

Using a Social Science–Fictional Play to Teach about Global Capitalism and Macro-structural Systems in Introduction to Sociology

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Abstract

This article explores the use of a social science–fictional play to teach macro-structural concepts related to global capitalism and surplus labor in a small and large Introduction to Sociology course. Relying on a cross-disciplinary and critical pedagogical approach that combines theory and practice to empower students to develop a critical consciousness of the world around them, the authors develop an active learning exercise centered on an in-class reading of the dystopian play *I Like Firing People* written by sociologists Charles Derber and Yale Magrass. To assess the effectiveness of the exercise to increase student engagement and conceptual learning, the authors use quantitative and qualitative data and a quasi-experimental research design. Even with the mixed findings, the reading of an evocative social scientific fictional play coupled with short writing exercises and class discussions appears to assist in making macro-structural systems more visible and real to students and offers a unique role-playing opportunity that highlights multiple perspectives on the global capitalist economy.

Keywords

active learning exercise, macro-structural systems, social science–fictional play, student engagement, conceptual learning

All educators, including those who teach sociology, struggle with the question of how to increase student engagement and conceptual learning. Teaching about macro-structural systems such as the political economy, capitalism, globalization, and the labor market in an undergraduate Introduction to Sociology course can be particularly challenging when students are micro-level focused, inexperienced in the labor market, and unaware of how macro-structural forces influence their daily lives (see Saunders 1991; Smith 1991). Moreover, the lack of a future orientation of the national social studies curriculum in the United States (Marker 2006) suggests that students entering an Introduction to Sociology course in college may not have had any educational-based opportunities to grapple with current and/or future social

problems related to our global economic system. To address this dilemma, we developed an innovative pedagogical strategy that uses Charles Derber and Yale Magrass's (2012) social science–fictional play, *I Like Firing People*, to help teach sociological concepts and debates related to the U.S. political economy. We adopt a critical pedagogical approach that combines theory and practice to

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empower students to develop a critical consciousness of the world around them (Freire [1970] 1994; Weber 2010). This article discusses our experiences with staging an in-class reading of the social science-fictional play and presents an assessment of the effectiveness of this active learning exercise.

Research on the pedagogical benefits of using nontraditional texts to enhance student engagement and learning in sociology courses is now quite substantial (e.g., Castellano, DeAngelis, and Clark-Ibáñez 2008; Coser 1963; Sullivan 1982). The scholarship on teaching and learning (SoTL) also abounds with research demonstrating that active learning exercises and “active” classrooms enhance student engagement and learning (Faust and Paulson 1998; Levy and Merenstein 2005; Lewis 2004; Reger and Dugan 2001; Wilson and Reiser 1982). Sociology instructors teaching Introduction to Sociology also emphasize the pedagogical goal of nurturing critical thinking capacities of their students (Rickles et al. 2013; Shepelak, Curry-Jackson, and Moore 1992). Drawing on insights from the SoTL in sociology and critical multicultural education, we conducted a mixed methods assessment to answer three research questions:

Research Question 1: Does a collective reading and role-playing of a social science-fictional play in an undergraduate Introduction to Sociology course enhance student engagement with concepts, theories, and debates surrounding surplus labor and global capitalism?

Research Question 2: Does utilizing a social science-fictional play enhance students’ conceptual learning of macro-structural concepts of the U.S. political economy, capitalism, economic elites, the labor market, multinational corporations, and globalization?

Research Question 3: Is this pedagogical strategy effective in both a large class and a small class of Introduction to Sociology?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1963, Lewis Coser published an anthology titled *Sociology through Literature*, which argues that the use of literature is an effective pedagogical strategy to teach sociological concepts and perspectives. In the early 1980s, Teresa Sullivan (1982) published a study that found that 83 percent of her students in her Introduction to Sociology class reported that they preferred the use of literature to the traditional lecture/textbook course format, which they perceived as dry and boring. Over the past decades,

sociologists have continued to look to novels, science fiction, cartoons, poetry, and other fictionalized texts as a means through which to teach sociological concepts and ideas (e.g., Hartman 2005; Kasinitz 2009; Laz 1996; Moran 1999; Scanlan and Feinberg 2000; Weber 2010). More recently, and in connection with the moves toward public sociology, sociologists have looked to social science-fiction in particular to provide accessible sociological accounts of the social world (see Kasinitz 2009; Penfold-Mounce, Beer, and Burrows 2011; Richardson 2000). Castellano et al. (2008:249) examine multiple strategies of using nontraditional texts in the classroom and found that such strategies can “foster students’ analytical and critical thinking skills,” especially if students can relate to the reading on a personal level. They recommend that instructors be sensitive to the reading load and provide structured guidelines to maximize student learning.

As mentioned previously, fostering an “active” classroom through employing active learning assignments can be an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing student engagement and learning (Bean 2011). Active learning can be summarized as any classroom activity students engage in beyond passive listening and contributes to their academic preparation for successive courses (Faust and Paulson 1998). While there is evidence that lecturing can be as effective as some active learning approaches (Huggins and Stamatel 2015), involvement of students as active participants can improve student attitudes and critical thinking skills, and such opportunities assist students in self-directed learning so they can better evaluate evidence and assess information from multiple sources to articulate their understanding (Cavanagh 2011). These advantages increase when students are able to engage varied roles and viewpoints, the activities are genuine and socially reflective, and students have to communicate their ideas in ways that reflect multiple perspectives (Herrington and Herrington 2006; Kitzerow 1990). Shor (1992:169) found that students can critically engage course material and consider the “deep meanings, personal implications, and social consequences” through role-playing in the classroom.

Sociology instructors have looked to active learning exercises of drama and group writing projects in a variety of sociology courses to enhance learning outcomes through engaging multiple perspectives and an opportunity to role-play (S. M. Alexander and Sullivan 1996; Gordy and Peary 2005; Lackey 1994). For example, Hardy (1989:

227) used a group drama project as a critical pedagogy in a required sociology of education course to provide future teachers with “the opportunity to gain a deeper insight into some of the central concepts and issues of the course, helping them to recognize the constraints on their actions as teachers and the possibilities for their participation in social change.” Likewise, in a sociology theory course, Eglitis (2010) asks groups of students to write and perform “theory plays” that “star” social theorists. She argues that the active learning exercise is effective because the students “must have an understanding of the theorists’ perspectives, the ability to apply the perspectives to a given issue and context, and the depth of comprehension to imagine the active interactions of these perspectives” (Eglitis 2010:344). Sociologists themselves have also turned to writing social science–fiction and/or performance ethnography to more effectively communicate sociological knowledge to diverse audiences (Denzin 2003; Richardson 1990, 1994, 2000). Richardson (2000:11) advocates for the use of evocative representations in sociological writing that “deploy literary devices to recreate lived experience and evoke emotional responses.” Within education, scholar Tara Goldstein (2012) writes and produces research-informed theatre as a way to bring role-playing and creativity into the classroom.

Given these theoretical and empirical insights, we developed an Introduction to Sociology teaching module on the U.S. political economy that centers on students taking roles of real and fictionalized characters in a social science–fictional play about the global capitalist economy and surplus labor. In what follows, we briefly discuss the impetus of developing this innovative teaching strategy, the play itself, its pedagogical benefits, as well as the process of staging an in-class reading. Next, we outline our methodology and analytical strategy to assess the level and nature of student engagement and conceptual learning before and after the in-class reading of the play. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

WHY THIS SOCIAL SCIENCE–FICTIONAL PLAY?

During the fall of 2014, while teaching concepts and theories related to the U.S. political economy in Introduction to Sociology, the first author became uncomfortably dissatisfied with her pedagogical approach and the resulting lackluster class

discussions of pressing social issues. It was clear neither the assigned textbook chapters on macro-level structures of society and stratification nor her enthusiastic interactive lectures were sufficiently engaging the students. Cynthia committed to finding a new reading to add to the syllabus and to developing an active learning exercise. When she read Derber and Magrass’s (2012) book, *The Surplus American: How the 1% Is Making Us Redundant*, and found the fictionalized play *I Like Firing People* at the end of the book, she knew she found what she was looking for.

In their book, Derber and Magrass (2012) consider how globalized corporate–capitalism increasingly renders people in the United States jobless and redundant. In the first half of the book, they offer an academic analysis of the U.S. political economy based on the work of economists and a history of surplus people in the United States. In the second half of the text, they present two versions of the fictional play, *I Like Firing People*, that satirize the irrationality of the current global economic system. Derber and Magrass (2012:95) were motivated to write the play to sharpen their argument and communicate their ideas in “a form that is comic, visceral, and speaks to the emotions” of the reader/audience. They position their project in the long tradition of political writers who move beyond the limits of the traditional book genre to theater in hopes of reaching the human spirit as a mechanism of political mobilization.

We used the shorter version of the three-act dystopian play that Derber and Magrass (2012) wrote and previously staged at Boston College. The play grapples with and dramatizes the interests and practices of economic elites and state policymakers and argues that hope for social change can be found in social movements that challenge the unprecedented concentrations of wealth, power, and control in our society (see M. Alexander 2010; Norton and Ariely 2011). Act I is set in 2020 and includes two scenes; Scene 1 is “The Teleconference” with economic elites and state political leaders who have gathered to discuss the national management of the surplus population, and Scene 2 is “The New Jersey Surplus People Retention Center, Two Hours Later.” Act II takes the reader/audience back 10 years to the economic meltdown of the great recession (2008–2012), and Act III returns to the second day of “The Teleconference” and the growing protests in the streets of 2020. The following abbreviated excerpt from Act I Scene 2 (Derber and Magrass 2012:199–201) shows how the authors use satirical and theatrical devices to build their

sociological argument of the irrationality of the global economic system.

Setting: New Jersey Surplus People Retention Center, 2020

Guardian of Emigration: Ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to update you on our Emigration Initiative. As you know, in 2018, the president announced formally our transition from an immigration to an emigration society. This reflected the trends of almost a decade, which led more and more surplus Americans to look for jobs in China, India, Brazil, or other foreign countries. This was especially true of educated young people, who couldn't get jobs here and desperately needed to pay back student loans. Once they realized their degrees meant a big zero in the US, they may have felt betrayed, but young people see the world as their big stage, and they always feel hopeful.

Sendu Packing CEO: I know the president has explained the new Emigration Initiative to the nation, indicating the way the US is prepared to help those with the boldness and entrepreneurial spirit to find jobs in other societies. He knows that these workers may end up working for US companies operating in other countries, of course, at far lower wages than they would pay in the US itself. It's a win-win as far as the young people are concerned. They finally get a job while also getting to see the world.

Bill Gateskeeper: But, Guardian of Emigration, how do you select and reeducate people for emigration in the retention centers?

Guardian of Emigration: We want to select as many worthy residents as possible—and even many of the unworthy—for emigration. Getting them out of the US in large numbers, as fast as possible, will stabilize the nation and tamp down the conditions giving rise to the mobs out there.

Donal Trumpcard: This seems a fitting punishment for the surplus rabble. If it were up to me, I'd load these folks up in spaceships and send them off to Pluto. [*Loud laughter heard from the teleconference participants.*]

Guardian of Emigration: Actually, we are coordinating with NASA to discover whether there are cost-efficient ways to send significant numbers of surplus people off the earth into space, Trumpcard. Space travel is becoming more commercially viable, and the population and surplus crises are becoming too intractable...

Narrator: Look, here's the ghost of the great nineteenth-century social theorist, Karl Marx.

[*Twilight Zone music plays and lights flash on and off.*]

Karl Marx: Even Malthus would have found you all barbarians as you happily discuss this absurdity.

Sendu Packing CEO: What is this strange apparition? A ghost playing Karl Marx, of all spooks? [*Laughter from the teleconference participants.*]

Karl Marx: You may all laugh. But my spirit lives on—and will as long as capitalism continues to survive and brutalize the world's people. Those people out there on the street are the victims I predicted your ruthless system would produce. I am still a specter haunting your global system, which is doomed by its own successes.

Sendu Packing CEO: Marx, if you are really his spirit, you're irrelevant today. Nobody believes in you. You're living still in the nineteenth century. But let's pretend to take your absurd ideas seriously. As one of the world's great entrepreneurs, I've always been willing to entertain the unimaginable—which is how I see your presence as a ghost. But think, then, you foolish ghost Marx. You, yourself, knew that capitalism has to expand everywhere—and now outer space is a possibility... I am happy to consider hiring the worthy surplus in my plants in China and India, as long as they accept the wages and hours I require there.

Goldman Sacker: I feel the same way. As we downsize on Wall Street, many of our laid-off workers are good candidates for jobs with us in Rio or Shanghai.

Guardian of Emigration: This is precisely the priority for our emigration policies in the retention centers. We carefully screen our residents to find the most worthy, those who could be productive workers for Goldman Sacker or Sendu Packing.

As illustrated through this excerpt, this social science-fictional play offers a comical dialogue between real and fictionalized characters and engages absurd ideas about our political economy to spark critical thinking about the motivations of economic elites and state actors and the problem of our growing jobless global economy.

Based on the existing scholarship and our pedagogical experiences, we identify numerous pedagogical benefits of this social science-fictional play for increasing student engagement and conceptual learning of sociological concepts and ideas. First, the fictional play serves as a useful complement to the two dispassionate and definition-based textbook chapters that discuss macro-structural

concepts. *I Like Firing People* engages multiple perspectives and presents a distinct and clear sociological argument that students can understand as relevant to their current and future lives (S. M. Alexander and Sullivan 1996; Marker 2006; Misra 2000). In fact, as shown previously, the financial challenges they face as college students are explicitly written into the play. Second, the humorous quality of this dystopian play helps to create a safe way for students to examine, reflect, and dialogue about controversial ideas (Laz 1996; Malott and Pruyun 2006; Sleeter and McLaren 1995). Third, the in-class reading offers students' role-playing opportunities, which have been shown to increase student engagement and conceptual learning (Herrington and Herrington 2006; Kitzerow 1990; Shor 1992). Finally, unlike most fictional writing (e.g., novels and cartoons) that have been used in sociology courses, this nontraditional text is written by sociologists for the expressed purpose of effectively communicating complex sociological ideas regarding pressing social dilemmas (Goldstein 2012; Richardson 1994). In other words, this social science-fictional play is tailor-made for effectively teaching macro-structural concepts of globalization, political economy, capitalism, surplus labor, economic elites, state political actors, and outsourcing in an Introduction to Sociology course. Derber and Magrass (2012) have done the hard work of writing a compelling and culturally relevant play about the global capitalist economy, and thus the instructor's task is to simply "stage" an in-class reading of the play.

STAGING THE PLAY

In this section, we outline the pedagogical procedures and process we employed to stage the play in one large ($N = 75$) and one small class ($N = 30$) of Introduction to Sociology.¹ To prepare for the in-class reading, students were asked to read the first three chapters of Derber and Magrass's (2012) book *The Surplus American*, which introduced the premise and goals of the book. For the in-class reading, students were required to read the lines of a character in at least one scene. The points earned for "reading a role" were minimal so that a student's nonparticipation did not substantively impact his or her course grade. Although it was time-consuming, we kept track of the names of the students participating in each scene so that points could be assigned. All students were provided with an electronic copy of the script prior to the in-class reading and a hard copy during the class and were

encouraged to read along as the lines were read aloud. We created nameplates of each of the characters to place in front of the person reading the role. During the reading of a scene, Cynthia read the narrator's lines, and Stacey managed the audio-visual PowerPoint presentation of sound effects and images that she created to set the scene for each act. The slides included visuals that were meant to complement or identify the setting (e.g., inside the teleconference, protest scenes outside the conference) or characters being represented (e.g., images of Foucault and Marx), as well as audio clips used to reflect the stage notes (e.g., applause, voices in the crowd, laughter, *Twilight Zone* music).

On the first day of reading the play, we engaged the students in a mini-lesson on what it means to think critically. We started by asking students what they thought thinking critically meant. Then after a brief discussion, we introduced six basic questions for students to remember—who/what/when/where/why/how—as a basis for summarizing, analyzing, assessing, deconstructing, and thinking critically about texts and/or social phenomena. Next, we assigned roles to students, which was the most difficult part of carrying out the in-class reading, especially in the large class. To facilitate role assignments, we created character lists for each scene/act, organizing the lists by four main character types and indicating which roles were major and which were minor. The characters include:

1. state policy actors, including both fictional and fictionalized characters of real governmental actors (e.g., Yourall Fired, Secretary of the Department of Surplus People, Larry Summit, Senior Economic Advisor to the President);
2. economic elites (the 1%), including fictional and fictionalized characters of real people who controlled large corporations, banks, and other financial institutions (e.g., Maura Lee Bankrupt, Chamberpot Commerce, Warren Buffer, and Mutt Banecapital);
3. social theorists, including real social theorists (e.g., Karl Marx, C. Wright Mills, and Michel Foucault); and
4. street protestors (the 99%) and various other characters such as Surplus resident and the Ghost of the Surplus Past.

Before reading Act I and Act II, we called for volunteers to play the needed number of characters. Students wanting to play state policy actors, economic elites, social theorists, and street protestors

were grouped together and given the task of dividing up the roles. Having students choose their character in groups was meant to empower students by giving them the choice of a role that was of personal interest and to lessen potential apprehension about reading the lines aloud. This was particularly important to us given that for a significant percentage of our students, Spanish is their first language, not English. Based on the animated interactions we observed between the students, the group process seemed to create a sense of “not being alone” in this active learning exercise. For the final act, we assigned the roles before the class meeting since the number of students who had not yet read a role was smaller and finite. This however proved difficult due to student absences on that day.

Directly after each act, we employed a write-pair-and-share exercise designed to deepen learning and nurture critical thinking skills (Bean 2011; Rickles et al. 2013). Students were asked to write responses to a set of discussion and reflection questions we provided and then pair up with another student to share their answers. The questions for Act I included: What does the play tell you about the world you live in or are likely to live in? What would it be like to be part of the 1%? What would it be like to be considered surplus? What are the goals of each side? What problems does each side face? The questions for Act II included: What emotional reactions do you have about the play? What do you think about the play’s argument about surplus people? What criticisms do you have of the play? What do you like most about the play? The questions after Act III included: What argument do Derber and Magrass (2012) put forth in their book and the play regarding the U.S. global capitalist economy of the twenty-first century? Why do they think that the current U.S. political economy is an irrational system? According to the play *I Like Firing People*, what logic, beliefs, values, and ideas do the power elite hold, and what social institutions and institutionalized practices support the current globalized capitalist system?

For this activity in the larger class, students created their own groups of three to five students and took 15 to 20 minutes to discuss their responses as we walked around the room listening, observing, and answering any questions. In the smaller class, students paired up with their neighbor and were given 10 to 15 minutes to discuss their responses with each other. When time allowed after the write-pair-share exercise, we facilitated a larger class discussion of the main points of the act. In general, the in-class reading, the write-pair-share exercises, and class discussions were more challenging the first time we staged the in-class reading of the play in

the larger class. The second time around, in the smaller class with plenty of time and fewer students, the logistical and pedagogical process unfolded more smoothly.

ASSESSING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

To assess the effectiveness of using an in-class reading of the social science-fictional play, we employed a multi-methods approach and a quasi-experimental research design. We administered a pretest survey and a posttest survey one week prior to and one week after the in-class reading of the play. We assumed that the students did not read Derber and Magrass’s (2012) book or play before taking the pretest survey and that they had at least a vague sense of sociological concepts related to the political economy. The survey instrument included six indirect quantitative measures of student engagement, six indirect quantitative measures of conceptual learning, and an additional three open-ended questions on the post-survey to gauge students’ experiences and feedback. The qualitative survey questions include: Overall, what were the strengths of using the play in this class? Overall, what were the weaknesses of using the play in this class? And, do you have any specific recommendations for how to improve the assignment?

We conceptualize student engagement as a multidimensional construct that refers to a student’s interest in and actual practice of critically thinking about course concepts and ideas. Student engagement can manifest itself as subjective perceptions of one’s engagement, reading the course materials, verbal participation in class, and active note taking (Castellano et al. 2008). We operationalized student engagement as a student’s perception of his or her level of interest in critically thinking about six concepts, including political economy, labor market, outsourcing, U.S. capitalism, globalization, and economic elites. For each concept we asked: “What is your level of interest in critically thinking about *the concept*?” The response categories include a four-point Likert rating scale coded: 1 = no interest, 2 = a little interest, 3 = moderate interest, and 4 = a lot of interest. We make the assumption that students are aware, at least somewhat, of what critical thinking means given that developing critical thinking skills is a stated and discussed learning objective for the course.

We view conceptual learning as a dynamic process of understanding and comprehending concepts and ideas at multiple levels of cognition or thinking (Bloom et al. 1956; Shepelak et al. 1992). Conceptual

learning is measured here indirectly as a student's perception of his or her level of confidence in understanding six sociological concepts. We assume that an increase in self-assurance or confidence in what one knows is related to an increase in conceptual learning. For each concept (political economy, economic elites, U.S. capitalism, surplus labor, multinational corporations, and globalization), we ask: "What is your level of confidence in understanding the concept?" The response categories include a four-point Likert rating scale coded: 1 = not at all confident, 2 = a little confident, 3 = moderately confident, and 4 = extremely confident. We chose to ask students about their level of confidence in their knowledge because we assumed it was a more reliable and valid measure than asking students to subjectively assess their understanding of the concepts, which is likely to be more influenced by social desirability bias.

To determine if there were statistically significant differences between the pretest scores and posttest scores, we conducted paired samples *t* tests for each of the indirect measures. We hypothesize that the posttest scores for each concept will be significantly greater than the pretest scores for the concepts. To analyze the qualitative data from the three open-ended questions, we independently conducted a content analysis of student responses to identify the unique categories of strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations reported by the students. We then reconciled the differences in our coding to determine the frequency of each category. We report only the categories with frequencies that represent at least 5 percent of the sample.

The sampling pool for this assessment consists of 105 students enrolled in two sections of an Introduction to Sociology course at a large public university in the U.S. Southwest. Due to nonparticipation in the pre- and posttest, the final sample size is 77 students, which represents a response rate of 73.3 percent. Reflecting the makeup of the undergraduate student body, women are slightly overrepresented in the course. On average, two-thirds of the students enrolled in this general education course are in their first year of college, and over half of the students are Latina/o, Mexican American, Hispanic, and/or Indigenous.²

FINDINGS

Quantitative Data: Student Engagement

As shown in Table 1, the mean pretest scores for students' engagement with the concepts range from

2.49 to 3.09, indicating that students had more than a little to moderate interest in critically thinking about the macro-structural concepts before the in-class reading of the play. Students were most interested in critically thinking about globalization and least interested in critically thinking about outsourcing. After the in-class reading of the play, the lowest mean score (2.71) was for the concept political economy, and the highest mean score (3.11) was still for the concept globalization. Comparing the mean scores for each concept (political economy, labor market, outsourcing, U.S. capitalism, globalization, and economic elites), we found that the mean posttest scores were all greater than that of the pretest scores. Based on the paired-samples *t* tests, however, the only statistically significant difference was that for the concept of outsourcing. As shown in Table 1, the difference between the pretest score for outsourcing ($M = 2.4935$, $SD = .85$) and the posttest score for outsourcing ($M = 2.8442$, $SD = .79$) was statistically significant at the .01 level, $t(76) = -2.867$, $p = .005$. This demonstrates that after participating in the in-class reading of the play, students were significantly more interested in critically thinking about the concept of outsourcing.

To test if the class size is a factor in our analysis of enhancing student engagement, we repeated the paired-samples *t* tests separately for the large class ($N = 60$) and the small class ($N = 17$). For the large class, the findings were consistent with the findings discussed previously. After the in-class reading, students' interest in critically thinking about outsourcing increased significantly. However, for the smaller class we did not find a significant difference for the concept of outsourcing, which may be due to the small sample size.³

Quantitative Data: Conceptual Learning

The mean pretest scores for students' confidence in understanding the concepts range from 2.01 to 2.63, indicating that students had more than "a little confidence" in their understanding of the macro-structural concepts before the in-class reading of the play. Students were most confident about their understanding of globalization and least confident about the concept of surplus labor. For each concept, the posttest scores were greater than the means of the pretest scores. To test whether the increases in students' confidence in understanding the concepts were statistically significant, we conducted paired-samples *t* tests that compared the differences between the pretest and posttest scores for each concept. As shown in Table 2, four of the six *t*

Table 1. Paired-samples *t* Tests and Descriptive Statistics for Students' Level of Interest in Critically Thinking about Concepts, Measured on a 4-point Likert Scale (1–4) of Increasing Interest (N = 77).

Students' level of interest in critically thinking about...	Pretest Scores		Posttest Scores		Paired Samples <i>t</i> Test		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	Significance	<i>n</i>
Political economy	2.66	.68	2.71	.70	-.646	.520	77
The labor market	2.65	.80	2.76	.75	-1.241	.219	77
Outsourcing	2.49	.85	2.84	.79	-2.867*	.005	77
U.S. capitalism	2.71	.84	2.83	.80	-1.217	.227	77
Globalization	3.09	.86	3.12	.77	-.261	.795	77
Economic elites	2.66	1.00	2.80	.92	-1.054	.295	76

p* < .01.Table 2.** Paired-samples *t* Tests and Descriptive Statistics for Students' Level of Confidence in Understanding Concepts, Measured on a 4-point Scale (1–4) of Increasing Confidence (N = 77).

Students' level of confidence in understanding...	Pretest Scores		Posttest Scores		Paired-samples <i>t</i> Test		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	Significance	<i>n</i>
Political economy	2.17	.80	2.34	.83	-1.684	.096	77
Economic elites	2.10	.86	2.52	.85	-3.539**	.001	77
U.S. capitalism	2.35	.88	2.69	.84	-3.476**	.001	77
Surplus labor	2.01	.84	2.61	.92	-4.712**	.000	75
Multinational corporations	2.06	.97	2.44	.95	-3.105*	.003	77
Globalization	2.64	.90	2.70	.82	-.727	.469	77

p* < .01. *p* < .001.

tests were statistically significant at the .01 or .001 levels. After participating in the active learning exercise, students were significantly more confident in their understanding of the concepts of economic elites ($p = .001$), U.S. capitalism ($p = .001$), surplus labor ($p = .000$), and multinational corporations ($p = .003$). The increase in the posttest scores for the concepts of political economy and globalization were not statistically significant. These results suggest that participating in the active learning exercise increased students' level of confidence in understanding the macro-structural concepts of economic elites, U.S. capitalism, surplus labor, and multinational corporations.

Finally, to test the effectiveness of the active learning exercise for enhancing confidence in understanding the macro-structural concepts in both class settings, we repeated the paired-samples *t* tests separately for each class. The substantive findings were consistent with the aforementioned analysis; however, for the small class, the *t* test for the change in students' confidence in understanding "globalization" was also statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.⁴

Qualitative Data

Students' responses to the three open-ended questions in the posttest also contribute to understanding the effectiveness of the active learning exercise. In responding to the question about the strengths of the in-class reading of the play, students identified 12 unique strengths: 3 related to student engagement, 7 related to conceptual learning, and 2 strengths that incorporated both engagement and learning. The following qualitative comments are illustrative of students' perceptions of how the dramatization and active learning exercise helped to deepen their engagement and understanding:

I feel the play made things easier to understand. Giving people roles helped explain who was who and made the reading enjoyable.

It really helped me understand. Acting out made it all make sense. If we had just read an excerpt explaining the happenings, I probably wouldn't have even soaked anything in.

The play was good satire on real problems that are happening today. The play provided a good example on the problem with the economy today.

The play "I Like Firing People," really did help me understand a lot more about all these different concepts. I really paid attention because I found the information about what we were "acting" about very informative.

Each student identified, on average, 1.8 unique strengths. In total, 33 percent of students said one of the strengths of using the play was that it helped them to understand U.S. economic elites; 30 percent said the play helped them to understand what was happening in our economy; 17 percent said the play was enjoyable, entertaining, or a creative way to learn; 14 percent mentioned that the interactive aspect of the in-class reading was a strength; 13 percent said that the play increased their awareness of inequality and power differentials between groups; 12 percent said that the play helped them to understand the concept of surplus labor; 10 percent said that the play's fictionalized characters and dramatization helped to deepen their understanding; and about 8 percent of the students mentioned that the play helped them to understand economic decision making, why people were losing their jobs, and that the play was an easy form to understand, comical and humorous, and presented multiple perspectives.

Responding to the question about the weaknesses of the in-class reading of the play, 26 percent of the students said that there were no weaknesses, and 4 percent did not offer a response. In total, 54 students offered at least one weakness. Among the substantive responses, we observed six unique categories of weaknesses, including: the content of the play was weak in one way or another—too long, too repetitive, did not address the middle class or all aspects of the economy (21 percent); the play was difficult to understand (19 percent); the play was biased or too exaggerated (12 percent); the lack of enthusiasm of the students was a weakness (12 percent); some students read with quiet voices and thus it was difficult to hear (9 percent); and some aspect of the exercise needed to be better organized (8 percent). Although students in the large class represented 75 percent of the total sample, they offered 84 percent of the cited weaknesses. The staging of the play in the smaller class after having staged the play first in the larger class seems to have allowed us to mediate the weaknesses of organizational problems, misunderstandings of exaggeration in

satirical plays, and the difficulties with understanding and hearing the in-class reading.

The recommendations students offered paralleled the weaknesses they identified. A few students thought the play should be acted out, several thought additional background reading should be made available to support the authors' argument, some thought there should be more discussion and that the key concepts be taught before the reading of the play, and others suggested changes to how students signed up for roles and that a brief synopsis of the characters be provided.

DISCUSSION

The active learning exercise we developed requires student engagement through reading, role-playing, writing, and discussing the social science-fictional play *I Like Firing People*. Participating in the exercise, however, did not automatically translate into significant increases in students' interest in critically thinking about the concepts of political economy, U.S. capitalism, the labor market, globalization, and economic elites. Conversely, we did observe a significant increase in students' interest in critically thinking about the concept of outsourcing, which is a major focus of Derber and Magrass's (2012) book and dystopian play. Since outsourcing was the concept with the lowest mean score on the pretest, we speculate that some students may have never seriously thought about outsourcing or how it relates to surplus labor. Therefore, this one active learning exercise was enough to raise students' interest in critically thinking about outsourcing to similar levels of the other macro-structural concepts.

Despite the mixed findings regarding our measure of student engagement, participating in the innovative pedagogical exercise did significantly enhance our indirect measure of conceptual learning for four of the six concepts in the large class and five of the six concepts in the small class. After engaging with the evocative text, students' levels of confidence in understanding the concepts of economic elites, U.S. capitalism, surplus labor, and multinational corporations each significantly increased in both classes. In the separate analysis of the small class, we found that students' level of confidence in understanding "globalization" also increased. Students' level of confidence in understanding the more abstract concept of political economy, however, did not significantly increase in either class. Given that the term *political economy* was not mentioned in any of students' responses to the open-ended qualitative questions, we speculate

that this was an unfamiliar concept that remained elusive to students.

The findings of our qualitative content analyses lend support to the validity of the learning outcomes in a number of ways. First, we found that 9 out of the 12 strengths identified by students related to enhancing understanding or learning. Second, the 2 most cited strengths of the play were that it was helpful in understanding the perspective of economic elites and what was happening with the U.S. economy. Students also explicitly mentioned learning other concepts as strengths. Finally, the open-ended responses demonstrate that students recognized the value of role-playing, dramatization, and emotions for deepening their understanding. Overall, students identified far more strengths than weaknesses of the active learning exercise. The most common weakness cited was related to the content of the play itself. The diversity of students' experiences and feelings demonstrate that individuals did not experience the play in the same way, which speaks to the importance of employing diverse pedagogical strategies that are suitable for various learning styles.

Consistent with the existing SoTL literature on active learning exercises, nontraditional texts, and role-playing in sociology classrooms, we think Derber and Magrass's (2012) social science-fictional play offers readers a unique opportunity for grappling with macro-structural concepts and social dilemmas related to the global capitalist economy. First, as discussed previously, in contrast to dispassionate discussions of macro-structural concepts and debates, the future-oriented fictional play *I Like Firing People* offers a clear and strong theoretically informed argument that invites students to think about the social consequences of the global capitalist economy. Moreover, the exaggeration employed in the dystopian play makes the macro-economic structures and global social forces more visible to students. As one student commented, "It opened our eyes to issues we did not know even existed." In short, the social science-fictional play helps to make the macro-structural concepts more "real" (Misra 2000).

We also contend that it is through the opportunities for role-playing, writing, discussing, and reimagining a possible future society that students can start to understand different group interests, the institutional influences of government policymakers and economic elites, and the relevance of macro-structural forces in their lives. In this way, the active learning exercise opens up space for students to become more aware of their own assumptions and knowledge about U.S. global capitalism and provides a "stepping stone" of conceptual tools that

they can build on to develop their critical thinking capacities. For example, when assigning roles and handing out name placards for the characters, Stacey asked students what they knew about the people they were playing. One young man said he did not know who the character Donald Trumpcard was based on. At the time this was not too surprising, but given the current 2016 presidential election campaigns, this becomes even more significant in the sense of his learning and critical thinking regarding the election and presidential politics.

In terms of addressing the perceived weakness that "the play was hard to understand," we think the student recommendations of teaching key concepts before the in-class reading, creating brief synopses of the characters, and having more discussions are all great suggestions. Because of varying student understanding of class and issues of oppression, deficits in economic literacy, or possible math anxiety and phobia when exposed to statistical information, Leondar-Wright and Yeskel (2007:316) support the use of print resources explaining economic concepts as being "useful in demystifying classism." To address the perception that the play is biased, not factual, or too exaggerated, we think that it is necessary to introduce and discuss the genre of dystopian fiction and political satire before the in-class reading. It is also important for the instructor to explicitly connect the argument Derber and Magrass (2012) make with the information and concepts covered earlier in the course. This aligns with Sokolower's (2009:189) recommendation that "students need explicit support in going from classes with progressive, critical perspectives" as they learn to "navigate the distance" between the perspectives studied in the "critical" course to the perspectives they will learn elsewhere.

This pedagogical strategy that includes the in-class reading can be labor-intensive to employ the first time. Once the initial work is done, however, and after an instructor gains the experience of staging the in-class reading, the pedagogical process unfolds more constructively. Even after one in-class reading, we were better able to avoid some missteps and anticipate challenges of coordinating all the pieces. It is important to note that we do not claim that the staging of the in-class reading of the play is the only way to enjoy the pedagogical benefits of this social science-fictional play. In fact, the first author utilizes the play in her online Introduction to Sociology course without staging the play and finds that students enjoy and learn just as much, and maybe more, from individually reading the play and discussing it with classmates

online. It is also important to note that we are not suggesting that this fictional text replace other course readings but rather that the evocative play be used to build on and complement the information offered in traditional sociology texts.

CONCLUSION

Even with the mixed findings regarding enhancing student engagement and the indirect measure of conceptual learning, Derber and Magrass's (2012) humorous social science-fictional play appears to be a valuable pedagogical tool for teaching about the macro-structural systems and global capitalism in large and small Introduction to Sociology classes. From the perspective of busy professors, the time and labor it takes to change course materials can be a real obstacle, but not changing an ineffective pedagogical approach can also be costly in terms of an instructor's time and energy levels, not to mention falling short of course learning objectives. We hope this pedagogical assessment will encourage critical pedagogues to consider utilizing *I Like Firing People* or other social science-fictional plays for their classes, within and beyond sociology.

Given the social challenges of the twenty-first century such as climate change and unprecedented economic inequalities, Marker (2006:92) emphasizes the need for instructors to consider the roles our citizens will play in that future and what are the critical civic skills required for such, else we "are in jeopardy of creating an 'attention deficit democracy,'" which arguably (10 years later) already exists to some extent. This play provides a future-oriented perspective that allows the students to examine and challenge current consumer-mindsets, an essential process in creating and understanding future problems and possibilities. Derber and Magrass (2012) invite readers of their book *The Surplus American* to use their social science-fictional play in a manner that meets their needs. The potential for the use of this play in future courses may also consider a variation of *Theater of the Oppressed* (Boal 1985), where "spaces for actor/audience dialogues about oppression and liberation" (Adams 2010:65) are created in between the dramatized acts as a form of peer teaching to deepen learning and further student interest and engagement with the macro-structural systems of inequality.

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NOTES

1. The staging of the play took one week to complete in both classes. The large class met three times a week for 50 minutes over the course of 15 weeks, and the small class met two times a week for 2.5 hours over the course of 7.5 weeks.
2. These figures are based on findings from in-class surveys of students in Introduction to Sociology that the first author conducted during 2012.
3. Findings for these separate analyses are available upon request from the first author.
4. Findings for these separate analyses are available upon request from the first author.

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