



## INTIMATE WORK: TEACHING SOCIOLOGISTS TO WRITE\*

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When it comes to writing, the sociological imagination generally fails. In response to this deficiency, Kai Erikson introduced "The Sociologist's Craft: A Workshop on the Organization and Presentation of Sociological Materials" in the graduate program at Yale University in 1978. Now in its tenth year, this hopeful undertaking was based upon the premise that writing skills could be learned. Initially structured only by an assigned time and place, the class quickly developed a formal and informal organization peculiar to its mission. This ethnography, drawn from my own participation from 1979 to 1982, describes how the writing seminar became organized to teach sociologists to write.

The rudiments of the seminar's formal organization were few. The class was offered both semesters each year. It was open to advanced graduate students who were concerned about writing and who were doing serious writing of their own: dissertations, papers for meetings, or articles for journals. Class size ranged from six to 15 members. New students appeared each fall. Some participated for a single term, then left; others remained until they had completed their degree requirements. Still others left and returned in response to the demands of research or teaching. From these comings and goings evolved a small group of regulars whose familiar faces and experience in the seminar provided continuity and stability from term to term. For those who stayed and those who returned, commitment to the seminar and its work appeared to be strong, for neither grades nor credit were given, and many did not bother to register for the course.

The group met every week for two hours; the work in progress of class members served as catalyst for discussions. Someone distributed a draft of a paper or chapter so that the others could assess it before the next class meeting. When the group assembled, the author began with some remarks about the draft. The class then responded to the author's concerns and raised their own. At the

session's end, edited copies of the paper were returned to the writer, who was encouraged to revise and resubmit.

Critiquing the writing of class members was merely the starting point, however. Discussion of form frequently merged into discussion of substance. Moreover, the agenda was subject to sudden change. The group occasionally previewed someone's presentation for a meeting or an interview. Sometimes a paper raised a question that sent seminar members foraging through the libraries for writing samples to compare in class: favorite sociologists, titles, qualitative versus quantitative journals, abstracts, journal articles versus books. Entire sessions were devoted to the use of metaphor, citations, and pronouns. These meanderings led some to write about writing, as they explored these topics further and submitted the results to the class for review.

Intellectual excursions notwithstanding, criticism of written work remained the core of class activity. People exposed ideas in various stages of development to the opinions of others. Such exposure is always hazardous, for writing is an extension of self. Consequently, what is at risk is not only ideas, but self (Richards 1986). The risk is especially great when the author is new to the profession, the work is a draft, and the exchange takes place in a public setting where one receives the opinions of many.

As a response to the highly personal nature of its task, the seminar developed a culture that facilitated this intimate work. The group evolved a set of solutions, devised to meet the specific problems posed by the situation they faced in common, which were remembered and passed on to new members (Van Maanen and Barley 1985, p.33). Though each solution evolved spontaneously and became institutionalized independently of the others, all had similar effects: they provided transitions into and out of the seminar's central task. These transitions were as essential to what went on as the class members' writing, for they softened an environment potentially made harsh by criticism.

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The first three meetings of the fall term initiated people gently into the ways of giving and receiving criticism. These few meetings, part of the culture and pivotal to its maintenance, established a democratic leadership pattern, developed a sense of shared history and common objectives, and introduced negotiation as the principal means of getting things done. The first meeting was led by Kai Erikson, who took charge only for that session during the year. He told how the writing seminar had come into being and described the format of previous classes. Acknowledging sociology's notoriety as a discipline characterized by poor writing, he wondered aloud about the potential sources of the problem.

Traditionally Kai read from Mark Twain (1883, pp. 91-94). The passage, which described the subtleties of navigating the Mississippi, was not only the essence of good writing but also a compelling analogy to the hazards that beset the sociologist's craft. Extending the analogy, Kai drew upon his own writing history. His candid, informal remarks established the seminar as a place where doubts could be expressed and difficulties acknowledged openly. Tentatively, others began recounting their own doubts and difficulties, finding validation in the discovery of shared problems and unique solutions. The evolution of these collective understandings was joined with a sense of belonging to an ongoing endeavor, for Kai occasionally interjected stories of the success or failure of a previous class in dealing with a particular issue. From these various musings, the group began to chart the seminar's course for the year.

At the second meeting, new members learned by example how the seminar worked. A few days before the class met, Kai distributed copies of some of his work in progress. When the group convened, the transition was made to the seminar's usual style: the paper on the table was the center of attention, its author the leader of the discussion. At the third meeting, the leadership rotated. A student submitted his or her work and guided the discussion about it. For the rest of the year, the leadership continued to rotate; the formal leader became one of the group, letting the conversation find its own way, muttering occasionally that he couldn't "get a word in edgewise."

This gentle transition into the term was a

concerted effort to cope with the hazards of criticism. Spontaneously, an informal style emerged which provided a gradual transition into the seminar's intimate work each week. Other classes may begin efficiently at the sound of the bell, but the writing seminar developed the habit of moving leisurely into the paper for the day. People wandered in, coffee in hand, talking idly while others gathered slowly. Once under way, the class used its early moments for organizing future sessions. Discussion of the scheduled paper sometimes didn't begin until 20 minutes after official starting time. Though some complained about the delay, the informality eased people gently out of other business and into the business of this class.

In a telling parallel, the seminar evolved a way of easing members out of the class and back into everyday life. The first year of the seminar, I am told, was marked by painful gropings for the skills of giving and receiving criticism in open forum. No precedent was available, people were inexperienced, and some were better at it than others. Sometimes the class ended with people feeling upset. After one such session, the usual abrupt dispersal seemed awkward and inappropriate. Someone suggested going out for a pizza, and everyone walked to a nearby restaurant. Perhaps in going to the restaurant that night, people defused their feelings by airing their discontent privately to a companion. Perhaps the argument was continued openly and was thrashed out on the way. Perhaps getting there and settling down to this new task—of necessity, a group endeavor—demanded cooperation and negotiation, reaffirming the seminar's existence as a group. Perhaps people just had fun. Whether for all, some, or none of these reasons, having dinner together calmed lingering tensions. Discussing the matter in the next class, everyone decided that occasional dinners were a good idea. Soon, bimonthly potluck suppers became routine.

Both these responses—the lazy beginnings and the potluck suppers—increased the interaction of class members, integrating the social and intellectual lives of participants. They cushioned the task of criticism by blurring the boundaries between class and nonclass activities and by creating bonds between class members. Social ties also were strengthened in another way that made the boundaries less clear and therefore less difficult to bridge: people got caught up in

each others' projects. As a result, the seminar's intimate work spilled over into many informal minisessions in which ideas and writing were discussed outside the classroom. Conversations about research took place on street corners, in corridors, and at parties. An edited copy of a paper returned at the end of a session might include a hastily scrawled, "I've been working on a problem that is related to your work. Want to have coffee?" Notes with pertinent citations appeared mysteriously in mailboxes. Sometimes an author who emerged from a class confused or discouraged about a paper found himself or herself having lunch with Kai the next day, receiving encouragement and direction about how to move ahead.

The culture that evolved in response to the seminar's delicate challenge was shaped by the characteristics of class members. Obviously self-selection was a factor, for participation was voluntary, but class members' characteristics and the direction of their effect are hard to define. Those who came to the seminar were dedicated to writing well and were at a stage in their education where writing was expected. Beyond that I can only speculate about who became a working member of the group, who attended and then left, and who did not come at all. Those who participated appeared to be articulate, sociable, and comfortable enough with their own work to subject it to the opinions of others in a loosely structured setting. Perhaps those who did not participate (who also may have been articulate, sociable, and comfortable with their own work) thought a writing seminar was an inappropriate graduate school activity, or were skeptical about its personal relevance. Perhaps they preferred to work autonomously rather than in a class based on reciprocity. Perhaps they began the class but had obligations that prevented them from engaging in the social life of the seminar, remaining marginal to the group and ultimately dropping out.

Regardless of the mysteries of self-selection processes and their effect on the culture, the awareness that differences may have existed between members and nonmembers is important in itself. Though enrollment was open, potential participants may have perceived that the class was open to certain kinds of people, not to everyone, as intended. Some, sensing or suspecting differences, may have stayed away. Others, attuned somehow

to a subtle correspondence between themselves and seminar members, joined the class. Unwittingly, by virtue of the intangible similarities that drew them, the newcomers reinforced and perpetuated the collective solutions that were evolving.

Of course there were problems associated with the seminar for which no collective solutions evolved. The seminar became closely knit—a quasi-family—and tensions sometimes arose that would not have existed in a class where students filed in, listened to a lecture, and filed out. The voluntary nature of participation, although it worked astoundingly well, sometimes created problems of control: once in a while, someone remained in the class only long enough to have his or her work reviewed, and then left; occasionally, someone came week after week without having read the papers that were distributed. Perhaps another leadership style might have resolved these difficulties, but with some unpredictable changes in the benefits that the seminar offered.

What were these benefits? First, and in contradiction to the title of this piece, the seminar did not teach sociologists to write: it taught sociologists to teach themselves to write. Class members became sensitized to problems in their writing and in the writing of others. They became alert to the style of the professional material they read, as well as the substance. They learned to be better editors of their own work. Equally important, they found support for writing clarity, for creative expression, for developing a personal style. They learned that submitting a paper to colleagues for review improved the paper immeasurably. In a cloistered setting, they began developing skills essential to professional life: giving and receiving criticism.

There was yet another benefit. Writing, of necessity, is a lonely occupation, but the peculiarities of this discipline can make it more lonely still. Sociology is a profession where victories and failures seldom are shared. Victories seldom are shared because flaunting gains when others may be struggling is in poor taste. Failures seldom are shared because of fear that public knowledge will cast a shadow on one's professional credentials. Consequently, neither writing triumphs nor writing difficulties are legitimate topics of conversation (cf. Becker 1986, p. 21). Sadly, the transmission of good writing skills is precluded by the silence.

Moreover, writing is hard work. Because it is hard work, and because it is not discussed openly, those in the profession who have not labored with it so long may see their difficulties not as writing problems, but as reflections of their competence as sociologists. After all, if they were any good, surely writing would be easier. The writing seminar taught beginning sociologists that professional writing is a challenge for everyone. Any thoughts that writing problems reflected a void where sociological talent ought to be quickly were dispelled as the doubters heard others whose ideas were respected agonize over their particular *bêtes noires*. Perhaps the ultimate benefit of the writing seminar was that it provided a forum where writing was no longer such a lonely endeavor.

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