OUT OF THE CLASSROOM, ONTO THE STREETS: LEARNING SOCIAL RESEARCH BY DOING SOCIAL RESEARCH[1][2]

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports and assesses a semester-long activity-based approach to learning social research methods. Unlike more typical research methods classes which depend on lectures, readings, and tests, this class used a series of projects that moved students out of the classroom into a progressive series of research activities using Istanbul itself as the primary locale for learning. From the first session of the semester, two related research questions, "What makes a successful street beggar?" and "How do people in Istanbul interact with street beggars," guided a collaborative research project involving more than forty students and their instructor. Students used observation, role-taking, interview construction and gathering interviews, survey construction and administration, and data analysis as research tactics to address the research questions. Students report that they learned more through these activities than through usual classroom learning and they endorsed the approach for their other classes. Suggestions for adapting this approach for other classes are listed.

Keywords: classroom, streets, learning, social research

Introduction

A quiet revolution has been spreading through education. Fueled by the arguments, among others, nearly one hundred years ago of the Italian educator Maria Montessori (1995) and the American philosopher of education John Dewey (1997, 2008), a model of education that is learner- rather than teacher-centered has both captured the imagination of educators and has focused teaching efforts on empowering the learner. The earlier model of education imagined teaching and learning as transmittal of information from the knowing teacher to the impoverished learner. The older model at its heart proposed a mimetic model of learning: the learner was an empty vessel waiting to be filled by the knowing teacher so that the teacher's knowledge was re-created in the passive (and often resistant) learner. The older model was authoritarian and 'disciplining', taming recalcitrant learners into model 'subject.' Michel

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[2] An earlier two-part report on this project appeared in Turkey's largest circulation English language newspaper. See Allen Scarboro, **'Allah rızası için bir sadaka' (1) and (2)**, *Today's Zaman*, 26 and 27 August 2013. Yasemin Ekici, Aulia Pandamsari, Sevde Uylaş and Mohamed ElGed made significant contributions to that article.

Foucault's analysis of the 'means of correct training' powerfully dissects how this model creates passive dis-empowered citizens who are obedient to an ever more powerful state (1979). One may think of the Turkish Ministry of Education's central control of curriculum and pedagogy in Turkish schools as an example of the mimetic model of education, where schooling has as a primary purpose the 'Turkification' of a diverse student body into good—that is, uniform and 'normalized'—citizens.

The alternative model of education sees learners, not the teacher or the state, as the center of learning. Empowering students, fostering curiosity and problem solving rather than mimesis is the focus of this second model of teaching and learning. Two illustrative examples of the student focused model of teaching can be found in the works of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1990) and the American social activist Myles Horton (1991).

Freire's thinking is described in a book he called *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The book, about teaching and empowerment, grew from his work in adult education among poor, disenfranchised adults in northeast Brazil. Freire found that following the government-mandated curriculum was very unsuccessful in promoting learning among his students. Students resisted what they experienced as an alienating education that undermined their self-respect and seemed foreign to their experiences and needs. When Freire moved to a learning strategy founded on the learner's experienced life-world and aimed at developing skills that enhanced the learner's abilities at meeting their own needs and building a clearer consciousness of their involvement in their world, learners enthusiastically and effectively created an education for empowerment. Learners became doers rather than mimics.

Horton's work on education was part of his efforts to promote social change, especially in civil and economic rights in the United States. He founded a school, called the Highlander Center, for training social activists in rural east Tennessee. Like Freire, he and his colleagues saw learning as a way for disempowered people to resist their marginalization by and from social and civic institutions that exploited them and monopolized the social and economic capital of the society. For Horton, education was a means for the 'oppressed' to take charge of their lives and to open opportunities to take charge of their futures (Horton and Freire, 1991).[3]

Inside the Academy

The work of Paulo Freire and Myles Horton drew much of their educational philosophy from forerunners like Maria Montessori and John Dewey. However, their activities took place largely outside institutions of higher education.   But the effectiveness of their pedagogy caught the attention of practitioners within the academy, especially within teacher training programs and within the sociology of teaching and learning.

Within sociology, three themes in particular emphasize the shift from a focus on teaching (instructor-focused, mimetic education) to learning (student-focused, empowering education): the writing across the curriculum movement, 'active learning' approaches, and out-of the classroom learning activities. All stress learning from the learner's experiences rather than re-creating in the learner the instructor's 'knowledge.'

The writing across the curriculum movement is a shift from students 'taking notes' in a lecture setting to learners responding, in their own words and in their own constructions, to materials they read or activities they engage in. Composing their own responses and crafting their own understandings is no longer restricted to 'composition' classes or to writing essays that reiterate the texts they are reading. Rather, writing, in all their classes, becomes an avenue into the materials students are engaging. The writing through the curriculum movement stresses learners as constructors or creators of their learning.

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[3] Exemplary alumni of Horton's Highlander Center include Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hammer, and Rosa Parks.

Among a rich scholarly literature, the Women's Ways of Learning group provides a powerful examination of 'constructed knowing' via writing and other learner-focused approaches (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1997). Cadwallader and Scarboro provide an early model of applying the writing across the curriculum approach in sociology; they argue that "Better student writing leads the student to a closer, more personal involvement with the discipline through a more active involvement with its ideas, concepts, and information" (1982: 362). Writing across the curriculum has been widely adopted in American higher education but remains rare in Turkish universities.

The active learning model, drawing directly from the work of Montessori and Dewey, can be found throughout primary and early childhood education but is rarer in higher education. Universities continue to be dominated by the lecture (transfer of information) model. The power of active learning, or learning by doing, however, has been shown repeatedly to be associated both with higher student achievement and with higher student engagement in learning [see, for example, Kohl (1994), Angelo (1999), Paul (1999) or Perry (1970), or many others].

Out of classroom activities are particularly powerful in providing an experiential base on which learners construct their own knowing. Out of classroom activities radically de-center the teacher, replacing the teacher as fount of information and expertise with the learner's making sense of her or his actions the crucial activity in experiencing an ambiguous world and employing strategies for bringing organization and sensibility to their observations and experiences. Making sense is the controlling metaphor in this approach: construction rather than mimesis. In out of classroom activities, the teacher becomes more a resource for and less a source of learning. The scholarly literature demonstrating the effectiveness for empowering students as self-teachers and for enhancing student achievement and empowerment is voluminous. For example, Palsson (1994) provides an especially illuminating discussion of the effectiveness of active learning in Icelandic fishing captains gaining expertise through their apprenticeship with experienced, successful captains; Kuh (1995) shows that active learning produces greater student learning than do other approaches; Keith and Moore (1995) as well as McKinney, Saxe and Cobb (1998) offer evidence that active learning leads to higher levels of learner professionalism and attachment to the discipline than do other models; Angelo (1999) summarizes several studies that support the effectiveness of out of classroom learning. Takata and Leiting (1987) and Scarboro (2004) offer illustrative examples of the effectiveness of active learning in the teaching of sociology. Song, Hannafin and Hill summarize several studies that show an inconsistency: while teachers claim a commitment to active learning, they seldom put active learning strategies in practice in their teaching (2007). Ranson *et al.* argue that while active learning fosters the development of self and mind, current educational institutions are not structured in ways that facilitate such strategies (1996).

The scholarly literature is replete with persuasive arguments and compelling evidence demonstrating that the adoption of writing across the curriculum, active learning, and out of the classroom activities benefit students in several ways. They lead to higher academic achievement and promote student success. They shift the power relationship between learner and teacher, leading to learners who take greater responsibility for their learning and thereby increasing their sense of an inner locus of control. They engage students more enthusiastically in their learning. They empower learners not only as learners but as more effective citizens and as activists. They promote a shift from passivity to activity among learners. However, no matter how voluminous the scholarship and no matter how persuasive the evidence of the effectiveness of leaner-centered teaching, higher education has been slow to adopt these methods.

Here, we offer a case study of the adoption of active learning practices in a university in Istanbul. Our case study offers a step by step example of an out of the classroom active learning project.

A Case of Out of the Classroom Active Learning

Active learning best begins by growing out of curiosity, of trying to solve a problem in understanding. This project begins with the problem of understanding street begging in Istanbul and the relationship between beggars and those from whom they beg.

Street beggars are ubiquitous in Istanbul. When the teacher who sponsored this project first moved to Istanbul, he paid little attention to beggars in tourist areas—beggars are common in all the world's tourist destinations. However, when moving to Istanbul not as a tourist, but as a resident, the teacher noticed the prevalence of beggars not only in tourist areas but throughout the city. Beggars stood alongside the buildings lining every busy street, they sat on the steps for the overpasses across major highways, they clustered outside every AVM, and they sat in groups outside mosques. The city has beggars of every description: children and old women and men, blind people singly and in pairs, men displaying ghastly wounds and amputations, young women with babies, men in tattered uniforms. All, to the observer's eye, seemed obviously needy and ill-equipped to survive in Istanbul.

As a yabancı, the teacher watched local people interact with the street beggars, curious about the local norms—how much was a typical donation, how frequently did people give, how did passersby respond to beggars' entreaties and to the blessings beggars offered when they accepted money. Most local people seemed to ignore beggars and gave no money.

Over time, that yabancı curiosity shifted into a sociological perspective: what roles do beggars play in Istanbul society, how do beggars and the economically comfortable interact, and how do people think about the beggars all around them?

For a sociologist, two over-riding questions took shape. First, how does begging function as an occupation. Begging is, after all, work. Begging is hard work: one works outside in the scorching sun and in the winter's frigid sea wind, one works in difficult work environments, begging seems to offer little job security, most people do not hold the work of begging in high esteem, and begging's hours are irregular and inconvenient. A host of features makes begging seem to be an undesirable occupation.

So, do beggars earn lots of money, with a high monetary return offsetting the poor work conditions? Do people enter begging because other employment opportunities are blocked or out of reach? Do people enter begging because other sources of income (pensions, employed spouses, unemployment compensation, etc.) are unavailable or insufficient? Are beggars otherwise unable to work? Have beggars been abandoned by their families? Are beggars vulnerable people being exploited by others? And, overall, how does begging fit into Turkey's economic miracle?

Second, how does begging fit into the religious setting of Istanbul. Istanbul and Turkey are home to a large population of pious Muslims. Questions of how Islam in Turkey fits into the civic, the public, and the economic spheres are constantly in the air, with many people in Istanbul seeing Turkey as a model for other predominantly Muslim societies.

Beggars seemed to offer a neat opportunity: one of the Five Pillars of Islam is Zakat (Zekat). According to Wikipedia, zakat "or alms-giving is the practice of charitable giving by Muslims … and is obligatory for all who are able to do so. It is considered to be a personal responsibility for Muslims to ease economic hardship for others and eliminate inequality."

Zakat and begging seemed to go together in two fundamental ways: first, the purpose of zakat is "to ease the economic hardship of others." Second, Zakat is a "personal responsibility" and the benefits of Zakat adhere to the giver as much if not more than to the recipient. That "it is more blessed to give than to receive" was noted centuries ago. Would people here give generously to street beggars both to provide economic support and as acts of piety?

Begging, then, can serve two important functions: to provide economic subsistence to those with few other options and to provide an opportunity for pious Muslims to meet a religious obligation. What a neat coincidence, the sociological mind noted.

Sociological puzzles are, of course, the heart of this teacher's work. Further, the teacher teaches sociological research methods—the art and practice of untangling sociological puzzles. More than forty students were enrolled this spring in the research methods class, eager to learn how to do sociological research. What better way to learn than by doing?

The teacher's curiosity about begging in Istanbul, a sociological question arising from the teacher's lived environment, then provided the setting for active learning: a 'real' question in the life world shared by teacher and students. The teacher then shared the sociological puzzle with students and both agreed to spend the semester investigating street beggars in Istanbul and their interactions with more fortunate İstanbullular. We would apply our growing research skills to learn more about beggars and more about what other people thought about beggars. So our search began, each an exercise in active, learner focused out of classroom activities.

We started by seeing what others had found out. Each student located several articles, half in Turkish and half in English, including both popular media and scholarly sources.

The popular media consistently painted one of three images: first, many accounts focused on stories of unscrupulous persons, sometimes parents, sometimes unrelated adults, who force children into begging, exploiting the children to the benefits of the nefarious adults. Second, reporters and other interested people highlighted beggars who 'made fortunes' through their begging. Third, and less frequently, stories focused on the dangers of begging, especially to children. A typical story tells of a young beggar being beaten up by others or dying in traffic accidents.

Almost all the popular accounts paint very negative pictures: none praise the ingenuity or perseverance of beggars and none focus on the economic deprivation that could lead one to begging. Beggars are seen as a nuisance or a menace, preying on the solicitude of others. The scholarly reports tend to look at the dangers (disease, malnutrition, physical risks) of begging, on the economic forces that make begging a reasonable option, or on efforts to police or control beggars.

Neither of these two sources confirmed what I saw on my daily travel through Istanbul. The puzzle deepened.

As the next step in our active learning, each student each spent an hour observing beggars on the streets of various neighborhoods of Istanbul. The students paid special attention to the interactions between beggars and passersby. Their reports confirmed that beggars frequent certain locations (outside mosques, near shopping centers, near Metrobüs, Metro, and tram stations, on busy streets, near street markets); most beggars were alone rather than in groups; most beggars were adults, or were babies or children accompanied by someone who appeared to be their mother; beggars were both male and female; nearly all women beggars were covered.

Observation is a tricky strategy: one must learn to be observant, one must make careful records, one must be careful to keep one's own feelings out of the way of careful watching, and one must look and look again. The following week, the students returned to the same locale for another hour of observation.

From the two hours of observation of more than forty students, some themes began to emerge. Begging was hard work. Successful beggars wore clothing that signaled their poverty and need. Istanbul beggars presented themselves as pious people. Most passersby ignored beggars. Some passersby made rude comments or used rude gestures to beggars—beggars were not esteemed. Some passersby gave money or food to beggars. But most often, passersby treated beggars like smelly pieces of furniture.

This process of developing themes or sociological regularities grew from student activities and demonstrate students drawing conclusions from their disciplined activities: this was not a re-creation of what the teacher already knew ('mimesis) but a knowing constructed by the students.

A sociological technique for understanding a social situation is 'to take the role of the other'—to attempt to experience the situation from the perspective of the people we are trying to understand. We learn about others from walking a mile in their shoes.

When told that for their next assignment students would beg for an hour on the street, they responded with howls of disbelief. They said would be embarrassed and ashamed, that they did not want anyone to think they were dirty or poor. What would their families think? In fact, in the next class period, several students said a member of their family asked if all sociologists were crazy or just American ones.

But these were budding sociologists so they set themselves to the task. They begged near the same place they had observed. They took a partner when they begged, to keep a watch over them and to watch the interactions between the novice beggars and the passersby. In addition, the partner took a series of photographs which were later used to review the project.

The students began to prepare: they rummaged for old clothes, they posed in front of mirrors, they rehearsed what they would say, and they asked their families for advice. They were nervous but they were troopers—the closer their date with begging came, the more they began to think about the begging role and the people who filled that role.

Begging was an eye-opening experience for the students and our understanding of beggars was suddenly much richer. These beggars noted first how very hard it was to beg—not just physically, but also psychologically, emotionally and in terms of self-esteem.

To adopt a posture announcing one's needfulness and dependency was a shock to the students' self-image. Laying aside garb from Vakko, LTB and Hotiç in favor of old worn clothing, finding a headscarf that looked shabby, leaving ones iPhone at home—putting on the image of a beggar conflicted with self conceptions of comfortable, fashionable university students.

Second, the students noticed how few people were willing to give them money (maybe they did not try hard enough). Many of the student beggars collected no money in an hour of begging in busy locations. Most who did receive money earned less than 3 TL for an hour's work. Our most successful beggar collected a grand total of 5 TL. At that rate, a forty hour work week of begging would earn 200 TL. While that approaches minimum wage in Turkey, it is not a windfall. Clearly these students would have to work very much harder to make a fortune through begging. None of the students changed their career plans.

Their observations and begging episodes led the students to a greater appreciation of the difficulties of begging but they also shifted our attention to how passersby thought about beggars: what were the images of beggars among everyday İstanbullular? What was going through their minds as they encountered beggars?

Our research efforts turned then to the passersby. We developed a set of interview questions and each student interviewed ten passersby. Our goal was to collect roughly equal numbers of male and female respondents ranging in age from young adults to elderly. We did not interview anyone under the age of 18 and we tried to find equal numbers of respondents over the age of 50 and under the age of 50. Our researchers identified themselves as sociology students from our university and asked for a few minutes of time. Many pedestrians declined to be interviewed, but a hundred and ten were willing to answer our questions.

Two of the students' questions in particular were telling. First, respondents were asked to state the first four words that came to their minds when they thought of beggars. Then from that list, they were asked to pick the one word that the respondent thought was most characteristic of street beggars. (The interviews were in Turkish; the students translated the terms into English.)

The most frequent terms described beggars in very unfavorable words, with 'Liar' as the single most frequent word followed by 'Dishonest.' More than half the people interviewed did not believe beggars were truly in need and deserving of help.

Another set of respondents chose 'Shameless' to describe beggars and others chose 'Lazy.' Clearly, most passersby my students interviewed feel no moral claim from beggars and thus feel no obligation to provide assistance to them.

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A much smaller number of respondents chose words that do not carry moral condemnation. Among the interviewees, the most frequent non-moral term described beggars as 'Miserable,' followed by 'Neglected' and a smaller number described beggars as 'Disabled' or 'Elderly.' These terms suggest some degree of empathy or concern for street beggars. These are morally neutral words and perhaps even denote that beggars are deserving of help.

On the whole, though, the İstanbullular we interviewed hold negative, even disparaging, images of street beggars. They do not see street beggars as people down on their luck and deserving of help, but rather as swindlers who seek to manipulate people's feelings of sympathy and care.

Second, in our interviews, we asked if respondents saw giving alms to street beggars as a form of Zakat. Two thirds of the respondents replied that alms-giving to street beggars was not a form of Zakat, while one third thought giving to street beggars was Zakat.

When we analyzed attitudes about Zakat, we found that people with only a primary school education were very unlikely to see giving to street beggars as Zakat (82%), while respondents with a university education were about equally divided in their opinion.

Gender differences in opinion about giving to street beggars and Zakat also emerged in our analysis: men overwhelmingly (about 80%) said that giving to beggars was not a form of Zakat while women were more equally divided (about 60% of the women said giving to street beggars was not Zakat). About half of the university graduates and half of the women interviewed see alms-giving to street beggars as Zakat, while about half do not.

To confirm our interviews and to see further relationships among beggars and passersby, we then developed a survey. Students each gathered data from thirty respondents, gathered throughout the city. At the time of writing this paper, those surveys have not been analyzed.

Conclusions I

What have we learned so far about begging?

Beggars are a part of the Istanbul scene, pursuing their work throughout the city. The beggars we observed do not fit the media images. While some rich beggars may frequent the streets of Istanbul and some beggars may be the exploited victims of schemers, most beggars we saw appeared to work alone or in small groups. Many of the beggars we saw were not fit for the formal workforce—they were too old, too ill, too young, too disabled.

We did not interview beggars, so we do not have information on their levels of education, work experience, family situation, or work skills. Of those we observed, few seemed free from impediments to work. Begging is hard work undertaken under often unpleasant or dangerous conditions. Beggars are not respected, and begging corrodes self-esteem.

People in Istanbul have strong attitudes about beggars. More than two thirds of the people we interviewed used very negative, very disparaging terms to describe beggars and their character and their moral worth. Few people see begging as an occupation, few see it as an acceptable way to meet life's necessities.

Few people in Istanbul see street begging as an opportunity to gain merit through Zakat and rather choose other venues for opportunities to meet their obligation to give to the poor.

Conclusions II

And, what do we learn from this project about out of classroom active learning?

Sociological puzzles are intriguing. As my students moved into deeper involvement with the practice of sociological research, their excitement for sociology grew richer. They became more active as students and they bragged to their friends about their chance to beg, to observe beggars and to come better to know people they had previously largely taken for granted.

Students learned that they too can ask real questions. Sociological questions are not only found in books and lectures, but more importantly that emerge from the 'real lived' world around us and in which we are immersed. Questions emerge from our experiences.

In addition, students learned that they themselves can take on the responsibility for delving into those questions. Not only are their questions important but they are developing the skills to address those questions. Further, the answers that they develop are worthwhile. Students learned to be more autonomous and self-directed, to see themselves as authors of their own understanding. Knowing became more internalized and less dependent on 'authorities' and 'experts.' Thus their education became less alienating and more empowering. The students became more confident in their own expertise and more willing—nay, more eager—to speak their minds. In the Women's Ways of Knowing group's phrase, active learning gave students a greater security and confidence in their own self, voice and mind.

Portability

One concern among teachers and other scholars is the 'portability' of a method or exercise or practice. Is a set of practices limited to one situation or one context? Or can others fruitfully adopt or adapt a method and use it effectively in another setting. Specifically, is the active out of classroom practice we describe useful only in sociology courses at a single university in Istanbul? Or can they be useful as a model in other disciplines in other school settings (other universities, high schools, elementary schools, or outside school settings altogether)?

First, it is important to note that the project described would seem familiar to Paulo Freire's adult students in Brazil or to Maria Montessori's child learners in the slums of Rome or to John Dewey's university students in Chicago or to Myles Horton's social activists in the mountains of Tennessee. Learning and learning practices are widely adaptable and portable.

Second, one can find similar out of the classroom active learning practices in a wide variety of disciplines. The use of 'clinical education' in medicine or internships in teacher training are perhaps the most obvious examples. Clearly these practices can be effective across the disciplinary variety of universities or other schools.

Third, the literature is clear that such practices are very effective in promoting learner agency and are highly effective in propelling student success and achievement.

The project described, we believe, is clearly 'portable.'

We leave it to the reader to infer why this revolution in education, the movement from mimetic to empowering learning moves so slowly.

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