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ASSESSING INTRODUCTORY RURAL SOCIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the results of an assessment of an introductory rural sociology course offered at two land-grant universities, which are very different in size. These institutions are North Carolina A&T State University and The Ohio State University. The authors use similar assessment tools, including an embedded pre and post test of knowledge gained, students' written comments to open-ended questions administered at the end of term about the quality of the class and the instructors, and the traditional, standardized Student Evaluation of Instruction, an instrument used across many universities. In addition, at OSU, a small group diagnostic of students enrolled in introductory rural sociology was independently conducted by personnel from the university's Center for the Advancement of Teaching. The results indicate that knowledge is gained, although post test results for some multiple choice questions were disappointing. Students' written comments indicate that there was much about a sociological perspective applied to rural societies, communities and peoples that they find interesting and about which they learned something. As well, students were uniformly positive about the way the courses were taught and graded. However, they were critical of the textbooks adopted by the instructors for both versions of the course, which they found inadequate because they were not rural-oriented in their content. The primary recommendation is for a follow-up assessment of various rural sociology courses and specific practices used by rural sociology instructors that include as many universities as possible, despite challenges this presents to development of a standardized methodology.

The Boyer report (1990) forms a critical event in recognition that the teaching mission of institutions of higher learning, both small and large, must be held to high standards of accountability. This report accelerated the development of course assessments for both undergraduate and graduate educational programs as a legitimate and central dimension of rigorous pedagogy at the university level. As well, the Boyer report (1990) is today given credit as an important impetus for a growing multidisciplinary field of study called the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning or SoTL (Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff 1997).[1]

[1] The International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) was founded in 2004. Its annual meeting is attended by 500-1,000 participants interested in theory and research related to teaching and learning at the university level. It is the focus on institutions of higher learning that separates SoTL work from traditional educational research. As a result, most disciplines have journals, sections of their professional societies, and other scholarly activities that

Although SoTL borrows from theory and research on teaching and learning in the educational disciplines, the research is mostly conducted by scholars in all the other disciplines of a university who concern themselves with assessing college students' perceptions of their courses, how much they have learned, and the relative effectiveness of various pedagogical methodologies, from lecture to group exercises. Hence, while the various educational disciplines continue to focus on teaching and learning largely within the context of elementary and secondary education, a growing cadre of scholars with subject matter expertise within specialty areas of their own disciplines is simultaneously interested in how their students learn within the context of undergraduate and graduate level college education. Consequently, many if not most disciplines now have journals devoted to research on teaching and learning, such as the *Advances in Physiology Education*, the *American Journal of Physics, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, the *Journal of Accounting Education*, *Music Education Research*, and *Teaching Sociology*.[2]

Introductory rural sociology (or equivalent) has become a staple of many academic programs with social science scholars who focus on rural societies, peoples and issues. Like most other university courses, coming across any kind of assessment that uses anything more than a few perfunctory statements asking students to rate how much they liked the instructor, if they thought the instructor was organized, and if they believe they were graded fairly is rare indeed. This is beginning to change, thanks to Boyer (1990) and the SOTL movement.

The purpose of this article is to report on an assessment of two introductory rural sociology courses as they are offered within two very different circumstances. One version of the course is offered at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NCATSU), in Greensboro. Established as a land-grant in 1891, it is a historically black university with an enrollment today of nearly 11,000. The second version comes from The Ohio State University (OSU). Founded as the land-

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are considered within the domain of SoTL (www.ISSoTL.org). ISSoTL is a place where the scholarship on teaching and learning from scientists in many disciplines converge to discuss common issues. Often, the involvement of specific faculty from various disciplines to ISSoTL comes about through their prior participation in a faculty development activity at their own university, or through participation in a program sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (www.carnegiefoundation.org).

[2] A comprehensive list of journals which publish articles concerned with theory and research on teaching and learning at the college-level may be found through the online publication by Tessa N. Campbell and Christopher R. Davidson, *Bibliography of Teaching-Related Journals* (www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/resources/index.php).

grant institution for the state of Ohio in 1870, OSU is among the largest universities in the US, with more than 55,000 students on its main campus in Columbus. We assess both courses using similar, but not identical forms of evidence, including an embedded pre and post test analysis of knowledge gained, an evaluation of students' written comments, and a student evaluation of instruction (SEI). In addition, at OSU, an in-class focus group diagnostic was administered by the university's Center for the Advancement of Teaching.

INTRODUCTORY RURAL SOCIOLOGY AT NCATSU AND OSU

North Carolina A&T State University's School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (SAES) adheres to the historic mission of all land-grant universities to meet the needs of agriculture and of those who devote their lives to it. Its teaching, research and service missions concentrate on those individuals who live and work in rural areas, but also expands into urban areas and to other nations, as well. In this regard, Principles of Rural Sociology (AGEC-300) fits well within the educational mission of the SAES. AGEC-300 is an introductory course that provides an interpretation of social change in rural societies. It is part of NCATSU's interdisciplinary general education curriculum, helping to provide the intellectual foundation for the University's degree-granting programs. Like most other public and private universities, the goal of the interdisciplinary general education curriculum at NCATSU is to give students a framework for critical inquiry that serves as a foundation for continuing academic development and lifelong learning. As part of this curriculum, AGEC-300 is listed in the theme cluster called "community, conflict and society." It is described in the university course bulletin as: "Social systems, cultural patterns and institutional arrangements of people in rural environments will be examined. An interpretation of the structure, functioning and change in rural social systems will also be covered."

Since 1980, AGEC-300 has been taught in the Department of Agricultural Business, Economics and Agri-Science Education within the SAES. It is a three credit-hour course offered during the fall semester. The average enrollment is usually between 18 to 25 students, most of whom are majors in the department or are majors in another discipline within SAES. The mission of the department is to give its students the understanding and skills to address the problems of the agricultural economy and to help those involved in it to lead more productive and satisfying lives. Hence, AGEC 300 provides applications of sociological concepts to issues and topics affecting rural places, groups and peoples across the U.S. and other countries.

At The Ohio State University, Introduction to Rural Sociology (RS 105) is an introductory sociology course with an emphasis on rural populations, communities, institutions and the human and societal dimensions of agriculture and the environment. A course like RS 105 has been part of OSU's curriculum in the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CFAES) since as early as 1915. Today, it is a GEC course in category 1 (Individuals and Groups) of the social sciences. Courses in this category focus on the behavior of individuals and groups, human similarities and differences (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, class, religion), relations and interaction (individuals, groups, cultures, societies), and both cultural and social change. RS 105 is described in the course bulletin as "principles of society, major social institutions, and social change; emphasizes social changes in rural life, rural organizations, population, and family living."

RS 105 serves as a central Social Science GEC course for CFAES undergraduate majors, as well as offering a GEC social science alternative for non-CFAES undergraduates. In a typical year, about 35 to 45 percent of RS 105 students are CFAES majors, and a like percent of students are from small towns, the open-country and farms. Reflecting the urban make-up of Ohio's population, most RS 105 students come from cities, and if they are not CFAES majors, they enroll in RS 105 because of an interest in environmental and food issues or because they find it an attractive alternative to other social science courses that fulfill the GEC requirement.

The Rural Sociology program at OSU offers graduate degrees at the M.S. and Ph.D. levels, and an undergraduate minor, but does not offer a 4-year or undergraduate degree. Through the core faculty of the Rural Sociology program, eight sections of RS 105 are typically offered in an academic year (three in Autumn Quarter, two each in Winter and Spring Quarters, one in Summer Quarter). One Rural Sociology faculty member serves as the "coordinator" for RS 105, overseeing scheduling times and instructor assignments, and helping with assessment of instructors and course content. A more aggressive marketing strategy was implemented in 2007 by placing the course at more convenient times and locations on the main campus, not the CFAES side of campus, which is physically separated by a small river, which many non-CFAES majors see as too remote when they make enrollment decisions, based on many "hallway" conversations of the instructor with RS 105 students. Since then, student numbers have climbed from a low of 556 in 2007 to more than 800 in 2009, and may top 1,000 in 2010.

Both introductory rural sociology courses employ a multimethod approach to instruction. Lectures are supplemented by pertinent videos, group exercises, small

group discussion, and review sessions. Many of these, as used at OSU, are described by Donnermeyer et al. (2005) in the *NACTA* journal, and Jenkins, Rakowski and Grigsby's (2010, in press) ASA curriculum guide for teaching rural subjects in sociology courses. Hence, though AGEC 300 and RS 105 are taught under different circumstances, the instructors employ common pedagogical techniques and share common learning goals, which are to increase students' knowledge and awareness of issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, rural peoples and communities, and how larger social structural issues affect rural localities.

DATA COLLECTION

Overtime, course assessments have come to utilize multiple forms of evidence (Angelo and Cross 1993; Glassick et al. 1997; Kalish 2008). Both formative and summative indicators were utilized, with the former referring to information about students' perceptions of the course instructor and of teaching styles and course content, while the latter consists of indicators that the students may actually have learned something (Kalish 2008).

The key aspect of the summative side of this assessment is an embedded pre and post test of knowledge. This form of assessment is called "embedded" because it is meant to be an unobtrusive way of measuring student progress, and takes up little additional classroom time to be completed. For the embedded pre- and post-test assessment of AGEC-300 at NCATSU, the students were administered the pretest during the first class session. For those students not in attendance during the first class session, they were provided the opportunity to complete the pretest during the second class session. The pretest consisted of selected questions about rural sociology that appeared on subsequent exams.

Although similar in administration to the embedded knowledge tests at NCATSU, the content of the questions for the OSU assessment was not identical, reflecting subject matter differences from the lectures by the two instructors who are teaching the introductory rural sociology courses at their respective universities, with different class sizes and within the distinctive contexts of their respective institutions of higher learning. For the embedded test of knowledge at OSU, students in RS 105 were administered a "preclass assessment" during the first class session, with a few students who did not attend the first session, filling it out before the second session began. The embedded test was administered in four sections of RS 105 (2 in Winter, 1 in Spring, 1 in Autumn quarter) of the 2007-2008 academic year taught by the same instructor. Questions from the preclass

assessment covered during the 10-week quarter session were included on the final exam, and formed the post-test.

Similar to OSU procedures, there was never any mention to students at NCATSU that the pre test questions would potentially compose part of a later exam. The questions for AGEC 300 generally present more choices than the OSU questions, giving students more chances to answer incorrectly on both the pre and post test versions, despite the best efforts of the instructor to convey course content in a clear and understandable format. Specifically, at NCATSU questions adopted a format similar to that used on the Graduate Record Exam. The students do complain about this format, but are told that it will help any who plan to apply for graduate school and who need to take the GRE to meet admissions requirements. At both institutions, there were more questions on the pre test than were included as part of the post test because some specific subject matter was never covered. Inevitably, due to circumstances ranging from cancelled classes because of an instructor's illness, to a loss of efficiency in presentation of course materials because of students' questions and discussions that last too long, all of the topics listed on the ambitious schedule of a course syllabus are not covered. The pre and post tests at both universities were multiple choice questions. A positive gain in student knowledge is determined simply by comparing the percentage of correct answers across the pre and post tests.

On the NCATSU version of the embedded knowledge test, post test questions could show up on any one of the two midterm exams or the final. During the semester, sometime after the first midterm, a student dropped out of the course. Hence, totals on which percentages are calculated are either 18 or 19 students (see Table 1). On the OSU version of the embedded knowledge test, there are no mid terms, only a final exam. Other activities throughout the quarter helped students earn points toward a final grade. By the end of the quarter, a net decline of two students had occurred. Since three students added the course sometime during the second week and were not given the preclass assessment, this means that five had dropped the course. Hence, 259 students participated in the pre test, and 257 in the post test.

Beyond the pre and post test for the two introductory rural sociology courses were other forms of evidence. For AGEC-300 at NCATSU and RS 105 at OSU, this comprised student comments about the course and what they learned. At NCATSU, students were asked to write down their impressions about favorable and unfavorable aspects of the course on the final day of class. For RS 105 at OSU, the written responses of students were collected over a period of eight quarters (two

academic years) for those sections taught by the same instructor. Students were asked to respond to two simple questions, including: (1) "write down one important sociological lesson you learned in this class"; and (2) "write down one suggestion for improving this course." The first question fits with a summative form of assessment, while the second question is more formative as to the kinds of comments it elicited, as were the student comments from the NCATSU assessment. At both institutions, students were instructed not to put their name on the paper. At OSU, the statements were collected by the TAs after the instructor left the room, while in the smaller class at NCATSU, the instructor simply asked students to hand their papers with written comments to the front of the classroom.

A third assessment tool, summative in style, was also utilized for the OSU version of introductory rural sociology. It was a small group diagnostic, which was administered on the same day during the 7th week of the Autumn Quarter, 2008 to students in all three sections of RS 105. Persons trained in this assessment tool from the OSU Center for the Advancement of Teaching administered and supervised the small group discussions, and as well, collected, transcribed and provided a written interpretation of the results.

Finally, a brief discussion of results from the standardized evaluation of instruction or SEI's is provided. As Kalish (2008) notes, SEI's were the primary form of evaluation before Boyer's report and the development of SoTL. Now, the SEI is considered as one of many ways to assess teaching and learning at the college level, and overall, multiple forms of assessment are preferred by SoTL scholars (Kalish 2008).

RESULTS

Embedded Pre and Post Test

As mentioned above, the pre and post tests from both institutions were similar in the general sense of attempting to measure knowledge gained, but the content of the actual items reflected differences in lectures on course content and styles in wording multiple choice questions.[3] Tables 1 and 2 show the results of knowledge gained from the NCATSU and the OSU versions of introductory rural sociology, respectively. The multiple choice questions are arranged in descending order, based on the percentage of students who answered correctly on the pre test.

[3] There was, however, one question in common. See question 5 from Table 1 and question 6 from Table 2.

TABLE 1. RESULTS OF THE EMBEDDED PRE AND POST TEST FOR NCATSU INTRODUCTORY RURAL SOCIOLOGY

CONTENT OF QUESTION (CORRECT ANSWER IN ITALICS)	PRE TEST CORRECT %	POST TEST CORRECT %	DIFFERENCE %
1. A typical family will usually perform which of the following functions for its members... a) Provide economic stability; b) Provide emotional support; c) Provide a college education; *d) Both a and b*; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	16/19 84.2%	17/18 94.4%	+1 +10.2%
2. Culture can be spread or communicated as... a) Signs; b) Gestures; c) Language; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; *g) All of the above*.	15/19 78.9%	15/18 83.3%	0 +4.4%
3. Farming today is considered _____, while farming of the past was considered a_____... *a) An occupation, way of life*; b) Right, opportunity; c) Ritual, necessity; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above. . .	15/19 78.9%	19/19 100.0%	4 21.1%
4. Communities are subdivided into... a) Census tracks; b) Neighborhood groups; *c) Neighborhoods*; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) All of the above.	13/19 68.4%	13/18 72.2%	0 +3.8%
5. A role strain is... a) Difficulty in fulfilling obligations; b) Difficulty in meeting expectations associated with a role; c) A result of being overly prepared to meet certain expectations; *d) Both a and b*; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	12/19 63.2%	7/18 38.9%	-5 -24.3%
6. The U.S. Census defines a family as... *a) One or more persons living in the same house who are related*; b) One or more persons living in the same house who do not have to be related; c) Central element of the neighborhood/ community; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; and g) All of the above.	11/19 57.9%	17/18 94.4%	6 36.5%

Content of Question (correct answer in Italics)	Pre Test Correct %	Post Test Correct %	Difference %
7. The U.S. Census defines a farm as… a) Any place where $10,000 or more of agricultural products are produced and sold during one year; *b) Any place where $1,000 or more of agricultural products are produced and sold during one year*; c) Any place where $100 or more of agricultural products are produced and sold during one year; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	11/19 57.9%	18/19 94.7%	+7 +36.8%
8. In the past 10 years, the rural population of the United States has… *a) Increased*; b) Decreased; and c) Not Changed.	10/19 52.6%	16/18 88.9%	+6 +36.3%
9. The best way to describe a farmstead is by… *a) Farmers who live on the land they farm*; b) Farmers who have to travel great distances to reach their farms; c) Farmers who live along riverbanks and farm the land behind their homes; d) both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	10/19 52.6%	17/18 94.4%	+7 +41.8%
10. The U.S. Census defines a household as… a) One or more persons living in the same house who are related; *b) One or more persons living in the same house who do not have to be related*; c) Central element of the neighborhood/community; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	9/19 47.4%	17/18 94.4%	+8 +47.1%
11. "Rural" means living in the open countryside or in open towns of less than… a) 2,500,000 inhabitants; b) 250,000 inhabitants; *c) 2,500 inhabitants*; d) 1,500 inhabitants; e) None of the above.	8/19 42.1%	16/18 88.9%	+8 +46.8%
12. Which of the following are major reasons for cultural variability? a) Physical environment and isolation; b) Technology; c) Stock Markets; *d) both a and b*; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) All of the above.	8/19 42.1%	14/18 77.8%	+6 +35.7%

TABLE 2. RESULTS OF THE EMBEDDED PRE AND POST TEST FOR OSU INTRODUCTORY RURAL SOCIOLOGY

CONTENT OF QUESTION (CORRECT ANSWER IN ITALICS)	PRE TEST CORRECT %	POST TEST CORRECT %	DIFFERENCE %
1. A typical family will usually perform which of the following functions for its members... a) Provide economic stability; b) Provide emotional support; c) Provide a college education; *d) Both a and b*; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	176/259 68.0%	242/257 94.1%	+66 +26.1%
2. Culture can be spread or communicated as... a) Signs; b) Gestures; c) Language; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; *g). All of the above*.	161/259 62.2%	214/257 83.3%	+53 +21.1%
3. Farming today is considered _____, while farming of the past was considered a_____... *a) An occupation, way of life*; b) Right, opportunity; c) Ritual, necessity; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above. . .	140/259 54.1%	187/257 72.8%	+47 18.9%
4. Communities are subdivided into... a) Census tracks; b) Neighborhood groups; *c) Neighborhoods*; d) Both a and b; e) both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) All of the above.	112/259 43.2%	165/257 64.2%	+53 +21.0%
5. A role strain is... a) Difficulty in fulfilling obligations; *b) Difficulty in meeting expectations associated with a role*; c) A result of being overly prepared to meet certain expectations; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	109/259 42.1%	184/257 71.6%	+75 29.5%
6. The U.S. Census defines a family as... *a) One or more persons living in the same house who are related*; b) One or more persons living in the same house who do not have to be related; c) Central element of the neighborhood/ community; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) All of the above.	101/259 39.0%	211/257 82.1%	+110 42.1%

Content of Question (correct answer in Italics)	Pre test Correct %	Post Test Correct %	Difference %
7. The U.S. Census defines a farm as… a) Any place where $10,000 or more of agricultural products are produced and sold during one year; *b) Any place where $1,000 or more of agricultural products are produced and sold during one year*; c) Any place where $100 or more of agricultural products are produced and sold during one year; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	75/259 29.0%	229/257 89.1%	+154 +60.1%
8. In the past 10 years, the rural population of the United States has… *a) Increased*; b) Decreased; c) Not Changed.	72/259 27.8%	194/257 75.5%	+122 +47.7%
9. The best way to describe a farmstead is by… *a) Farmers who live on the land they farm*; b) Farmers who have to travel great distances to reach their farms; c) Farmers who live along riverbanks and farm the land behind their homes; d) both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	52/259 20.1%	232/257 90.3%	+180 +70.2%
10. The U.S. Census defines a household as… a) One or more persons living in the same house who are related; *b) One or more persons living in the same house who do not have to be related*; c) Central element of the neighborhood/community; d) Both a and b; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) None of the above.	48/256 18.5%	195/257 75.9%	+147 +57.4%
11. "Rural" means living in the open countryside or in open towns of less than… a) 250,000,000 inhabitants; b) 250,000 inhabitants; *c) 2,500 inhabitants*; d) 1,500 inhabitants; e) None of the above.	39/259 15.1%	146/257 56.8%	+107 +41.7%
12. Which of the following are major reasons for cultural variability? a) Physical environment and isolation; b) Technology; c) Stock Markets; *d) Both a and b*; e) Both a and c; f) Both b and c; g) All of the above.	22/259 8.5%	162/257 63.0%	+140 54.5%

The first pattern found in both tables represents a reaction that every college level teacher has expressed from time to time, and even frequently. It goes something like this: "How could so many students have missed that question?!" For example, the NCATSU results indicate collective post test scores for specific questions ranging from perfection to failure. However, only Q5 was below 70 percent. For OSU, three of the twelve questions displayed post test scores below 70 percent, including one below a passing grade of 60 percent. Although no large differences were founded on the results of the embedded pre and post test between the two courses, those differences found are probably due to a combination of factors. The NCATSU questions generally present more choices than the OSU questions. This means that students enrolled at NCATSU had more chances to answer incorrectly, despite the best efforts of the instructor to convey course content in a clear and understandable format. Such factors as teaching styles and classroom environment may also explain various differences. Specifically, the instructor at NCATSU deals face-to-face with a small group of students, while the instructor at OSU delivers the lectures to large classes frequently exceeding 100, but relies on his Graduate Teaching Assistants to meet with small groups of students who need tutoring.

On the pre test, it is expected that students' selection would approach random chance. However, some students may have been exposed to sociological subject matter in high school, or in other social science classes at the university level. As well, students' own experiences aid their abilities to answer some questions correctly on the pre test versions. For example, three of the twelve NCATSU questions were answered correctly on the pre test by 70 percent or more of the students. One concerned the question about the functions of a family, the second on how culture is communicated, and the third about the way farming has changed. Many students would intuitively know that families provide economic stability and emotional support (but not a college education) that cultures are based on all three forms of communication – signs, gestures and language – and that farming is more of a business (i.e., occupation) today than a way of life, as it was during America's agrarian days.

On the OSU version, three questions were also answered correctly on the pre test by most students. Sixty-eight percent already displayed knowledge of the concept of alienation as a by-product of contemporary work environments in bureaucracies. Alienation is not an obscure academic word, but one that crosses over into everyday conversations and media reports about the negative aspects of the workplace. Hence, many students know the word long before their enrollment

in a sociology course, and can "psych out" the answer. For the other two questions, on the rise of income inequality and Hispanic Americans as the largest minority group, student answers may reflect knowledge they have retained from recent media stories on social trends and issues in American society.

Despite the differences in styles for wording multiple choice questions, both instructors are encouraged by gains in students' knowledge, although they also concede that results for some questions were below expectations. For NCATSU, knowledge gained showed an expected or common sense pattern – the larger gains were for questions where pre test averages were the lowest, namely, Q10, Q11, and Q12. Two of those questions focused on census definitions of a household and rural, respectively. Both represent items on which few students would be expected to have prior knowledge as to the correct answer. The other question is one where students "guessed" wrong because they themselves would personally know how technology affects lifestyle, but would less likely consider the role of the physical environment. By the end of the introductory rural sociology course at NCATSU, however, more knew that both create cultural variability.

The pattern for OSU was similar to NCATSU. The larger gains from pre test to post test occurred among those questions with the lowest pre test scores. For example, on Q9 about the proportion of the U.S. population that is rural, the increase was nearly 70 percent. This increase is likely due to the emphasis placed on the proportion of Americans who are rural by the instructor throughout the course, constantly reminding students that the rural population is a large and diverse group, though a minority within the total US population. Related to this is the 54 percent gain on Q12, which is about the period when America became an urban-majority society, a fact emphasized as symbolic of a significant shift in the demographics of American society since its founding. It would be expected that few students know anything about the concept of the sociological imagination or of functionalism and Emile Durkheim before attending introductory rural sociology (Q11 and Q10), or about the percentage of Americans living on a farm or that poverty rates are higher in rural America (Q8 and Q7). However, each of these is highlighted at numerous places throughout the course in lectures by the instructor, hence, the knowledge gained.

The embedded pre and post test is not only useful for gauging student progress in knowledge, it also identifies places where the lectures must have been confusing to students or additional emphasis is needed. For NCATSU, it is students' substantial reversal of percent correct from pre to post test on the question about role strain (see Q5, Table 1). For OSU, post test results on social structure and the

sociological imagination (Q4 and Q11, Table 2) indicate that collectively, the students did not retain this information. Both represent concepts presented during the first week of lectures, hence, indicating a need for a more focused review of course material, with an emphasis on knowledge from lectures from the first few weeks, to remind students about what they learned.

Student Comments and Evaluations

Examining student comments is a more traditional form of assessment. The most recurring theme from NACTSU's introductory rural sociology class was that the students seemed generally satisfied with the instructor and the information provided. In particular, the course seems to resonate with urban students. It may be a case that they see themselves as knowing little about rural America, but believe they learned a lot in the course. Typical of written comments is the following:

> I really enjoyed being in this class. Not being an agriculture major I was unsure of how I would do. I have learned a lot from this class to the point where I can apply it to the real world. It's funny because this class would relate to something that I have talked about in business or the cultural anthropology class that I took last semester. The instructor did an excellent job and I can definitely say that he knows his stuff. Me being from a urban area, I learned a lot about what rural means in general and what rural people have to go through.

In the OSU version of the class, students made similar comments. As two different students commented: "Many of us don't have exposure to rural life, and this course gave us a lot"; and "I liked the comparisons between rural areas and urban areas on things I didn't know a lot about, like minorities, poverty and crime."

Students in both NCATSU's and OSU's version of introductory rural sociology often mentioned facts or topics they learned about, reflecting specific types of course content emphasized by the instructors. At NCATSU, comments of this sort centered most frequently on definitions of rural and information about agriculture. At OSU, the comments most frequently mentioned rural located religions, such as the Amish and fundamentalists who throw rattlesnakes in their church services to prove they are saved, and different kinds of cultures, such as the Yanomamö of Venezuela and Brazil and the unique form of English spoken by people from the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu.

Student comments indicate that they appreciated introductory rural sociology courses when they sense that the instructors are enthusiastic about the subject matter, use multiple methods for teaching (i.e., lecture, videos, group discussion, group exercises etc.), and probably most important of all, have a sense of being graded fairly. For example, a comment from a NCATSU student noted that the instructor " . . . knew massive amounts pertaining to this subject matter and had a great interest in the subject matter, and his grading system was beyond fair." Similarly, an OSU student said: "I did not think much about unannounced quizzes, but I got to like them because I did well. They made me take notes and show up." Another OSU student mentioned: "The instructor is not there to try to flunk you, like in Chemistry, but to help you get a good grade."

As mentioned, the context in which both introductory rural sociology courses is taught differs in several important ways. Most apparent is the number of students who enroll in one of the numerous sections of the course at OSU because it fulfills a general education curriculum requirement. The Ohio State University instituted a policy that all GEC courses must be assessed periodically, which led to two additional assessment tools employed in the OSU version of introductory rural sociology.

First, students were asked to respond to one extra open-ended question as part of the end of term evaluation. It was: "Write down the most important sociological lesson you learned in this class." After transcriptions of the written comments were made, a review discovered five recurring themes, with students referring to: (1) learning about sociological theories and differing perspectives for understanding societies; (2) understanding social change/trends, including the rural/agricultural to urban transition of American society; (3) learning about social class, poverty, and inequality; (4) learning how sociology is a science, including learning about surveys and how to do cross tabulations; and (5) understanding issues related to diversity of societies and culture, and of subcultures/groups within rural American society, including the Amish. These comments reflect the primary content areas of the course, hence, they likely indicate not what was specifically learned per se, but what was most memorable about the course itself.

Second, the small group diagnostic administered by the OSU Center for the Advancement of Teaching found results similar to the written comments of individual students. This is important, as the small groups were conducted independent of the instructor, as was the analysis of the transcripts of written comments received from each of the 54 groups.

Three primary questions were posed to students in the small groups. The first was: "What are the most important concepts and lessons you have learned in Rural Sociology 105 about society, culture and yourself?" The most frequently occurring themes were similar to those mentioned above. Based on consensus from the students within each group were: (1) understanding the concept of the sociological imagination; (2) learning about different societies and cultures; (3) learning about social change (called the "7 big trends"); (4) learning about social class; (5) learning about the three sociological perspectives – functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and conflict theory; (6) learning about the sociological concept of the community; and (7) gaining greater awareness of how individuals think and behave based on their culture. Less frequently mentioned was learning about rural-urban differences, environmental issues, and agriculture. However, this was an artifact of the time the diagnostic was administered (7th week), as most of the content for these topics were taught during the final three weeks of the quarter.

The second question asked about the strengths of the course. Similar to the written comments from the end of term assessment, students liked the course when they perceived the instructor to be enthusiastic about the subject matter, to have a willingness to mix lectures with in-class discussion, to display a willingness to listen actively when student questions come up in the middle of a lecture, and that the instructor was both fair and flexible with grading.

The third question asked about weaknesses in the course. One of the two most frequently mentioned weaknesses was that some students wanted more focus on rural-related topics, and thought that the instructor spent too much time on rural-urban comparisons or general sociology topics (such as theory) that were not rural related. Determining if these comments came largely from students in small groups who are majors in the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences at OSU is impossible. However, these comments probably reflect that some dissatisfaction with introductory rural sociology is likely to occur among students who would prefer to enroll only in courses that are most directly pertinent to their backgrounds, that is, where they grew up. As a cross-listed course with introduction to sociology (i.e., Sociology 101) and as a course listed as fulfilling a general education curriculum requirement, the introductory rural sociology at OSU inevitably includes some students who fail to find the course content relevant under any circumstances. Further, if the course were revised so that general sociological principles and references to urban and/or rural-urban comparisons were diminished and focused more parochially on rural and agricultural topics, dissatisfaction from a different set of students would likely arise.

A second perceived weakness of the course was the lack of an adequate textbook. As one small group wrote: "The book doesn't always line up with the discussions, so, it is hard to know what you should read." "We paid a lot for the book and don't need it," was the assessment of another group. A third group chimed in with: "There's no motivation to read the book – nothing on the test about it." As well, written comments from the students in the NCATSU version of introductory rural sociology also mentioned a general dissatisfaction with the textbook. They believed that it did not fit the course very well and some were concerned about what to read relative to tests and grades.

Both authors note that students are becoming increasingly cost-conscious and judge the quality of a course in part by how much instructors refer to and base their grading directly from textbook material. As well, both authors have attempted adoption of general introductory sociology textbooks to the course, with our lectures mostly supplying the rural perspective, but with limited success. Many students notice a disconnect between the textbook and what is said in the classroom, constant corrections and qualifiers to the textbook narrative, and what parts will be pertinent to quizzes and exams.

Student Evaluation of Instruction

The most traditional form of course assessment is a standardized student evaluation (Kalish 2008), also known at many universities as the SEI. SEI's are not only the most traditional form of course assessment, they may be the least informative unless they are part of a multimethod approach to evaluation. For both the NCATSU and the OSU versions of introductory rural sociology, the student evaluation of instruction shows average scores consistently above 4.5 (on a 5-point Likert type scale with "5" being "high" and "1" being "low"). The highest scores pertained to the enthusiasm for the subject matter displayed by the instructors, with lower scores on items like "intellectually stimulating." We eschew a more detailed reporting of SEI scores, as overall, the scores for most classes at our institutions are also highly skewed. Averages for all university courses of the same size, whether they are part of a general education requirement or serve only majors, and whether they are for lower or upper division students, are well above 4.0, and for most, above 4.5. Thus, what can be learned from SEI's is limited and must be put within the context of other forms of assessment. In addition, both institutions have switched over to on-line submission of SEI's, which has reduced response rates and further limits SEI's utility as an assessment tool.

Perhaps the best use of an SEI is comparative, that is, to examine how student ratings of an introductory rural sociology course compare with college and university averages for courses of the same type. In this regard, it should be noted that SEI's scores for both courses were always above respective university averages, indicating that rural sociological topics, if presented in both an entertaining and educational manner, are attractive to undergraduates, despite the limited utility of current sociology textbooks employed in both versions of the course.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The institutional contexts of introductory rural sociology courses at NCATSU and OSU are both different and similar. Although both are land-grant universities with a heritage and continued focus on agriculture and rural society, the former is a predominately black institution of higher learning established in 1893, and the latter is not. The former is much smaller, while the latter is one of the largest universities in the U.S. At NCATSU, AGEC 300 is a course that rarely exceeds 25 students and is a service course enrolled in mostly by agricultural economics and agricultural business students, which is the administrative home for the course, and other college majors. At OSU, sections of RS 105 frequently exceed 100 students, most of them are not agricultural majors, students enroll in the course because it fulfills a GEC requirement, and many find it an attractive alternative to other social science courses. There is no Rural Sociology undergraduate major at OSU, and the minor includes less than 25 students.

Despite the differences between the two introductory rural sociology courses, there are remarkable convergences from these similar but independent assessments. First, when tested for gains in knowledge, there is indeed progress, based on the results of the embedded pre and post tests, but the results were also disappointing. The pre test results indicated that students at both institutions largely came to introductory rural sociology with very limited knowledge concerning the subject matter covered. This is to be expected, for after-all, they are "introductory" courses. The students exited the courses with much more knowledge based on their written comments (and the small group diagnostic), yet, the percentage of students who answered correctly on the post test version of the embedded knowledge test is not even close to what would be considered an A (i.e., 92 or 93 percent and above). In fact, the average of the post test scores from the NCATSU version was a B (i.e., 85.2%) and from the OSU version was a low B (i.e., 83.8%). The difference in average in probably trivial, as the important point is that retention of specific information will always be problematic in an introductory rural sociology course,

even when most of the students give the course itself and the instructor a high rating.

Student comments clearly indicate that although they may not remember specific things as measured in a multiple-choice style test, they do learn and retain something about sociological concepts and lessons, other cultures, and of rural societies, communities, and peoples. In this sense, the collective grades achieved on the post test version of the knowledge assessment does not measure everything that students may have learned. What they really learned, based on the end of term written comments and the focus group assessment was less tangible than facts and more about an appreciation of the human and social dimensions of rural, environmental and agricultural issues.

It is this disconnect between knowledge gained and students' written comments, and between both of these and the results from a standardized SEI evaluation, that forms the most important lesson for instructors of undergraduate rural sociology who wish to engage in a serious assessment of their courses. A multiple methods approach to assessment is a far better approach than employing a single measurement only (Angelo and Cross 1993; Kalish 2008). Not only will there be points of convergence that confirm what students learn and how they perceive the quality of the course and of the instructor, but places where the results seem to diverge are just as enlightening. It is at the divergences that a more critical approach to assessment and revision of a course can be undertaken by instructors of undergraduate and other rural sociology courses.

For example, perhaps it is the lack of an adequate textbook that accounts for the disappointing scores on the post test side of the embedded knowledge test. Would an appropriate textbook, or equivalent course notes and/or study guides, give students a more firm basis on which to learn specific items of knowledge that can be measured through a multiple choice test? In that regard, the discipline of Rural Sociology is long overdue for a textbook and related materials to serve introductory rural sociology and other undergraduate courses (for a guide to teaching rural subject matter, see Jenkins and Rakowski 2000, with a new version by Jenkins, Rakowski, and Grigsby 2010, in press).

This assessment has its limitations. It was conducted at only two institutions of higher learning with introductory rural sociology courses. Perhaps it is time for a more comprehensive assessment with participation of instructors at several universities across the U.S., following the standards of rigor and procedures found in the literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning (i.e., SOTL) now applied in so many other disciplines. A comprehensive assessment would necessitate

a better coordinated and standardized set of measurement tools than the assessment in this article displayed, which presents a problem that might not be solvable. Instructors of various introductory rural sociology courses will inevitably exhibit, no matter how hard they try to conform, variability in teaching styles and the content of their class lectures, discussions, exercises and other course assignments. Hence, attempts at a rigidly standardized cross-university assessment may be impossible, but regardless, a coordination of effort is highly recommended. Even on the ad hoc basis by which this assessment of two introductory rural sociology courses was conducted, the nature of assessment itself automatically creates some measure of comparability across different kinds of institutions of higher learning that proves informative.

The authors also recommend a more coordinated effort to assess rural sociology courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels across a variety of university settings to examine more closely specific pedagogical methodologies that allow students to learn and gain new insights into specific issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural societies. Hence, the authors recommend a collaborative approach among rural sociological scholars at different universities who would attempt to use the same, specific innovative practices. Some of these techniques are described by Donnermeyer et al. (2005), which included only a few of the potential ways that rural sociological subject matter can be taught by professors and learned by students. Evaluation of specific practices might include an assessment of a small group exercise about survey research on a rural-related topic, a review of pertinent literature about a rural social problem or a rural-located subculture, the use of "storytelling" to depict rural lifestyles and differences among rural peoples and communities by race, ethnicity, age and other factors, the use of clickers (a technology similar to that used in a popular quiz show called "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire") to monitor students' knowledge of lecture topics or their opinion about specific issues, and the use of short clips available on YouTube and other web sites about people, places and issues within a rural context. These and many other innovative practices are used today by professors in all of the disciplines as the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) spreads throughout the various social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, and other fields of study. Some of these practices may be more applicable to and effective in rural sociology courses than with other subject matter, and some may not. A cross-university approach to the research would benefit both individual Rural Sociology instructors and various programs of the same.

Without a doubt, introductory rural sociology has great potential to extend the visibility of the discipline of rural sociology to a much larger audience at the undergraduate level. We contend that many students might prefer a rural focus to their sociology, even those students who come from urban backgrounds, that is, once they are enrolled in the course and show up for class. Perhaps it is easier for them to "get their heads around" issues like poverty and the environment when presented in places with smaller populations. It may also be that for urban students, a rural oriented course shows a type of societal diversity of which they were previously not aware. As for students with rural backgrounds, maybe they learned that a sociological perspective can be productively applied to the familiar, hence, gaining views different from the biases they carried into class based on what they have learned from their families and the "talking heads" on the radio stations in their hometowns. Hence, introductory rural sociology continues to serve a liberal arts function for undergraduate agriculture majors but has great potential for expansion to students from all backgrounds and experiences (Flinn 1982; Donnermeyer et al. 2005). Whatever the answer, without taking seriously the need to assess introductory rural sociology, we Rural Sociologists limit our ability to expand the presence of the discipline at our universities and among one of our primary audiences, namely, undergraduates (Donnermeyer, Kalish, and Johnson 2009).

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