

Article

Don't Just Read Books, Write Them! Four Lessons Learned from a Multiyear Student-authored Book Project in Social Theory

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Abstract

This article documents the process of having students research, create, edit, and self-publish a book of social theorist profiles (arranged alphabetically from Adorno to Weber) for a required theory course I teach in the department of sociology. An ongoing project, it currently spans over three semesters worth of theory students with each class building on the work of the last. It is both a guide to implementing a similar project in any course (though particularly relevant to those specifically looking to engage students in their sociological theory course) and an analysis of the lessons I have learned along the way that may help others overcome a number of the inherent challenges. Although others are certainly implementing projects like this in their own college classrooms, the materials available in peer-reviewed journals are almost nonexistent. I assert that public sociologists, in particular, should consider taking on these kinds of projects as they both benefit larger communities and allow us to reconsider the long-term results of our teaching efforts.

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Personal Reflexive Statement

*Ever since I began teaching in graduate school, I've been strangely interested in having my students write books. As a sociologist, I often hate to admit to the usefulness of another discipline's framework, but I think this compulsion may have stemmed from the conflict between my own desire to write books and my inability to follow through with the task. As a graduate instructor in 1996, I decided to integrate a classwide book project into a course I was teaching called *Nonviolence & The Ethics of Social Action*. The result was a rather primitive, student-produced, copy machine printed, Kinko's spiral bound "book," with a lot of heart, if not much professionalism, editing, or particularly connected or relevant content. Since that time, I have added a book project to a wide variety of courses with increasingly better results (and have successfully authored two of my own books: *The Better World Handbook* (Jones et al. 2007) and *The Better World Shopping Guide* (Jones 2012). This piece will discuss one of my latest student book projects, now in its third edition, for the required course I teach on sociological theory at Holy Cross College in Worcester, MA.*

Let me begin by suggesting that while I am certain that I am far from the first academic to attempt this sort of collaborative book project in a college classroom, there is a dearth of published writing on the topic. In fact, the only peer-reviewed articles dedicated to writing a book as a student project were specifically aimed at middle school or high school educators (Heyer 2009; Huntley-Johnston, Merritt, and Huffman 1997). The current literature on whole-class student writing projects in higher education is split between projects that take either a more traditional research methods approach or adopt a more tech-savvy wiki-based option. In the former case, teachers typically allow every student to experience firsthand how research methods are implemented "in the real world" using data collection via either quantitative surveys (Royce 2007) or qualitative interviews (Raddon, Nault, and Scott 2008). These data are subsequently coded, analyzed, and written up in such a way that students absorb the experience of what it means to engage in social science research. In the latter case, students are asked to build a wiki (Pellet 2012) or wikibook (Bonk et al. 2009) in order to (1) teach them how to successfully cooperate to generate meaningful content as a team and (2) familiarize them with the mechanics and potential contained in Web 2.0 platforms. Although both approaches seem to yield a range of positive student outcomes, I would argue that the former is largely restricted to research methods courses and the latter requires a familiarity and ease with wikis, that is, regrettably, still difficult to come by in our profession. I see a book project

as just flexible enough and just familiar enough to have potentially broad appeal to those of us in the academy interested in pedagogical experimentation.

Why have students write books? Let me begin the answer by noting a few of my own reasons for pursuing a class book project in a college classroom, and why I think many of us tend to avoid projects of this sort, despite their pedagogical potential. First, I see most of my students learning many ways to be excellent consumers of knowledge (e.g., carefully reading texts, thoughtfully using library databases, and efficiently studying for exams) but few ways to produce knowledge outside of a standard research paper. This may seriously hobble our students' ability to thoughtfully produce and effectively communicate their expertise to others. Second, the knowledge they do produce often holds little meaning for them because it is essentially produced for an audience of one (me) and may garner 30–60 minutes of careful attention before it is returned with a grade and quickly forgotten or physically disposed of by the end of the term. I worry that this trend mirrors what we often decry in other parts of our culture as the unchecked growth of the quickly consumed, quickly disposed of economy, that is, fast food, fast fashion, and now, fast education. Third, although many of us recognize the many downsides of an education that encourages and rewards individuals within a primarily competitive framework, we also shy away from the much-maligned "group project" which, when announced in class, almost inevitably results in a chorus of groans and grimaces based on the particularly salient past experiences our students have had with similar, typically failed ventures. Often our concern for both potentially poor student evaluations and, more legitimately, dicey student learning outcomes overrides our instincts to encourage cooperation and peer education.

In my own experience, a book project provides students with an array of benefits that may otherwise not come with a more typically designed course. First, students seem to quickly feel investment in and later ownership over the project themselves. I think immediately of Marx's alienation from the product of one's labor when I see how meaningfully students connect to this kind of activity (and perhaps their species-being if we take the analogy further) in comparison to most other assignments. Second, students walk away from the course with something quite tangible, essentially physical, and easily explained to others, including friends, family, and so on. "What did you do in Course X?" "I wrote a book!" It is something that they can take pride in and a potential tool for communicating the value of what they are learning to people they know. Third, students gain a better sense of how important professional presentation is, and how to achieve it. They tend to produce better work when they know it will be read by others in (and outside of) the class and that their name will be attached both to the book as a whole and their specific contribution, though they also mention knowing that others in the class are counting on them as a motivating factor. Finally, I think students come to a place of greater compassion for the author's of the works they read throughout the class as they realize how difficult good, clear writing for a public, albeit somewhat educated, audience can be.

The Mechanics of a Class-authored Book

The basic premise behind the theory book project is one that students readily adopt when I introduce it at the midpoint of the semester, that is, students need a more concise resource to understand each of the theorists that are covered in a typical sociological theory course. At this point in the term, students have waded through a combination of often difficult to decode primary source material written by the theorists themselves and secondary interpretations of each theorist's work from the perspective of a sociologist specializing in theory (e.g., George Ritzer). Even then, students often hang on my every word to try and make some sense of what the contribution of each theorist actually is and how it in fact helps reveal something important about our world. In short, they understand how useful this resource could potentially be for themselves and students like them in other theory courses.

The book is organized in a fairly simple way as an alphabetical listing of important sociological theorists. The first edition included 17 theorists, from Theodor Adorno to Max Weber and totals 346 pages, including a simple table of contents. For consistency of formatting and the fair distribution of work among students, each theorist is allotted exactly eight pages in the book. Each theorist profile includes the following brief material: name, theoretical orientation, a photo, lifespan in years, and three to five major concepts. Subsections of one to three paragraphs include a quotation from that theorist with a meaningful explanation, the sociohistorical context of the theorist's life, connections to other theorists and/or historical figures, an explanation of his or her theoretical perspective, an explanation of each of his or her major concepts, details on his or her notable writings, criticisms of the theorist, and an overall assessment of the lasting impact of the theorist. Each profile wraps up with a list of three to five useful texts for further readings about the theorist as well as a list of citations, numbered to correspond with the endnote numbers in the text of the profile itself.

For the first edition, each student in the course chose a theorist card from a deck of cards I'd printed up using online photos, theorist names, playing card designs, heavy weight paper, and the department scanner/printer. They could exchange their theorist with any other student in the class or return their card to draw again, but few took me up on the idea. With theorist in hand, each was handed a paper copy of the theorist profile template (detailed in the paragraph previously) as well as a link to an online version of the template in Microsoft Word that they would be typing into directly. This was essential for keeping the work on formatting down to an absolute minimum and to make certain that the pages would "fit" correctly into the printed version of the book.

Students were asked to use a combination of three major sources to assemble their theorist's profile: (1) 15 theory texts I'd placed on two-hour reserve at the library, (2) our course text—*Sociological Theory* by George Ritzer, and (3) online academic research databases (JSTOR, ProQuest, SocIndex, and Google Scholar). Students were required to turn in their work in stages (outline, rough draft, second draft, and

third draft) on a weekly basis, and time was allotted in each of those sessions for general questions as well as peer review of their work in pairs. Their completed profile was handed in on paper for me to evaluate as well as digitally (via a specified folder on the course Moodle page) to facilitate the work of the editors combining all of the profiles and revising each profile as needed.

Once the profiles were handed in, I copied and pasted all of them into a single Microsoft Word document in alphabetical order by theorist's last names, taking time to correct the inevitable formatting bugs that crop up during this process. Having added a title page, an "About the Book" page explaining the project, and the table of contents, I inserted page numbers. At this point, I added each student's name next to their theorist profile reference in the table of contents to allow everyone to claim their own work while not unnecessarily disrupting the flow of the body of the book itself.

For printing purposes, I used an online self-publishing press called Lulu (www.lulu.com). Although there are now a variety of options available to instructors, I have been generally quite pleased with the quality of their books, the efficiency of their turnaround time, and the simplicity of their uploading process. For the first two editions, I chose a pocket size of 4.25" × 6.88", perfect (adhesive-based) binding, standard black and white interior pages, and a full color paperback cover. The body text was set to 8 point Arial font with larger text for titles and the like (for the third edition, I changed the size of the book to 6" × 9" and moved the body font to 12 point Arial accordingly). As a consequence, the Microsoft Word template the students used was always set to 4.25" × 6.88" with mirror margins chosen in the document formatting process. Before uploading the document, Lulu requires that you upload it as a PDF file. The generation of cover material (front, back, and spine) was fairly straight forward, though I spent more time on it than I probably should have as I wanted to guarantee that students experienced a favorable first impression of the book. I included the name of every student as the main material for the back cover. I ordered a copy of the book for every student in the course, allowing two weeks for printing and shipping, and five copies for myself. Including shipping, the books cost roughly US\$10 each to purchase (oddly, the larger 6" × 9" format books are generally a few dollars cheaper). I made sure that the books arrived before the last day of class, so that I could hand it to them, garner their reactions, and discuss what they thought of the project now that it was complete. The general feedback from students was that it felt somewhat satisfying and a bit shocking to have coauthored a book that they can hold in their hands.

Although the results from the first edition of the theory book were surprisingly good, I decided that I would continue the process with the next theory class to improve upon what I'd learned during this time. I could, I thought, streamline the process, add more content, and improve the quality of the present material until the final product was not just something that students could be proud of, but something that would meet my own, somewhat higher, standards of professionalism and usefulness.

Lesson 1: Build in a Training Project

Although the theory book project was always meant to occupy the second half of the semester, I didn't originally intend the project from the first half of the semester to provide any kind of preparation or training. I ended up benefiting from a happy coincidence. In the first part of the course, I had each of my students adopt a theorist's Wikipedia page. I randomly assigned theorists to students from a subset that I had chosen based on the current state of their Wikipedia page. I weeded out those theorists whose entries are quite well developed and did the same for theorists whose entries are little more than a place holder. I handpicked roughly 20 theorists whose entries had (1) some significant substance included that could be edited and/or corrected, (2) left plenty of room for more detailed text to be included about their life and work, and (3) entries in many of the theory texts that I provided in my library reserve collection.

I required each student to create a free Wikipedia account with a username ending in something like "hcs12" to designate a contribution from a Holy Cross student during a Spring 2012 theory course. Although it is technically not necessary to have an account to make changes to a page (it logs your Internet protocol address instead), I found it useful to track my students' contributions from years past. I had students read over a Wikipedia editing tutorial and watch a couple of YouTube videos of how the process worked. I then had students compare their assigned theorist's entry with that of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim to allow them to comprehend the difference between an underdeveloped and a well-developed entry. Using the same resources mentioned earlier (course text, theory books on reserve, and online resources), I had students correct, edit, clarify, properly cite, upgrade, and add relevant material to their theorist's page in real time on Wikipedia. Each week they would bring in a printout of the page indicating, by using a highlighter, problems needing to be addressed as well as changes and improvements made to the page. These pages were exchanged with their peers to allow for additional feedback. At the end of the projects students handed in a printout of the *before* and *after* version of their theorist's Wikipedia page as well as a short paper documenting all of their research, changes made, justifications, citations, and a list of academic sources. They concluded their papers with two paragraphs on their understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Wikipedia as resource.

This project was originally intended to allow students to explore both the serious flaws and the potential benefits of Wikipedia as an information source, so that we might discuss in more detail why it is unacceptable as a reference for an academic paper, and yet may provide potential pathways to explore that could lead to more substantial and legitimate sources of information. In addition, as a public sociologist, I wanted students to be able to use their own research in the course to be put to use helping others learn about theory. As a bonus, I found that other Wikipedia contributors to the same pages would often engage my students in a series of their own edits that elaborated, countered, clarified, corrected, or even eliminated the students'

changes. This opened up discussions of what it meant to be a part of a growing online academic community and how Wikipedia functions as an experiment in information democracy. By the end of that semester, what I discovered through student feedback is that the Wikipedia project supplied students with confidence, experience, and a skillset that allowed them to produce a theorist profile of reasonable quality for the book project. I now make this connection explicit in my theory course.

Lesson 2: Appoint Student Editors

For the original edition of the theory book, I took on the role of editor myself. Students turned in physical and digital copies of their papers, and I was in charge of weaving them together into a seamless whole. In practice, this led to a handful of very long nights editing, reformatting, correcting, and generally wrestling with the many quirks of Microsoft Word. For the second edition of the book, I asked for volunteers and ultimately chose one of my best students as the editor, meeting with her weekly during the process, and found that while the process went more smoothly, the student had been overwhelmed with the workload herself. For the third edition, I chose two of my top students for the editor role and had them work together.

This two editor arrangement seems to be optimal as it allows for increased accountability, fewer mistakes, a more evenly distributed workload, and more time for me to deal with any crises that crop up along the way. By having this project begin later in the semester, I can more easily identify those students who reliably produce high-quality work and demonstrate other signs of above average responsibility that are necessary for effective editors. In addition, I have editors identify and communicate error patterns, formatting needs, and necessary design changes to the rest of the class throughout this process so that their own work doesn't become overwhelming in the final weeks of class. Having said this, I find that students do grumble over having to be so careful about their own formatting, and I have to spend extra time reminding them that this kind of thoughtful work is exactly what will be required of them in the professional world.

Lesson 3: Balance Control and Ownership

Although I am quite proud of the results of my students' work, I find that I am constantly fighting back the urge to make a tsunami of corrections myself to each profile to bring the whole thing *up to snuff* in my own eyes. I'll read a sentence in the book on a favorite theorist that I find misleading or grammatically dodgy or just odd and I'll want to rewrite it so that it is more correct, clear, and thoughtful. I then remind myself that this book is *their work* and therein lies the true power of the project. At the beginning of each new theory class, I hold up the book and say "students just like you wrote this" and in that moment know that some new possibilities open up for my students in that class. Having said that, I will not assign the book itself as a reference for my class to use (outside of for the project itself) because there are still too many

errors. It contains the work of every student that completed the class, including all of the “A” students *and* all of the “D” students.

It wasn't until the third edition of the book that I began to tackle this problem of inconsistent quality. Students editing the work of other students can be a potentially dicey endeavor, and with so many other aspects of the work to address, I left this problem as one of the last on my list to resolve. In this most recent class, I decided to divide the book project into two parts. For the first part, I assigned each student two randomly selected theorist profiles from the last edition of the book (with the names of the original student-authors removed) and had them treat the book profiles like they did the Wikipedia entries—looking for mistakes, gaps, vagueness, missing citations, and so on. Each student was given a digital copy to work with and asked to hand in a *before* and *after* version of the profiles (in paper and digital form) to me along with a brief paper documenting their research process. I then handed the digital copies to the editors to integrate into the latest edition. For the second part, I assigned a single theorist profile to a pair of students to research and write up collaboratively. This allowed me both to lighten the workload on the students to compensate for the additional work of editing profiles from the previous edition, and it also lowered the number of new theorists being included to eight (something I thought necessary to avoid the inclusion of too many obscure theorists in the book). Although this may have resulted in students feeling a bit less ownership over the final product, I ultimately decided it was worth it. In my mind, the real advantage of a multiyear project lies in the potential to increase the quality of the project over time while still maintaining its integrity as a purely student-produced enterprise. Although the resulting revisions have been a bit uneven, the profiles are generally improved with each edition.

Lesson 4: Choose Your Technology Carefully

On one hand, it is rapidly advancing technology that makes this whole book project possible: ubiquitous student access to computers, common word processing software, online publishing websites, and so on. On the other hand, more than anything else, that same technology is often at the root of the most significant challenges facing its successful implementation. For example, if you have worked with Microsoft Word for any length of time, you know that it is not a frustration-free piece of software, but you do not have a sense of how widespread these bugs are until you attempt to assemble a well-designed, custom-sized, book-formatted document from 20 individual Word documents that may have been produced on either a PC or a Mac in anything from a 2001 to a 2012 edition of the software. Having said this, I chose to stick with Word for the same reason most of us do, because almost every single student has access to it and is familiar with it.

Although, as stated earlier, I've had plenty of success with the online publisher, Lulu as well as Wikipedia, I have not been as lucky with online partner choices for similar projects in other courses. For example, in a yearlong course I taught called

Building A Better World, I had the students collaborate to publish their reviews of books on ethical consumerism on a website (www.ethicalconsumerbookreviews.com) using a popular website service called Wix (www.wix.com). My intention was to make this the first of a series of similar websites, but by the time I taught the next section of the course where students reviewed books on global citizenship, the website had changed many of its online tools and no longer allowed this particular kind of java-based formatting to be used. This threw a wrench into the works of the project right as the editors were placing the work online, and as a result, that second website remains inaccessible to the public (including the students themselves). I mention this only as a warning about the potential downsides of these technology dependent projects.

In spite of these technologically based challenges, I have decided that the fourth edition of the theory book will be published as an app for smartphones and tablets using one of the many online app building services (in this case, AppyPie). I am venturing down this somewhat new path for four reasons. First, I have long desired a broader audience for this project, and while the students may share the books with a small circle of their friends and family, it is unlikely to move beyond that reach. Similar to Wikipedia, an app allows for a global audience to benefit from this work, and it is more likely to end up in the hands of interested sociology faculty and students. Second, apps have finally begun to reach the stage that websites arrived at years ago—construction without the need to code. Many app building services are allowing users to “drag and drop” (and “cut and paste”) their way to the creation of useful, well-designed apps. I’ve chosen AppyPie due to a combination of (1) reasonable pricing for aesthetically pleasing and user-friendly results and (2) the ability for the app to be translated instantly across devices (smartphones and tablets) and platforms (iOS, Android, Windows, and Blackberry). Third, nearly all of my students have smartphones on them day and night. The medium speaks to them, and they are really excited about the possibility of creating their own app that they can carry with them in their pocket. This is a level of enthusiasm that I find difficult to ignore when it comes to sociological theory-related projects. Finally, as of the third edition, 42 theorists are now included in the book. And while I expect a few more theorists will be added, we are quickly running out of new material to research. I now divide students’ time between new research and checking, editing, updating, and revising their predecessors’ work. The app opens up new avenues of online research including audio archives, short videos, university lectures, thoughtfully constructed charts, creative images, and so on. I may even consider having student create and produced videos of themselves summarizing what we know about particular theorists. In any case, going digital opens new avenues for this work that may otherwise have gone unexplored in the world of physical texts.

Final Thoughts

To this day, I find these kind of book projects immensely satisfying at a number of levels. First, I think there is something to be said for creating a lasting physical

representation of some of the learning that takes place in a course. A book on my shelf that I can browse through, pass along, and present to other classes carries for me some symbolic weight that seems to codify something about this more ephemeral world of teaching (and I hope it may do the same for some of the students). Second, while I generally abhor the pressure on higher education writ large to conform to a more consumer-oriented, job-ready, business-savvy model of learning, I do feel compelled to pass along some combination of practical skills, attention to detail, and creative accomplishment to my students that may serve them well once they leave the academy. Third, as a public sociologist, I firmly believe that we need to teach our students to effectively translate what they are learning in ways that benefit outside communities. This not only allows them to reframe their education as potentially resulting in something more than just personal gain and enrichment, but it begins to open up the idea that the privilege of education comes with some level of responsibility to others and to the society as a whole. Finally, by setting up this book project as a multiyear effort, I instill in my students (and remind myself) that teaching, like knowledge, is a long-term endeavor requiring sustained commitment. It may not be this next edition, but perhaps by the seventh, or ninth, or fifteenth edition, we will have created something of true value for others. And it is that kind of hope that keeps me passionate about teaching.

Author's Note

A copy of the third edition of this book project is available online in a PDF file at academicsholycross.edu/sociology-anthropology/faculty/jones. Feel free to contact me (ejones@holycross.edu) if you're interested in the individual assignment sheets.

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