To: Ielleen Miller, GECC Chair  
From: Sean K. Taudin Chabot  
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Subjects: General Education Assessment for SOCI 490 Senior Capstone

ASSESSMENT REPORT
1. Course name & number: Capstone in Sociology, SOCI 490

2. Assessment rubric
The purpose of this course was to synthesize student learning and consider the practical relevance of sociology in the “real world.” Students had to show understanding of sociological ideas and theories during class conversations, and apply these concepts in their writing. The main project in this course asked students to relate key ideas from the book Privilege, Power, and Difference to their personal biographies and social worlds.

Quantitative measures cannot adequately reflect the quality of understanding and application demonstrated by students. To evaluate student learning and progress, I will focus on whether and how students show understanding and apply key ideas. I will give my definition of key ideas here and briefly discuss the quality of understanding and application of each student in the next section. I will include copies of the project essays by 8 Capstone students as qualitative evidence (see highlighted areas for specific examples of understanding and application).

My definitions of key ideas in Allan Johnson’s Privilege, Power, and Difference
1) Social construction of difference
We tend to assume that fear and distrust of people who are different is inevitable and deeply ingrained. The author’s main point is that these differences are not natural or normal, but socially constructed. While differences (including race, class, gender, and sexuality) generally serve the interests of privileged individuals and groups, we can also learn to respect and learn from them.

2) Privilege
As Peggy McIntosh says, privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, not anything they have or haven’t done. Privileged status offers benefits like unearned entitlements, unearned advantages, and the luxury of obliviousness. Privilege is not just personal, but also rooted in societies, organizations, and social categories. This means that we can benefit from a system of privilege without feeling privileged or intentionally oppressing other people.

3) Oppression
Where there is privilege, there is oppression. Oppression limits social opportunities and life chances for some individuals and social groups, favoring others. It results from social relationships between privileged/oppressed social categories. To experience being oppressed, you must belong to an oppressed category. According to Iris Marion Young, there are five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Oppression is closely associated with domination and “power over” (i.e. the ability to impose one’s will despite resistance).

4) Responses and resistance
The first myth that affects people’s responses and resistance to systems of privilege and oppression is: “It’s always been this way, and it always will.” This encourages many people to
take paths of least resistance rather than taking the risks and accepting the discomfort associated with action for social justice. The second myth is called “Gandhi’s paradox,” which suggests that we cannot have an impact on our society unless we are saints. This prevents us from acting in current situations unless we see immediate and personal rewards. The author suggests several courses of action for meaningful social change, including: acknowledge trouble, pay attention, take little risks, make noise/be seen, withdraw support from paths of least resistance, get out of comfort zone, openly follow and model alternative paths, promote change in system’s organization, consider intersections among oppressions, work with other people, and start where you are and expand.

3. Summary of results
Evaluation of student understanding and application (see copies of project essays)

1) Amanda: Shows basic understanding of oppression and “power over,” focusing on children’s voice in relation to parents and coaches. She applies the idea of oppression to children involved in sports and why they are “driven to the point of injustices which can often lead to surgery.” She points out that coaches often control young athletes so much that they don’t feel like they have a choice and just follow orders. She offers suggestions for what parents can do (like ask whether children are having fun, getting along, and feeling healthy), but doesn’t say much about how to resist oppressive power relations and system of privilege. Summary: Amanda shows good understanding of most key ideas and does a good job applying them to her personal experiences and observations as athlete. She could improve by paying more attention to the social construction of difference and resistance.

2) Kenna: Shows clear understanding of privilege, oppression, and “power over,” focusing on how one specific professor dominated her and fellow students by giving vague guidelines, offering little support, and causing high levels of stress. She also illustrates how the department chair defended the professor, thereby reinforcing the unequal system of privilege and oppression, and explains how students with good grades gain privilege and power over other students. She applies the idea of social construction of difference by highlighting the role of class and relates what happens in the classroom to student careers after graduation. She concludes that teachers have too much power to determine the future of students, using grades to reproduce a system of stratification. Summary: Kenna shows deep understanding of key ideas and does a great job applying them to her personal experiences and observations as EWU student. Although she discusses support networks and friendships as coping strategy, she could improve by consider resistance in greater depth and detail.

3) Pamela: Shows how privilege, power, and oppression not only apply to race, but also to sexuality—in particular, to bisexual people. She makes the important point that power is neither good nor bad; what matters is how it’s used. She highlights how invisible oppressions relate to her internal battles and the responses by those around her concerning her sexuality. She illustrates her main points in vivid detail and relates her life stories to social institutions like church, family, and government. She also writes about how she is sticking up for what she knows is right. Summary: Pamela shows good understanding of key ideas and analyzes her own sexuality in considerable depth and detail. She hints at personal resistance, but could say more about collective resistance.

4) Jessica: Shows how physical differences (obesity) are socially constructed and can influence personal and social life. She examines her personal experiences in vivid detail and makes great observations about social pressures and the personal impact of labels and oppression. She
highlights personal responses and resistance, but is also reality about how hard it is to get off the path of least resistance. Summary: Jessica’s essay is particularly strong and original in applying key ideas, but she could do more to show deeper understanding of them.

5) **Isaak**: Shows how privilege applies to people from different social classes and their views on education. He demonstrates clear understanding of key terms and uses them to make sense of his fiancé’s educational experiences. He describes how her parents didn’t value education, saying “what difference does it make,” and how this affected her achievements and relationships at school. He compares her situation with his own, highlighting the role of his parents (who are teachers) in his own learning and educational process. He even relates oppression, power, and privilege to Paulo Freire’s pedagogical theories and considers the “matrix of domination, capitalism, and class status.” He also considers the paths of least resistance and briefly discusses personal responses. Summary: Isaak demonstrates a firm grasp of the key ideas and does a good job applying them to a comparative analysis of his and his partner’s educational life. He could improve by focusing more on resistance.

6) **Avery**: Shows good understanding of how privilege and oppression affect people’s views on higher education, which reproduce unequal class structures. He makes the important point that privileged people have more power to shape what’s normal, what’s “the reality.” He also highlights that the system of capitalism shapes people’s aspirations, motivating many young people to take the paths of least resistance and seek fame and fortune through sports or entertainment. He writes: “The entertainment industry allows children to believe that education is not necessary but rather secondary to wealth and fame.” He concludes that college is for everybody, because it gives people a chance to learn, which is crucial for all social groups. He argues that education allows individuals to develop their own responses and resistance to the system of oppression and privilege. Summary: Avery’s paper is a little fragmented, but it shows an intuitive understanding of the significance of the key ideas of the course. He could improve his project by specifying how key ideas apply to personal experiences and how education might expand opportunities for resistance.

7) **Elroy**: Shows good understanding of privilege and power, recognizing his own “undeserving privileges” as a white, heterosexual male without disabilities. He highlights how his personal experiences relate to our American culture, which needs to break down barriers between privileged and oppressed people. He even proposes a strategy for resistance, arguing that social change must “start from the top,” but could do more to support his ideas. He applies specific forms of oppression—classism, sexism, and racism—to interactions and experiences at a car dealership, and clearly demonstrates how the social construction of difference works. He suggests that the powerful need to transform their belief systems, rooted in language and values, because the efforts by the oppressed have failed to achieve social justice. Summary: Elroy’s paper is original in taking the perspective of the privileged and focusing on a car dealership. He could improve by examining strategies for resistance from multiple perspectives and specifying his illustrations.

8) **Rob**: Shows excellent understanding of privilege and oppression, highlighting race and class differences in the US Navy. He notes how the test deciding what job qualifies structures inequalities and differences from the beginning, because people from relatively privileged social classes and schools generally do better than others. He illustrates in great detail how power and privilege increases opportunities in all aspects of military life, despite the military’s efforts to impose and enforce equality for the purpose of unity toward a common cause. He discusses many subtle and some more explicit manifestations of racism, writing that: “some people just
didn’t know why they were racist…the problem with racism and privilege is it is rooted in societies and groups as much as it is rooted in people’s personalities and how they perceive and react to one another.” This observation demonstrates deep understanding of the author’s arguments. He also points out that racism and oppression not only takes a toll on targeted individuals and groups, but also on the moral integrity of the relatively privileged. He suggests that learning from people from other countries—where competition and individualism is not so brutal—is important for identifying flaws in the Navy as well as in our capitalist system. He concludes with some ideas about how to change systems of privilege and oppression. Summary: Although the writing was not always polished, this essay reflects deep learning by Rob. He offers his own interpretations of key ideas and does a great job applying them to specific examples and situations.

4. Interpretation of the results
This course’s key ideas synthesize what students studied in earlier Sociology courses. As teacher, I was less interested in memorization and reproduction of definitions or facts than in students’ depth of understanding and ability to apply key ideas to specific experiences or situations. Overall, I was very satisfied with the quality of the students’ projects.

After carefully reading each essay, I decided that three of them were outstanding. The essays by Rob, Kenna, and Jessica were not only original and personal, but also demonstrated “sociological imagination,” which is the most important skill of our discipline. They used the knowledge gained as majors in Sociology to develop their own insights and express them in the form of clear, persuasive writing. The essays by Amanda, Pamela, Isaak, Avery, and Elroy were not quite as well-written or powerful, but they also showed adequate understanding and application of the key ideas. I was particularly pleased by the enthusiasm for their subjects that seemed to motivate all of the students. I encourage GECC members to examine the included copies of their essays.

As teacher, I learned that this project inspired students to use their sociological knowledge to make sense of their lives and social worlds. Students were more comfortable analyzing social problems than proposing resistance strategies or possible solutions. In the future, I will focus more on resistance and solutions by assigning additional readings and paying more attention to these areas during class discussions. I will also try to clarify the guidelines for this project and perhaps discuss a few samples of “excellent work” to help students make the most of their abilities. Overall, though, this was one of the most enjoyable and successful courses that I have taught during my seven years at EWU.

To conclude, I want to mention that much of the learning in this course occurred in the form of intimate and honest conversations among students. I have never taught a class where students were more comfortable with each other and with me. This atmosphere had a very positive impact on the quality and educational value of our class dialogues. Although it is impossible to assess these moments of dialogue in the form of a quantitative or qualitative rubrics, I believe they were crucial to the learning process of students. I hope the General Education Coordinating Committee will appreciate and protect the intangible relational aspects of higher education that data will never capture.