

# **Using Focused Web-Based Discussions To Enhance Student Interaction and Deep Understanding**

**Caroline Hodges Persell**  
**Sociology, New York University**  
email: [chp1@nyu.edu](mailto:chp1@nyu.edu)

I wish to thank the Carnegie Foundation  
for supporting this project

# Setting and Questions

- **Undergraduate Senior Sociology Seminar on Race and Education. Large urban private university, 16 students, fall 2000.**
- **Diverse students: 5 whites (1 Italian-American, 1 Irish-American, 1 Russian-American, 1 Greek-American, 1 Jewish-American); 5 blacks (2 African-Americans, 2 Caribbean-Americans, 1 Native American/African-American biracial); 3 Hispanics (1 Puerto Rican-American, one Dominican-American, 1 Chicano); 3 Asian-Americans ( 2 Chinese-Americans, 1 Korean-American).**
- **Several pedagogical questions guided this study.**

# **Pedagogical problems I**

**hoped to address by using web-based discussion as a supplement to weekly seminar meetings :**

- How to help students to think and write more analytically, sociologically, and with greater complexity.**
- How to encourage students to engage directly with ideas and issues raised in readings and by others.**

# Plan:

- **To have students make structured, weekly, one-page web-based postings focused on a particular issue, using Blackboard.**
- **Students took one of three specific roles: stater, responder, or integrator.**

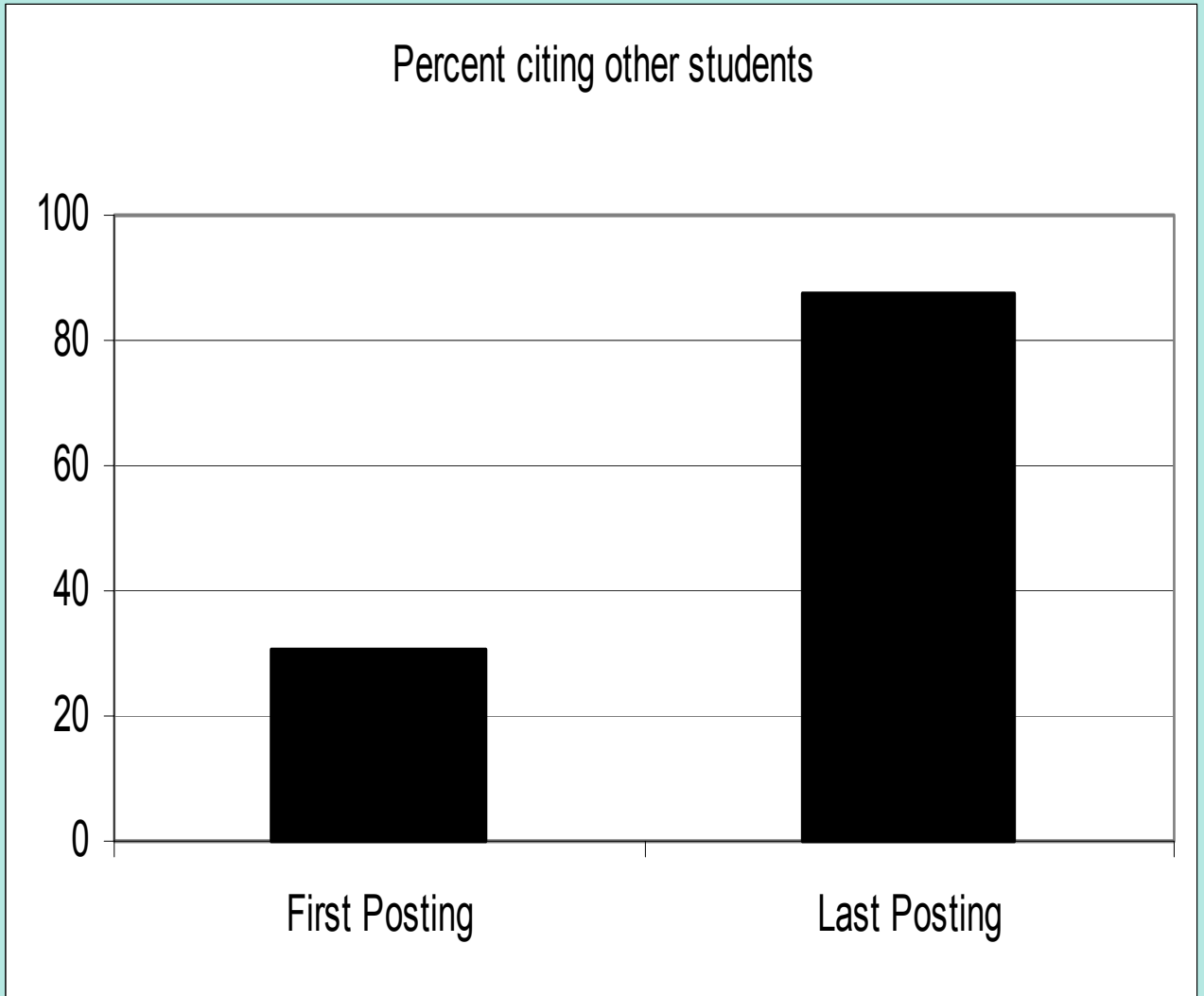
# Roles

- The day before seminar, Staters a) introduced something important they learned from a reading, b) noted what was most difficult or murky about it, and c) raised new sociological questions.
- The day after seminar Responders replied to the ideas posted and posed further sociological questions.
- Two days later, Integrators synthesized what others had said that week and raised new sociological questions.

# **SIGNS OF STUDENT LEARNING**

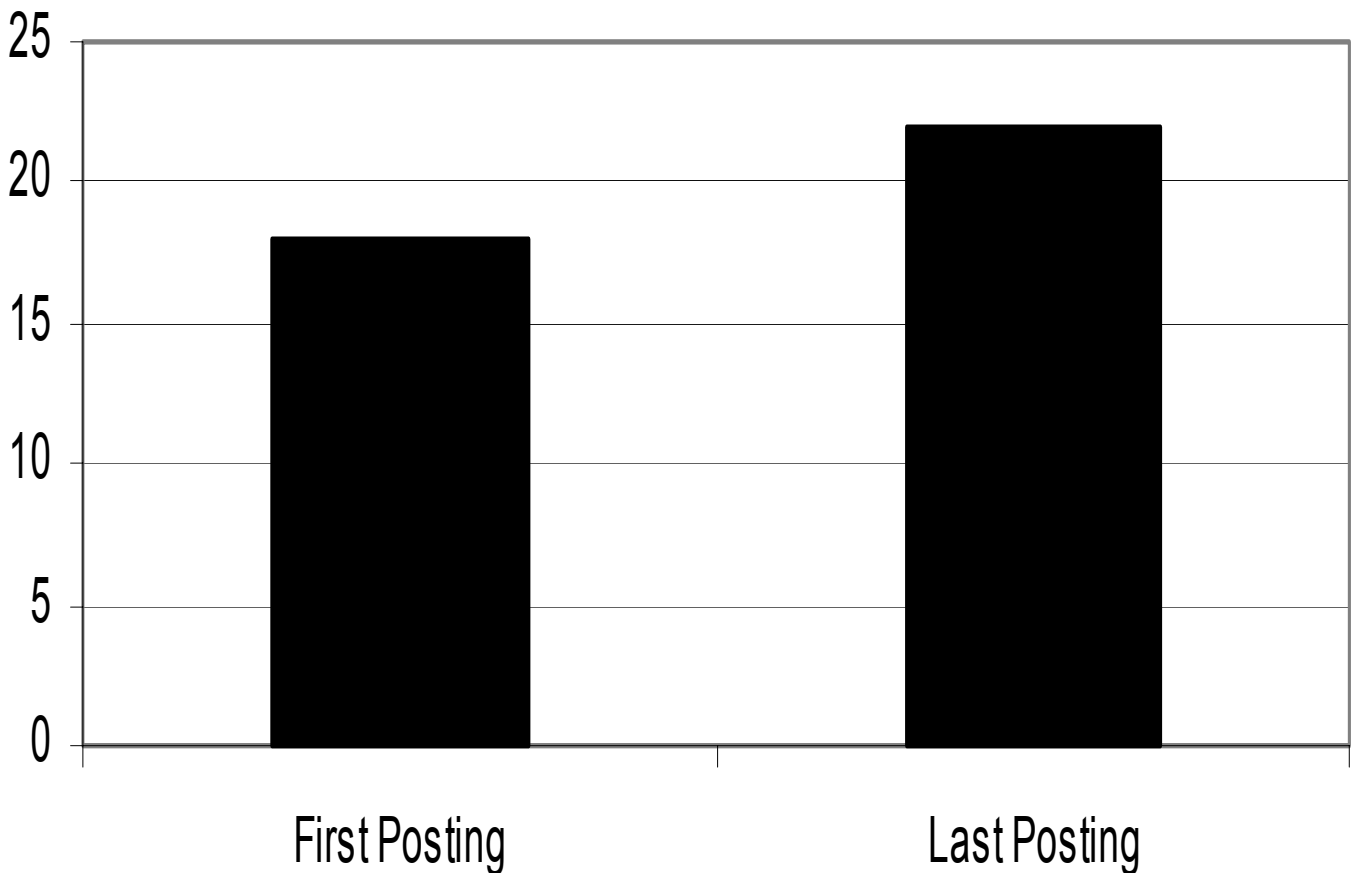
**In their last posting compared to their first one, students were more likely to:**

# cite other students



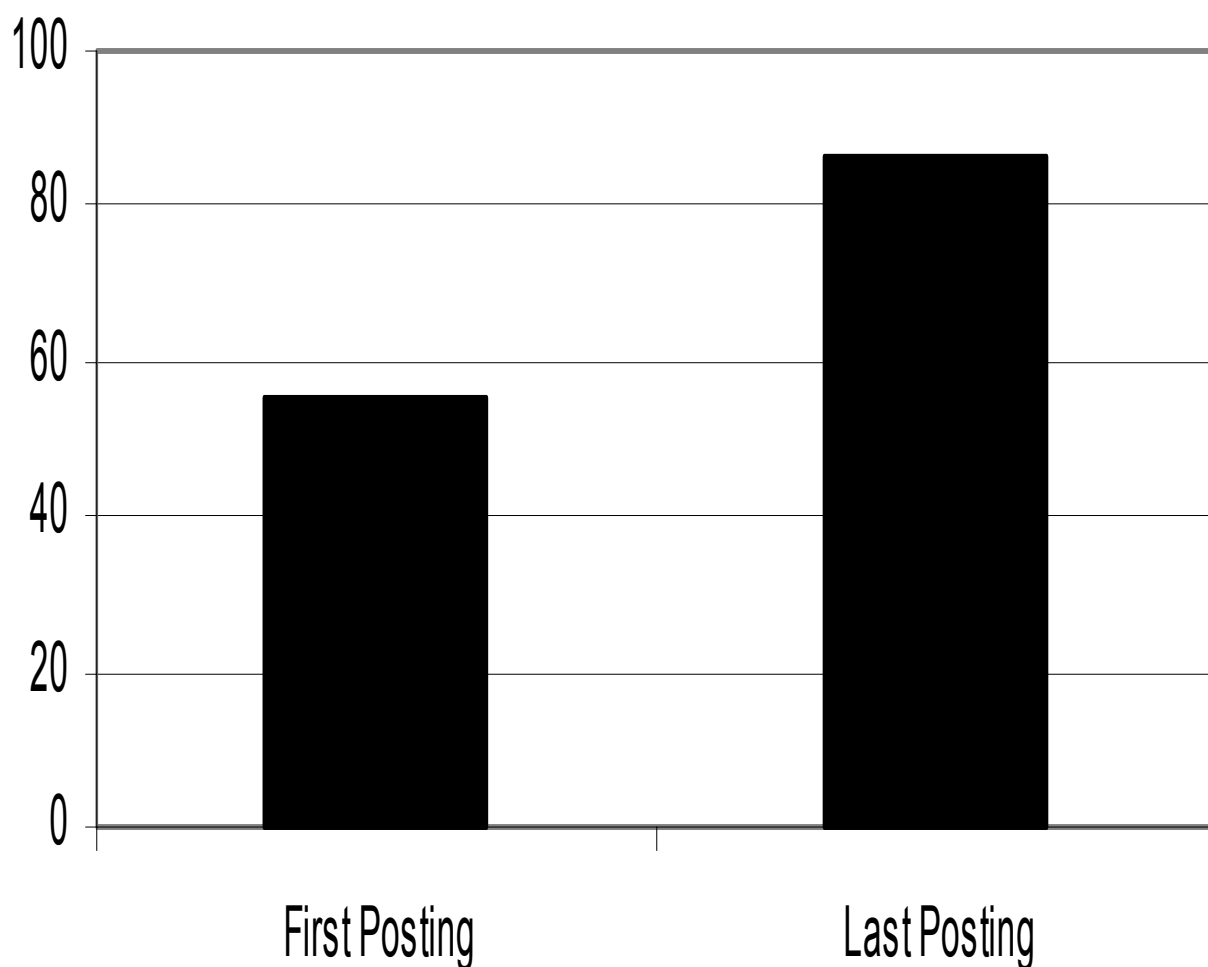
# refer to sociological ideas

Mean references to Sociological Ideas



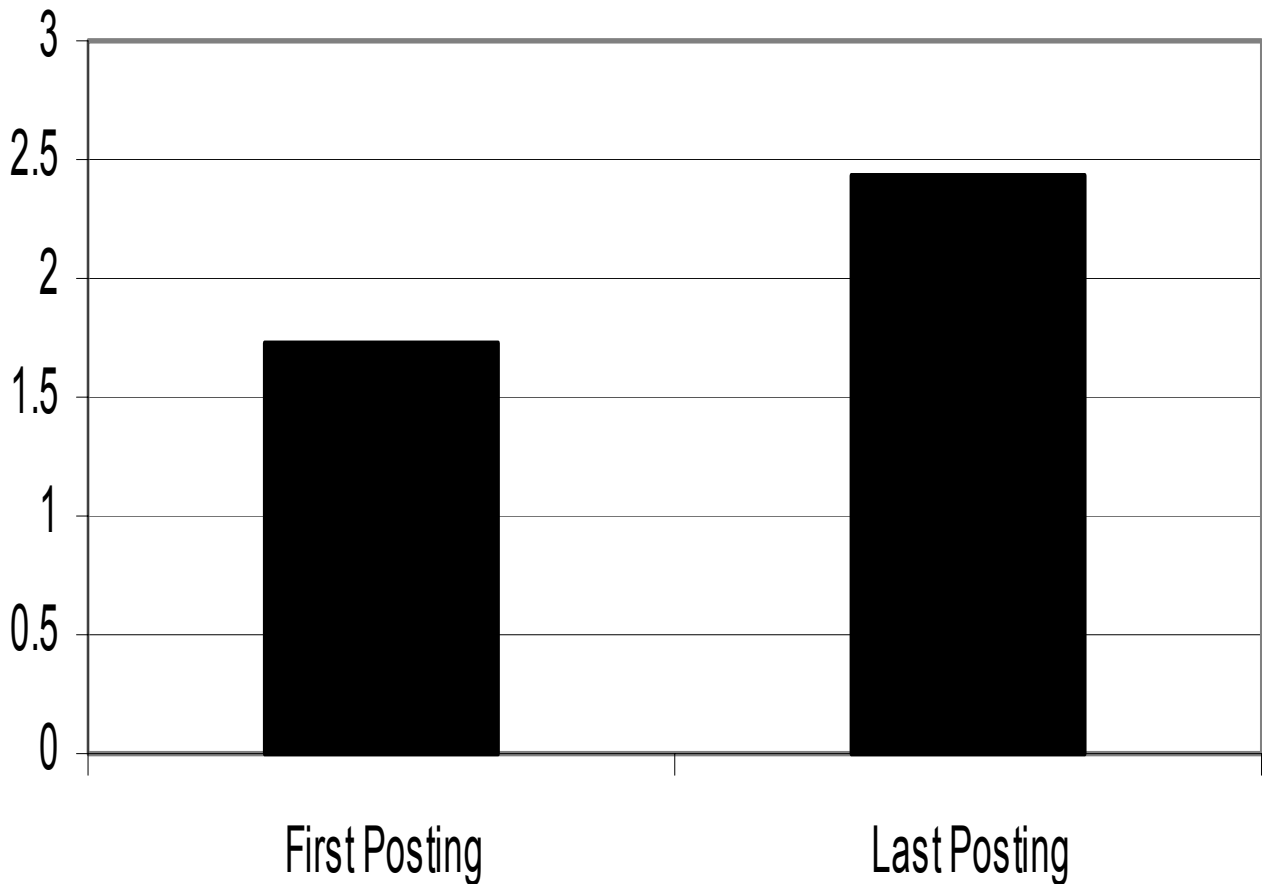
# raise sociological questions

Percent who raised sociological questions



# and their questions revealed greater complexity of thought

Mean complexity of thought score in questions raised



**Example of a posting coded as revealing somewhat less complexity of thought:**

***“But, how are individuals living in our society able to grow up with a clear sense of self and identity when they are sent contradictory and derogatory messages about who they are. As it is, individuals who belong to a certain, definitive group frequently develop a sense of uncertainty of identity as they age because of the prejudice and stereotypes that plague our society. But, it seems almost impossible for individuals who are taught to avoid one group (or pretend not to be a member of that group) to grow up with a proud identity. I guess, Tatum would say that for kids who have some sense of racial identity and who choose to sit at the cafeteria table with others of the same race serve an important role of reaffirming their identity-- of creating pride in their heritage. And, in that sense, her analogy with the cafeteria table seems to make perfect sense.”***

**(07)**

**An example showing greater complexity:**

***“And if people take this book's words to heart, what would be the implications? For example, in Chapter 5 Tatum mentions considerable evidence that Black students at historically Black colleges and universities achieve higher academic performance, enjoy greater social involvement, and aspire to higher occupational goals than do their peers at predominately White institutions (p. 79). Should Black students be encouraged to go to Black colleges? And even if such would be better for students on an individual level, what will be the larger social implications? If Blacks are better off-- perhaps even best off-- when interacting with other Blacks does this suggest that various groups are best off only socializing intra-, rather than inter-, group? Does such a notion preclude the possibility of a racially-mixed and/or racially-harmonious society once and for all?” (14)***

**Another posting coded as revealing a higher level of complex thinking noted:**

***“Although Tatum is a psychologist, I believe she incorporates a view that is highly sociological within this work. She is addressing society, and all the ethnic groups contained within, and giving a prescription on how to become comfortable with race and openly discuss it. My question is if it does happen that we begin to unload the term 'race' and are able to discuss it, not only within our own racial or ethnic grouping, will that actually work to break down the system of advantages? Will an open discourse of race relations lead to the end of racism? Is this possible?” (11)***

# **7 Processes that helped learning:**

- 1) Time on task (24/7, consulted website at least 3 times per week, curious about what others thought).**
- 2) Involved silent members.**
- 3) Easy to review peers' writings.**
- 4) Saw really good work by peers.**
- 5) Difficulties articulated by some helped others.**
- 6) Multiple comments validated alternative views of readings.**
- 7) Group support for doing work on time.**

# **4 ideas for improving teaching:**

- 1) Underscored value of using "moments of difficulty" strategy.**
- 2) Revealed need for more instructional scaffolding.**
- 3) Raised basic questions about the discipline.**
- 4) Suggested ideas for reorganizing the seminar.**

# **ANY NEGATIVES?**

- **One student said the seminar was too much work. I was surprised it was only one!**
- **Very labor intensive for instructor as well.**

# **Most Successful Aspects?**

- **Greater student involvement**
- **Made student thinking visible**
- **Forced me to slow down and reflect on what I was doing**

# Questions for Further Research

- *Organizational and Institutional Analyses*
  - A) *More Consideration of the Implications of Technology in Higher Education*
  - B) *Need for Organizational Analyses of Higher Education*
- *How do we develop a sociological theory of teaching and learning?*
- *Conditions necessary to “scale up” what we learn?*

# Going Forward:

- **How to apply lessons learned to a much larger Introduction to Sociology course? The time-intensive aspect of web-postings seemed overwhelming.**
- **So, the challenge was to apply the central essence of the lessons learned, by fostering student involvement, making their thinking visible, and allowing time for reflection.**

# Two ways:

- **Short oral group presentations in which they do three things:**
  - a) state the most important understanding they obtained from the reading,**
  - b) identify what they found most murky, and**
  - c) raise new sociological questions.**
- **Short, on-line, electronically-scored quizzes testing their knowledge of the readings.**