Brigid pointed out that this doesn't always translate into an easy teaching situation.

"Some of it is fairly heavy. It's this whole thing about exploring taken for granted assumptions and I warn them at the start. This is heavy going because it's the world we live in and it's hard to keep living in the world and examining it at the same time and it gets confusing and for some people it's a discomfort to start examining the world around you and some people just reject it and say, 'I'm not going to continue doing this' and other people embrace it and they see that it has power but not everybody wants to be reflective about the world around them."

This sentiment was echoed during a conversation I was peripherally involved in prior to the start of one of Brigid's tutorials. One student stated that she preferred another Sociology class to this one because it provided you with more answers and was a "lighter look." The other student stated she liked this one because there were no right or wrong answers. Herein lies a challenge for IBL at any level, but maybe more so at 100 level where of these two students, one was more open to it than the other. Until there is a more consistent and explicit expectation of university study being one rooted in inquiry (much like the student in the focus conversation thought it would be), then there will be a mismatch between students expecting to be lectured or presented at for their first two years of study versus others entering tertiary study ready to start asking their own questions.

Again, Brigid's personal desire to base the class on leading students to ask their own questions represents a personal teaching decision on her part but one that is intimately linked to her perception of the discipline in that she downplays the current content of the course with an emphasis on a longer-lasting skill she is teaching.

"The content is irrelevant. The lecturers wouldn't love me saying that but the cases are not relevant. What is relevant is the relationship between asking questions and finding out. So how do you ask a good question in order to find something out and then how do you find something out?"

We don't call it [research skills]. So, we call it finding out and asking questions about being analytic about the world you live in."

The fact that most students responded to the last question on the survey about what they had learned in the course with answers about attributes, behaviours, and skills beyond those required for the class suggests that students got what Brigid had intended.

### **Reflections & Implications**

All sources of data and analysis with the Semester 1, 2007 version of *Sociology 111* suggest that it was a course that had a close alignment of the Course Coordinator's intentions, IBL characteristics, and student engagement. In other words, by all measurable data available, it appears to have been a highly successful learning experience for most involved.

In terms of the possible linkage between the IBL approach and students' self-reported sense of engagement in this course, there is a clear indication that these may be related. As stated by Brigid, her ultimate goal with the course was to provide students with opportunities to think like sociologists, or social science researchers. Given that this is an introductory course in a tertiary system that allows for open, age-based admission, this goal may seem to be a far stretch. This especially seemed the case after observing the tutorial about essay planning and seeing that many students had never learned that. However, the students' responses to the IBL survey, the student's interview, and perhaps most importantly, the students' responses to the course evaluation all point toward students feeling like they did engage in authentic social science research in an introductory course.

In the course evaluation responses to the prompt: "The course developed my ability to engage in research-related activities," this course scored 10% higher (1/2 point on the 5 point Likert scale) than the mean for all courses in the College of Arts. Again, the fact that this is a 100 level course and it is outpacing the mean for all other courses in its college suggests that the "thinking like a sociologist" theme was realized by many students.

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