Essential Social Science Skills in College and University Education

By Victor N. Shaw

This paper draws from the author’s years of observations and experiences in teaching different social sciences courses on various university campuses. It begins with the general purpose of training in social sciences. It then focuses on essential skills, their respective characteristics, components, and standards, required for social sciences disciplines and related professions. The paper concludes with an urgent call for all social sciences instructors to contribute their part to the training of essential educational skills through regular course planning and classroom activities.

The Purpose of Training in Social Sciences

The purpose of training changes with the educational level as well as the professional goal of students (Bloom, 1983; American Sociological Association, 1991; Wagenaar, 1991). For students who are in their first two years of general education, the purpose of training in social sciences is to expose them to basic concepts, ideas, methods, and theories that social scientists have developed to describe and explain social phenomena. They are expected to incorporate social sciences knowledge into their overall educational experience so that they are able to read, interpret, and act on social issues or situations in a way that is commonly assumed for an educated person. However, most of them will probably not rely much upon their social sciences course work in professional development. For instance, a liberal arts student who later becomes a musician may benefit from his or her social sciences education only by being able to take the perspective of an educated person on social affairs.

For students who work on a bachelor’s degree in a social sciences discipline, the purpose of training goes beyond general exposure to a command of basic theoretical frameworks and research methodologies in the specific discipline, whether it is sociology, anthropology, or political science. They are expected to apply their social sciences knowledge to different areas and develop sensitive explanations or solutions for various social phenomena or problems in those areas. Moreover, as most of them use their social sciences degree to enter a specialty job, they will have to draw on their social sciences training continually in their professional career (Rossides, 1998). For example, a sociology major who later becomes a social worker may have to rely upon sociology as his or her source of inspiration for a lifetime.

For graduate students in a social sciences discipline, the purpose of training goes even further to the development of a professional or scholarly identity with the specific discipline, whether it refers to the professional role of a social worker, professorship in political science, or the scholarly prestige of a sociologist (Lowi, 1992). They are expected to identify new areas of interest and contribute to the growth of the discipline. To the extent that they work within the discipline on a day-to-day basis, they will have to expand it, maintain it, represent it, and live with it through their life. For instance, a graduate student in anthropology who later becomes a professor in the discipline may identify with anthropology to a degree that he or she is not able to separate it from many dimensions of his or her life.

While the purpose of training changes from general exposure, through a command of knowledge and its application, to the development of identity in different levels of education, does the content of training change accordingly? It changes in terms of depth and breadth. General education may be limited to common concepts and theories in their understandable forms. Undergraduate training may cover standard topics in all recognized areas. Graduate study may explore areas of controversy and delve into the complexity of theoretical reasoning and methodological development. However, in terms of the substance, the content of training may remain the
same. For instance, social stratification, career mobility, and political pluralism as general social sciences topics may figure in all different levels of training no matter how simply or complexly they are presented in class.

Most essentially, there are fundamental social sciences skills that need to be effectively taught to all students regardless of their educational levels and professional goals. These fundamental skills reflect the spirit of social sciences thinking and are key to doing social sciences. To students in general education, they give them ways and means to improve their functioning as a social member. To students who earn a bachelor's degree in social sciences, they give them assets and resources to excel on jobs. To social sciences graduate students, they give them power and inspiration to work creatively and productively toward the betterment of a discipline. These fundamental skills are reading and comprehension, presenting and oral communications, and writing and publication.

The Basic Social Sciences Skills

The basic social sciences skills are determined by the nature of social sciences. They are a constituent to the content of social sciences but remain independent and relatively stable from the changing substance of a discipline. In sociology, while ideas, debates, theories, and methods of an area change with social, knowledge, and disciplinary forces, skills involved in developing, communicating, and promoting substantive contents in the area can remain the same. Students of sociology always need to read and understand the present literature, present and communicate their reactions, interpretations, and new ideas, and write and publish their contributions to the discipline.

Because of their universal and stable nature, social sciences skills learned and practiced can sink through everyday experience and remain influential or beneficial for a lifetime even though the substance, along which basic skills are learned, itself fades from memory. The influence can be epitomized by those students who take social sciences courses to fulfill their general education requirements. After 10 or 20 years, some of them may say that the greatest benefit they have received from social sciences courses is that they have learned how to read and interpret different points of view as well as how to organize and present their ideas and arguments effectively in oral and written forms.

Reading and comprehension are basic skills to all academic disciplines but stand out particularly in importance in social sciences. The reason is obvious. Knowledge in social sciences is not expressed and condensed in formula, equations, and repeatable experiments. It is contained in and transmitted through words, sentences, and essays. There are different points of view developed out of different contexts with different background materials by different logic of reasoning. Contributions to a topic usually involve hundreds of pieces in the literature. Also, individual contributors have different styles in their expressions. Some are straightforward, concise, and precise whereas others are evasive, verbose, and ambiguous in writings.

The reading and comprehension skills in social sciences therefore have unique dimensions. First, the process calls for speed in reading. Students of a social sciences discipline need to read fast to catch up with the development in the discipline. Second, it requires an adequate quantity of reading. Students need to read classical work, basic theories, and recent developments in sufficient amount to gain a firm grounding in the discipline. Third, it requires diversity in reading. Students need to read different topics and different points of view to appreciate the richness of a field. Fourth, it demands comprehension. Students need to understand the subject matter not only by line but also by context, rationale, intent, and implication. Finally, it includes interpretation. Students need to interpret the text in a sensible way so that an underlying conversation with the author can be established during and after the process of reading. Integrating all these dimensions into an individual capability, a person with an adequate reading and comprehension skills should have read extensively on his or her discipline. On that basis, he or she can read fast, a lot, and widely; understand quickly, meticulously,
and on subtle points; and interpret accurately, critically, and with sophistication. Reading then becomes a process of appreciation for personal enjoyment and a source of inspiration for scholarly productivity.

Presenting and oral communications are the most widely-used skills in human interactions. They are particularly important in social sciences because most materials communicated orally in social sciences are not substitutable by gestures, postures, figures, numbers, or equations. Describing a social phenomenon, making a claim, fashioning an argument, and explaining a relationship all require clear and intensive use of language. Expressing a subtle point and presenting a sophisticated series of reasoning may even take an exceptional effort in the application of articulate skills. On the part of listeners, some are smart, with adequate background knowledge, and responsive whereas others may be slow-witted, lay to the subject, and dumb. However, from a given audience, whether it is a gathering of all professionals or a mix of laymen and professionals, why are some speakers cheered while others are chilled? Or in a one-on-one advisement between professor and student, why do some students feel enlightened while others still remain in quandary? Except for other factors, the difference lies in the power and skills of presentation and oral communications.

What constitutes an adequate combination of the skills of presentation and oral communications in social sciences? What makes an effective presenter in social sciences classrooms and gatherings? It takes character, talents, and situational cues. Above those factors, however, skills of presentation and oral communications can be learned and improved in five aspects. First is proficiency. Presenters must have a good command and understanding of basic concepts, ideas, and theories on the topic to be presented in social sciences. Second is preparation. Presenters must prepare a conversation, a lecture, or a speech with notes and by mock exercises. Most important, preparation is a process to explore different ways of presenting the same topic as well as to experiment with the best way of presentation pertaining to a specific topic and an expected audience.

It is therefore a crucial stage to actively practice and fine-tune skills in presentation. Third is the use of props. Presenters may use props to enhance their presentation. Props may be setting-specific, such as sound aids, overhead projectors, and audio devices, or text-specific, such as graphs, photos, and tables. Fourth is the manipulation of proximity. Presenters need to understand their audience, interpret situational cues, manipulate distance, and develop a rapport with the audience in the course of the presentation. Fifth is projection. Presenters need to place themselves in the position of the audience and imagine how their messages are projected into the mind of the audience. With projection, presenters can, constantly as well as instantly, assess the effect of their presentation and use it as a feedback to modify their next-step performance.

Proficiency, preparation, use of props, manipulation of proximity, and projection take training and practice. A skilled presenter builds on all these components to grab their audience and turn their messages into power and influence. In social sciences, as teaching, raising collective awareness, and changing public policies are mostly carried out or realized through oral communications, an effective use of presentation skills may determine how the public are educated, how mass opinions are formed, and how public policies are made.

Writing and publications are essential to the recorded history of human civilizations. In social sciences, they are a defining feature of academic creativity, productivity, and influence. Compared to oral communications, writing and publications have their unique advantages. First, they give authors the leisure to explore a topic in its width and depth. Second, they render authors the opportunity to present facts, reasoning, and substance in their wholeness. Third, they have the flexibility to allow for a systematic reaction and reflection between authors and readers. Fourth, they have the power to go beyond the limit of time and space. Written materials can be shared by people around the world and from generation to generation. Fifth, publications are designed for social circulation. Published materials have usually passed some
form of examination, review, or censorship. They are formal and have the potential to influence people as they are likely to be perceived as an established source of information.

Writing is a special skill. It takes training and practice as well as individual talents and natural endowments. Publication is based on writing, but itself is a social process. It takes patience and involves a range of social factors. However, what composes writing and publications as a basic social sciences skill? There are six important dimensions at stake. First is inventory. Writers have a large inventory of vocabularies on the topic. They are at ease using names, places, time, words, concepts, ideas, and theories as their building materials. Second is the horizon of thinking. Writers have a vast landscape of mind to spread writing materials and shovel them around in different configurations. Third is association. Writers have a rich imagination to see subtle connections among different elements and explore routes of reasoning through a seemingly non-differentiable mass of substance. Fourth is dialogue. Writers have the ability to project their thinking into a dialogue between themselves and an imaginary party. Fifth is a systematic view of the subject. Writers have the vision to see a subject in its entirety and understand what essential components are involved in the analysis of the subject. Sixth is clarity. Writers are able to put their thoughts into words in a linguistically clear and logically consistent manner.

Compared to other skills in social sciences, writing and publication provide a comprehensive synthesis and display of reading, understanding, exploration, imagination, explanation, and presentation skills. A skilled writer begins with a master command of materials through extensive reading, observation, and experience. He or she assumes the position of readers, viewers, and listeners, understands what they need, expect, and like, and puts words, sentences, and language into the most convincing, persuasive, and imaginative use. If oral presentation is to grab the attention of the audience, writing and publication as a form of presentation are confronted with an even tougher mission of catching the mind of readers through new findings, fresh thoughts, and powerful explanations.

Concluding Remarks

Reading, presenting, and writing are fundamental skills in social sciences. They are not only essential to understanding social sciences concepts, ideas, theories, and reasoning in classroom, but also crucial to applying social sciences knowledge and methods of analysis to social issues in everyday life. To students enrolled in social sciences classes, while the substance of courses learned may become lost, outdated, and updated over time, reading, presenting, and writing skills acquired can sink through career experience and remain beneficial for a lifetime.

There are various ways and means to train students with reading, presenting, and writing skills in social sciences and other content courses (Shaw, 1999). Some modes of training target one skill while others have effect on two or three skills in combination. Some are simple, routine, easy to follow, and take no extraordinary effort to implement while others are sophisticated, innovative, difficult to pursue, and demand tremendous attention, enthusiasm, and dedication from both students and the instructor. Regarding the status of application, some have long been in wide use while others are still new, controversial, and with no uniform benefit. In fact, as newly developed methods of training await more practice to be established, many more creative and effective training ideas and modalities are forthcoming from classroom to classroom. Training is an endless process of creation, revision, and perfection driven by students’ interest to learn and instructors’ conscience to teach. It is also a continual process of negotiation, struggle, and compromise between students and instructors on academic standards and social expectations.

On today’s campus, students are no longer traditional students. They work on jobs, raise children, and demand time for leisure. Instructors are no longer traditional scholars. They teach part-time, work on grants, and have to publish papers or serve on committees for tenure and promotion. Time spent on a course is limited from both the
instructor and students. It is unrealistic to expect students to obtain all necessary training in one course. It usually takes a cluster of courses to achieve the minimal level of training in social sciences skills. It is because of this trickle-down feature that each instructor should conscientiously contribute his or her share to the general training of reading, presenting, and writing skills in social sciences through his or her regular course planning and classroom activities.

REFERENCES


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