

Teaching Social Problems from a Constructionist Perspective

THIRD EDITION

INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL AND TEST BANK

Teaching Social Problems
from a Constructionist
Perspective: A Manual to
Accompany Joel Best's *Social
Problems*

THIRD EDITION

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W. W. Norton & Company · New York · London

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Printed in the United States of America.

Third Edition

Associate Editor: Mary Williams.

Manufacturing by Maple Press.

Book design by Margaret M. Wagner.

Composition and project management by Westchester Book Group.

Production manager: Ashley Horna.

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110

www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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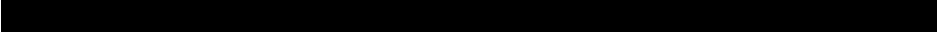
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Teaching Social Problems from a Constructionist Perspective

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PART 1

Teaching from a Constructionist Perspective



Thinking about Teaching a Social Problems Course: A Personal Journey

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TEACHING DEPRESSION

Teaching the undergraduate social problems course is no easy feat. It was the first course that I was hired to teach at Valdosta State in 1987—my first solo class ever as an instructor. I will never forget that first class, especially the many mistakes that I made! I have, thank goodness, matured as a professor. Nearly every term I have tweaked how I taught the class, learning as I went along. In this essay, I want to describe how my social problems course has changed and evolved. It's still a work in pro-

gress, but isn't that how all our courses should be?

At Valdosta State, as at many schools, the social problems introductory course usually has a mixed constituency. The bulk of the students are enrolled in the course as part of the general education social sciences core requirements, with a smattering of majors intermixed, for whom the course is a requirement for the degree. What faculty feel each of these constituencies needs frequently does not match each other exactly, and so compromises must be made in terms of topical coverage, theoretical exposure, and the like.

Choosing a textbook is often the first decision a faculty member must make as he or she confronts teaching the course, since the ordering deadline, at least at my university, comes a semester or two before the class actually begins. Most of the social problems texts that are available are the "big book" variety; they often have twenty or more chapters, each covering a different social problem, with one or two introductory chapters at the beginning which lay out theoretical frameworks and sources of data on social problems. This textbook format often leads faculty to a chapter-per-week class structure. Hey, we've probably all been there, done that, right? I know that I certainly have. But that format caused increasing difficulty for me as I began to teach the class on a regular basis, have more confidence in my own teaching, and be comfortable assessing what I felt students needed to get from the class. At that point in my teaching, I experienced several dilemmas.

First, initially behind my back and eventually to my face, students began to call my social problems class Depression 105 instead of Sociology 105. It was 1989, and I remember vividly when I first overheard students call it that. I was in a stall in the women's restroom and two students, not knowing I was there, were talking at the sinks. I recall one student said, "Each week, it just gets worse; we just add another problem to the mix. I am so depressed every time I leave [class]. We never talk about solu-

tions, just problems and more problems.” I know my first reaction was to put this down to two students having a bad day, until I kept hearing it, both in what I call hallway gossip and on more and more student evaluations. While it hurt to recognize it, I came to the conclusion that they were correct; that was exactly how my class unfolded and that, at least for me, was primarily driven by the textbook’s format. The dilemma became how to fix the pessimism while maintaining the academic content I felt was necessary.

From that moment on, I was on a mission to conduct the class differently. So each time that I taught it, I began to experiment. Initially, I cut down on the number of chapters/problems we discussed, so that at least there would be more time to discuss topics and research solutions—something that textbooks did not cover much then. They are a bit better now about noting some localized solutions. There is even a series of monographs published by Sage (see, for example, Eitzen & Sage, 2007) that focus exclusively on this topic. Each term I found solutions to different problems by combing newspapers and the Internet and made sure to incorporate them into lectures.

Students seemed happier that the bleakness of the course was mitigated a bit, but I was still very dissatisfied. Why? The second dilemma I faced was finding a textbook that more closely paralleled the ways that the theoretical aspects of my class were evolving. I felt that none of the major textbooks consistently integrated theoretical perspectives throughout the text, yet that was one of the key objectives of my teaching—to help students, especially majors, see sociology’s systematic approaches to studying social problems. Rather, the major perspectives were discussed in those one or two beginning chapters, then shunted to the side for hundreds of pages, only to resurface in the concluding chapter of the “big textbooks.” To be sure, most chapters on racial tensions discussed both the functionalist and conflict perspectives, as did chapters on crime

and illegal drugs, but many other chapters, for example those on work problems or family problems, did not. These chapters were often entirely atheoretical or mentioned theory only in some sections but not in others. Even worse, while interactionism, most notably constructionism, was discussed in the introductory chapter of these textbooks, it was rarely if ever used—let alone consistently integrated into—any of the topical chapters. It was as if constructionism had to be in those first theoretical chapters in order for the book to pass muster with reviewers and publishers, but then it was not viewed as relevant to the discussion of social problems. It was frustrating to be forced into ordering a big book when I knew I would not use most of it; in fact, it seemed unethical.