

June, 2003 - Donal Malone, Sociology

Connecting the Classroom to Everyday Life

One of the challenges we face as teachers is engaging our students and connecting what they learn in the classroom to their experience in everyday life. In my consumer culture class this semester I made an attempt to do this. After the students read an analysis of department stores and supermarkets and the shopping styles of consumers in them, I asked them to visit either kind of store and do their own analyses of these stores and the shoppers in them. I asked them to monitor their behavior in the store as well as that of other consumers. In addition, I asked them to pay attention to the environment of the store and how it might affect the behavior of shoppers. Some of these questions required students to test some of the claims in the reading in their field research. Other questions asked them to go beyond the material to make their own discoveries.

On the day the assignment was due I invited the students to report on their fieldwork to the class. Since this was not a course requirement, I was surprised by the large number of students who volunteered to present their findings to the class. They eagerly and engagingly reported on their own as well as other shoppers' behavior and whether it conformed to or contradicted the findings in the reading assignment. They also analyzed the environment of the stores and what role it may have played in influencing shoppers' behavior. Without any coaching from me, they questioned each other to see if their own particular findings were borne out by their peers' research.

They were delighted by their own discoveries of how stores attempt to influence how people shop. For example, through their fieldwork, they found that in many supermarkets the vegetables, fruits and flowers are often near the entrance while the milk and bread are always in the rear. Or that candy and cereal are often on lower shelves to appeal to children. And that famous brand items are often placed on shelves at eye level. Or that Pepsi and Coke are never on sale at the same time. And that high "impulse" items are often placed at or near the checkout counter. They discovered that they and other shoppers have a variety of shopping styles, which caused them to question some of the assumptions in the reading assignment.

It was gratifying to see students make their own discoveries and relate them to the course material. Through this field exercise we were able to cover the reading material in a more interactive way without much reliance on lecturing or extensive notes. It was all the more rewarding for me because I had not thought through the field assignment in great detail and thought that many of the students would try to "fake" their assignments because shopping is such a common experience. But I was wrong. They embraced this assignment and wanted to share it with others and seemed to understand the reading in a deeper way. It reminded me again that we, as teachers, must be willing to take chances and

find more ways to engage our students. As a postscript, I should add that, emboldened by this positive result, I sent the students into fast food outlets to examine some of the findings in one of our texts, *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser. It too produced similar results.