**Lesson Plan**

**Critical Reading in Sociology – 45 min class**

**Background:**

The students will have already read Elijah Anderson (1999) *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* and Thomas L. McNulty and Paul E. Bellair (2003), “Explaining Racial and Ethnic Differences in Serious Adolescent Violent Behavior.”

**Goal**: Introduce students to critical reading skills to support their ability to complete the readings and extract important topics and ideas. Have students practice critical reading skills: 1) identify key elements of a text, 2) reflect on how methods, structure, and presentation impact their reception of a text’s arguments, and 3) become more comfortable sharing their experiences with each other and considering how and why different people have different reactions to the same text.

**Instruction – 12 min**

*Introduce yourself: (1 min)*

Give your name, role, & why you’re there today. Also provide campus/library resources available to students on this topic & how they can reach you or an appropriate staff member for additional help.

*What is Critical Reading? (1 min)*

Critical reading is reading for the purpose of working, understanding, or creating new knowledge in an academic discipline or for positive social change. Critical reading allows readers to identify patterns in the text, determine main and supporting ideas, evaluate credibility, assess the appropriateness of the methods and arguments employed, and make judgements about the value of a work in contributing to its field or to the larger society.

*What kind of papers am I likely to encounter in Sociology? (10 min)*

Give an overview of the kinds of papers they are likely to encounter and their layouts (see “Common Paper Structures in Sociology” below, after the lesson plan). Explain how they can use knowledge of these common features and the context of their class to better navigate the text.

Understanding how academic papers are commonly structured allows the reader to anticipate where to find key elements of a paper, which will help them 1) identify the main argument(s) more quickly and 2) identify the supporting points and reflect on how well they support the main argument.

Utilizing the context of their class allows students to: 1) use the class they’re in to guide their reading (i.e., for a methods class, pay more attention to the methods section and how the methods contribute to results) and 2) use course documents (e.g., syllabus, assignment guide) and instructor comments to guide their reading (i.e., if the theme for this week’s readings is juvenile delinquency, you can assume the readings all touch on that topic and focus on how each of them contributes to that topic instead. For example: do they agree or disagree? Use the same or different methods? Are they from roughly the same time period, or are they decades apart? How do those similarities/differences contribute to a holistic understanding of this topic?)

**Critical Reading Exercise – 10 min**

1. Divide class into 4 groups of 5
2. Assign each group a reading:

Group 1 – McNulty & Bellair: Abstract & Introduction

Group 2 – McNulty & Bellair: Discussion and Conclusion

Group 3 – Anderson: Preface

Group 4 – Anderson: ‘The Code of the Street’ section in Introduction

3. In your group, spend the next 10 minutes going through your reading and pulling out the any important points that are present (Research Question(s), Main Argument(s), Sub Arguments, Method). Write them down or make note of them somewhere because when time is up you will be writing them on the board to share with the class. Likewise, use this time to decide who will take the notes, write on the board, and summarize them to the class.

4. Keep the strategies I just presented to you in mind and see if you can observe them being helpful as you go through the reading.

*Two Options:*

5a. When you’re ready, start writing the important takeaways on the board. After 10 minutes we’ll go around, and each group will present what they found.

5b. Have your notes ready because after 10 minutes we’ll go around, and each group will share what they found.

**Share with Class – 7 min**

Give each group 1 min to share what they found in their section. Ask them how they reached those conclusions: was there something in the text that they recognized as indicating importance? Where in the passage did these key bits of information appear (beginning, middle, end?). Likewise, where in the paragraph did they appear? Did you see any similarities to the layouts we discussed earlier?

After they’ve all shared, ask if any of them surprised by what they found or how much information they found in their section. Then ask if they can envision how identifying and isolating these key bits of information in advance could impact the way they read the rest of the text. Would it change the way they approached the text? How so?

**Deeper Questions – 7 min**

With students remaining in the same groups, ask them to reflect on the entire reading, not just the sections they reviewed in class, and consider the some of the following questions for both texts:

* Did you have any reactions to the reading? Did you find yourself agreeing or being convinced by their arguments? Disagreeing?
* Do you think the authors covered this topic thoroughly enough? Do you feel like you get a complete picture of the issue they’re tackling?
* Do you think the methods they used were appropriate? Was this methodological approach successful in providing insight and understanding into the issue they examined? Could they have done more? Should they have?
* How did the methods used in these two texts impact the way you reacted to the text? Was one more compelling than the other? What would you consider the advantages or limitations of each? If you wanted to convince someone of an argument, would you use quantitative evidence like McNulty and Bellair did, or qualitative evidence like that in Anderson’s book? Is that type of evidence also the type you found most convincing yourself?
* Is your group in agreeance in your opinions, or do some group members feel differently than others?

*For example (provide examples if they’re uncertain where to begin):*

I wonder if, since the causes aren’t significant across the board, can they really be considered causal? How could their findings be implemented in terms of policy? Should districts try to cater their programs to their demographics? Or should there be a blanket policy to address all the concerns raised? The authors don’t try to explain WHY each group has that particular vulnerability, and is there something missing by not including this or does it not matter?

**Share with Class – 7 min**

Either go around the room again or ask groups to voluntarily share what they discussed.

**Final Thoughts – 2 min**

After all the groups have shared, ask students to reflect on how their preferences for, and the perceived persuasiveness of, different types of methodologies might impact how they receive information from other sources and how readily they, or others, believe or reject that information. Likewise, how might they use this understanding to formulate and present their own research in order to make their argument as effective as possible?

***Common Paper Structures in Sociology***

**1. General Research Paper**

Introduction

* Brief literature review – what has already been done in this field?
* Statement of research question and how the literature presented above has and/or has not addressed this topic
* Statement of thesis, often literally “in this paper I will argue …”
* [Brief outline of the paper’s organization, i.e. “First I will examine X. Then I will look at Y. Finally I will consider Z.”]

Main Body

* Organized thematically into logical sub-arguments/main points
* Common organizational structures are:
  + Transition 🡪 Evidence 🡪 Sub-Argument
  + Transition 🡪 Introduction of Sub-Argument as possible or as a question 🡪 Evidence 🡪 Clear statement of Sub-Argument
  + Transition 🡪 Sub-Argument 🡪 Evidence

Conclusion

* Summarize the main points, how they relate to each other, and how they support your thesis

**2. Scientific Research Paper**

Introduction

* Brief literature review – what has already been done in this field?
* Statement of research question, thesis, and how this research relates to the literature presented above

Methods

* How data was collected and analyzed
* Reasoning for methods choices & potential issues/flaws

Results

* Explication of study findings and their significance
* Often broken down and organized into relevant topics
* Structure often: transition, finding, more detail & contextualization

Discussion/Conclusion

* Looking at the results holistically – how they relate to one another an contribute to a complete picture
* Conclusions & reflections
* Opportunities for future research

**3. Literature Review**

Introduction

* State the topic, scope, and how the chosen texts fit into this theme
* Brief outline of the review’s organization, i.e. “The literature on X topic is largely focused on three main categories: A, B, and C.”

Main Body

* Literature organized by themes
  + Broad to narrow focus or vice-versa
  + Grouped by methods, findings, or some other common element
  + Chronological presentation makes sense when the studies being discussed build off one another.
  + Mixture of the above. For example, Study A used quantitative methods and found Results X. Study B also used quantitative methods and had similar findings with Results Y. Study C built off the work of Studies A and B, repeating their methods a decade later and incorporating qualitative methods to help guide the interpretation of their quantitative findings. Study D used similar qualitative methods but in a different city and found different results.
* Present, discuss, link, compare, and/or contrast the main arguments/findings of the literature

Conclusion

* Summarize the important contributions of the selected literature
* Evaluate the current state of research on this topic including flaws in previous studies, gaps in existing knowledge, and opportunities for future study

**4. Book Review**

Introduction

- Brief presentation of the work being reviewed: author, book title, and main theme

- Situate the book within the context of the author’s other work: have they done previous work in this area or has their previous research focused elsewhere?

- State the main thesis of the book and situate the work within the larger academic corpus on this subject

Main Body

Usually consists of two main topics:

- Summarizing the main arguments and major evidence presented in the book.

- Critical evaluation of the text

o Is the argument successful? Why? Why not?

 Is there a perspective or possible explanation that the author doesn’t address that would benefit their argument?

 Are any of the author’s arguments not very well supported?

 Does the text progress logically? Is it clear why the author organized the text in the way they did? i.e. Is it clear how the author’s ideas are connected and why they’re in the order they’re in?

o Does anything seem to be missing or underexplored/underexplained?

 Are there any gaps or leaps in logic? Briefly presented but otherwise unexplored ideas? Do you wish the author had talked more about something? (i.e. “The article would have benefitted from a deeper exploration of XYZ”) Be sure to explain how addressing these issues would improve the text.

o What, if anything, does the text contribute to the knowledgebase of this field?

Conclusion

- Brief summary of the main argument of the text, it’s contribution to the field, and areas of praise/criticism.