



Research Article

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## The Value of Integrating 21st Century Skills into the Enterprise of Teaching Sociology

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### Abstract

*The 21st Century labour market is changing fast with unprecedented acceleration. Training in the field of sociology follows the pattern of education which is a process of leading out of ignorance and bringing one up to another plain, a higher one, within a societal context. Its organisation and curricular should be done within the frame work of the general society and life. It ought to follow the trend of the time. This article discusses the discipline of sociology, its concept and teaching approach from the ambiance of integrating 21st century skills into it. Using the qualitative method, the article examines the study of sociology in the light of the 21st Century, and reveals that students will be confronted with the effects social institutions, globalization, and technological advancement have on education in general. In responding to this challenge, the article reveals that sociology, through studies and statistical research across societies, will be able to establish that the more technical skills and knowledge one gains, the easier it is to move up to the upper class in the society (Max Weber). As a study of social life, sociology adapts and allows its fields to be re-structured to meet up with the demands of the "ever-changing" social life. Since the world in the 21st century has experienced technological and social developments and challenges, which have many impacts on the lives of individuals living in it, the teaching of sociology has to be abreast with the demands of the current century.*

**Keywords:** Sociology, Education, 21st Century, University, Interdisciplinary

### 1. Introduction

The Word sociology has its root in the Latin prefix "Socius" meaning 'companion' and the suffix "logy" meaning 'the study of ' coming from the Greek "lógos" meaning 'knowledge'. It is a 'systematic' and 'scientific' study of the society and behavioral patterns of men and women living in it. It is systematic because it encompasses all the aspects of society beginning with the social relation of individuals with each other to social stratification and interaction. It is scientific because it has a wide range of analytical methods with theories and hypotheses to arrive at logical results. Sociology as a study attempts to identify all those elements that secretly keep society lively and growing (Whitty & Young, 1976).

There is a subtle relationship between education and sociology. Education helps to overcome societal inequalities and at the same time promotes the equilibrium status of the society (Hemron, 2008). Because the society tends to move in the direction the dominant group in the society wants it to move, education becomes necessary to inform this group about those factors which will bring about a better and balanced society. The field, methods, and relevance of sociology apply here.

The first social science discipline to develop the basic frameworks for the study of education is

sociology because its study is based on theoretical premises which are highly relevant to policy in education. The researches sociologists are involved in are designed to serve the society especially where the policies are weak. Urban education and its social organization, successes and failures of school systems, and the educational needs of a given society can better be determined through a thorough method of evaluation that is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. No other discipline is better equipped for such enterprise as sociology.

When Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and other scholars threaded their way through the theoretical framework of sociology, they also developed multi-dimensional theories for education. These theories were further developed in the 21st century with sociology helping out in the understanding of their structures as a whole, and their effects on the students.

In the history of sociology there have been some hitches especially in the 1960s when it was linked with political radicalism and, as a result, it went through a hard period (Elliott, 2010). In the 21st century, there is a re-emergence of the discipline in the higher institutions where it provides new impulses in the study of many vital societal issues. Thus, as a discipline that has helped in transforming the dynamics of daily life in the 21st century, it is necessary that the teaching of sociology be adapted to the 21st century skills.

## 2. Method

The basic research methodology used in this work is qualitative. This is chosen because of the need to understand the essence of 21st Century skills and their application in the study of sociology. This is further legitimized because the student's learning styles and attitudes to study which form the main bulk of the data for the work are described subjectively. The article focuses on application of cross-disciplinary skills in teaching sociology based on content-base instruction. The basic idea is for the students of sociology in the 21st century to be taught in a manner that should reflect the demand of the complex and competitive society that they will find themselves in after leaving school. The aim is to make them to be properly informed and equipped to face the society driven by information-age and technology-driven economy.

## 3. Sociology as the Study of the Society and Social Life

As a study which deals with human social relationships and related institutions, sociology's subject matter ranges from race to social class, culture to behavioral patterns, family to state, crime and moral to religion, social stability to migration, economy to radical changes in the societies as a whole, history to general management and social thought. The purpose of sociology is (and should be) to understand how human action and thinking can shape (and is being shaped by) these diverse subject matters. Thus, sociology is seen in this form as a unifying study.

The origin of sociology as a field of study can be traced to Auguste Comte (1798 - 1857) as the founding father. He started using the name 'sociology' in his works in 1838. The word Sociology replaced the old terminology *physique sociale*, which was used in the scientific research in the time of Auguste Comte (Schaefer, 2013). A unanimous definition of sociology, like most disciplines, is difficult to arrive at because of many factors. While some scholars see sociology as a study which investigates social problems and their causes, e.g. identity (racial and gender), conflict (family and deviant behaviour), others tend to approach their understanding of sociology as a study which examines and explains issues such as law, poverty, wealth, population, peace, development, discrimination, education and migration.

However, the enterprise of sociology involves the careful collection and analysis of data about social life and the society in order to develop theories with which to answer research questions. It is a distinctive and enlightening way of studying the social world, which shapes our everyday lives. Sociology thus informs all stakeholders involved in the business of shaping the society, for example, the academics, politicians, business personnel, religious leaders, lawmakers, and parents. It does this by looking beyond normal reality through its particular analytical perspective, methods, and theories.

The boundaries of sociological discipline are not clear even though the discipline have some

identifiable marks (Cooper, 2012). Though all disciplines perceive their spheres as limitless, this is erroneous. Biology sees other disciplines as being possible because of life; geography concludes that every subject has a location; for history, everything is better understood through its past; sociology sees its scope as being limitless and universal; mathematics holds that everything has to do with the logic of numbers and arrangement. However, the wide range of interests for the sociological discipline helps to establish a connection with all other subjects while maintaining the specifics of the sociological field. In this wise, sociologists can apply many methods in their scope of teaching the subject.

#### **4. Sociology and Empirical Approach to Its Teaching**

As a study of society and human social behaviour, sociology investigates the origins, developments, and institutions that are involved in human society. Being a social science, its two main methods are: critical analytical method and empirical investigative method. These two play important roles in the development of our knowledge about social order and change in the society. Researchers in the field of sociology rely on a good number of techniques which are either quantitative or qualitative or both. Interpretative and philosophic approaches to the problems of society take their bearing from these techniques.

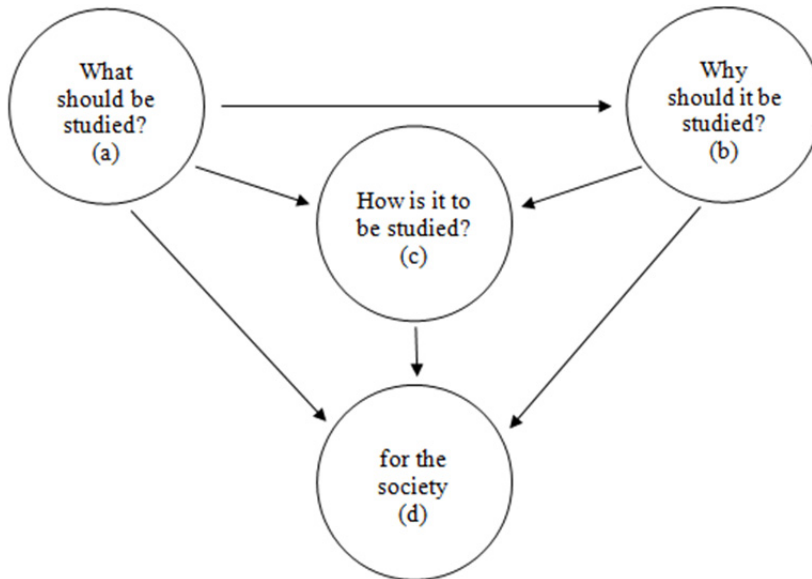
The research methodologies of sociological enquiries vary as sociologists observe and conduct their surveys of historical documents, analyse data, study everyday life in the society, and conduct interviews. These methodologies and theories yield insights into those social issues that are shaping both human lives and society in the contemporary world, and students who are well trained in them should be able to master the art of critical thinking about human life, how to ask intelligent questions and proffer solutions to problems.

Since sociology belongs to the branch of the social sciences, like economics, managements, political science, psychology, history etc., it uses empirical methods in the presentation of hypotheses during a research investigation. While teaching and studying sociology, both the teachers and the students should bear this in mind. This is because everyday life is dependent on the result and data got from the researches done by scholars especially in the empirical social sciences like sociology. Interviews, opinion polls and questionnaires, irrespective of the field they are conducted in, take their bearings and methods from the methods of sociology.

In the teaching of sociology, empirical research method, which is kept in focus, is regarded as a systematic comprehension and explanation of the subject matter (Atteslander, 2010). Here the three key words are: empirical, systematic, and subject-matter.

- a) Empirical: Since sociology is, as far as its field is concerned, a social science, which deals with everyday life of the individuals, its study is based on factors and issues that are experiential in nature.
- b) Systematic: The study has to follow an ordered form.
- c) Subject matter: For it to be experiential, the subject matter has to be a factor that can easily be observed, analysed, experienced, and in fact be applicable or appealing to the sense organs.

Generally, the subject matter for a sociological study or teaching ranges from human behavioral patterns to actions and opinions created by human beings. According to Atteslander (2010), there are realities that are not empirically observable. These are not the area of sociology, but of philosophy and religion. The process of an empirical social research begins with the establishment of the subject matter to be researched upon. This is followed by three main questions of – what, why, and how?



**Figure 1.** This is an adapted version from Atteslander, see Atteslander 2010, p.4

## 5. What is 21st Century Skills?

The term 21st century skills, as a concept, comprise a wide range of knowledge believed by educators and policy makers to be critically necessary in the contemporary society. The 21st century skills can be applied to any field of study in the school. Though the term is used in education, its definition is not consistent. As a result, improper application of the term in any field may lead to confusion. It is important that universally applicable skills be prioritized in the contemporary educational system. However, the specific skills that make up the body of the concept may be defined and categorized but they should not be taken or understood in isolation in the study of 21st century skills in the discipline of sociology. Students in the contemporal era are surrounded by information in a variety of mediums and they are required to engage in inquiry, analysis and dissemination of data and information. How they are taught will determine how fulfilling and active they will be when they leave school.

Incorporating the 21st Century skills into the teaching of sociology implies applying the underlisted skills into the curriculum. These are: Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, Communication, Information literacy, Media literacy, Technology literacy, Flexibility, Leadership, Initiative, Productivity and Social Skills. One thing that runs throughout the whole gamut of each of these skills is that they are in the age of the internet.

These skills can further be broken down into three categories with each pertaining to a specific digital action:

1. Learning skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication).  
Under this category, students acquire the mental growth needed to be able to adapt to any situation and improve on the knowledge they have already acquired.
2. Literacy skills (information literacy, media literacy and technology literacy).  
Under this category the students' main goal is to be able to understand facts and data. The ability to discern authentic sources and factual information amidst the numerous internet traffic.
3. Life skills (flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity and social skills).  
Under this category the student learns to take a critical look on everyday's life and activities.

## 6. Integrating the 21st Century Skills in the Study of Sociology

The two important phenomena predicted to have implication for changing the 21st century learning paradigm are technology and information and communication technology (ICT) (Tinio, 2007). These have their implication in changing the social, teaching and learning behaviours of teachers and students. They have also improved collaboration and genuine participation in the learning activities through creation of constructive learning environment (Chen, 2011).

Traditionally, sociology focuses on the following areas of interest - social stratification, social mobility, law, gender, deviance, and development. With the interplay of scientific activities, sociology has expanded its horizon to include such subject matters like medical, security, internet, education, migration, and general science. Educators and academics have developed series of higher order of skills and learning dispositions, which, according to experts, are *conditio sine qua non* for progress and success in the 21st century society. 21st century skills began in North America and has since spread to many other parts of the globe through many organisations that are both national and international. It is as a result of the research conducted in the early 1980s by academic and governmental agencies to identify the skills needed to match up with the demands of the growing world which is getting more complicated in nature. *Since the introduction of the 21st century skills*, international movements are focusing attention on the skills the students require in order to be abreast with the world we now live in which is not only rapidly changing in form, but also digitally doing so. These skills include teamwork and analytic reasoning, and they are quite different from the traditional method which is primarily "class and black-board based knowledge". The "class and black-board based knowledge" is akin to a process of "give and take back" whereby the students regurgitate what the teachers have given them back to them for some good grades. With the society changing pace with an unprecedented acceleration in economy and technology, the effect is easily noticed and so the teaching of students of sociology can be arranged to enable students meet the demands of the workforce. It could be noticed that in the present generation, the tendency for young workers to change jobs is higher compared to the older generation. This is referred to as "employment mobility". With such mobility comes the demand for different skills, which will make the young ones to be more flexible and offer them the ability to adapt to different careers.

In the 21st century education skills, there is a focus on digital literacy. The use of digital skill is applied in the teaching of sociology in the GOuni<sup>1</sup> (Soc 203)<sup>2</sup>. This is in conjunction with the other areas of skills that are in high demand in the 21st century - innovation skills, which involve critical analytical thinking, teamwork and creativity; and Career skills, which enable students to be flexible and adaptable in different career fields. These are the key qualities of education, which is progressive.

While applying and integrating the 21st century skills into the teaching of sociology, the approach should take into consideration the fact that the discipline encompasses many branches that could be thematically divided into areas such as:

- society and development
- education
- migration
- globalisation
- crime and governance
- family
- empirical
- theory

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<sup>1</sup> Godfrey Okoye University, Thinkers Corner – Enugu, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> This is the course code for "History of Social Thought". When we talk of social thought, we are referring to the product of man who thinks and philosophises about his social environment and the people living therein. What people think, do and observe within their environments are all subject matters for social thought.

- politics
- economic/occupational
- health and disability
- family
- religion
- media and communication
- gender and sexuality
- culture and ethnicity
- rural and urbanisation
- social stratification
- education
- youth and aged-people

These and other branches could also serve as research/project topics for the students offering sociology as a major in their academic career.

The 21st century skills encourage 'strictness' in the teaching of students of sociology to achieve a command of the discipline and at the same time advocates multidisciplinary programs in the study of sociology. Modularization is promoted and that calls for collaboration with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) department. Sociologists in Ireland, for example, teach sociology within multidisciplinary programs and their experience may be portentous of a global trend. The structural position of this Irish method applies not only to the wider European context but also to the Nigerian context.

The enterprise of sociology implies diversity. This characteristic guarantees totality in knowledge by solidly bringing the results of those sociologists who work strictly within the confines of sociology and those who work in interdisciplinary fields (Burawoy, 2009). When courses are intertwined in an interdisciplinary fashion, they create room for flexibility in thinking.

With the discussion on the best method of teaching going more in the direction of multidisciplinary approach (Cooper, 2012), sociology lauds that as a progress in the enterprise of teaching the discipline in modern universities (Biagioli, 2009). Application of the 21st century skills into the teaching of sociology will offer the potentials for more initiatives, innovation and creativity to the discipline. This will encourage collaboration and team-based activities for a holistic and integral intellectual development of the students and more enlightenment for the teachers.

However, while emphasising multidisciplinary approach to the teaching of sociology, care should be taken not to fall into what Pulkkinen (2015) describes as absence of disciplinary identity, which leaves students with chaotic options. For instance: which study should they pursue? What approach is suitable for a chosen subject of study? What will be the standard for measuring the value of their work? To which academic community should they contribute? These questions are the reason for the development of the method and approach as described in *figure 1* above.

## 7. 21st Century Skills within the Context of the Classroom

Integrating the 21st century skills into the study of sociology has its implications and some recommendations to address them. To optimize the teaching of sociology in this method in the developing countries, funds are needed to make materials available. Teachers' awareness and self-confidence are to be developed and fostered (Farisi, 2016). Teachers who will carry on these methods will need to have the ability to create their own ICT media teaching materials or be able to operate them if such are developed for them. Possession of personal "tablets or laptops" will help them to have the opportunity to use variety of digital technologies in their teaching. The same applies to the students.

The teaching of sociology within the context of the Godfrey Okoye University is enriched both by the theoretical and empirical contributions of the teaching methodology as used by sociologists within the spheres of applied sociology and sociological practice as used by those who are more inclined to interdisciplinary method. The students are taught and guided by a programme of study, to engage in a coherent system of sociological norms, which includes theoretical and empirical

methodologies (McLean, Abbas, & Aschwin, 2015). In the teaching of the History of Social Thought - SOC 203, for example, the module<sup>3</sup>, which is accessible to the 200 level students of department of Sociology is accessible with a Pin code.

The text is prepared with a vision to set the students poised to move beyond the usual "handing on of knowledge" through handouts. They are able to follow the process the lecturer used to arrive at his information and the materials he accessed. Other forms of visual aids, e.g. scholarly online lectures on some sub-topics within the course can be followed. In this way, they are able to examine the methods and results of other scholars in the field, thereby learning the tools and values of sociology. The module is prepared in such a way as to enable the students to be able to access as many materials as possible following a strict but tailored method of academic honesty, which the teacher uses in the preparation of the course. The students are expected to be immersed in sociological world and acquire the ability to master the way sociologists work in evaluating and interpreting their research activities. (McLean et al., 2015).

While engaging the students with the 21st century skills and encouraging multidisciplinary approach, we make efforts to maintain what McLean et al (2015: 181) call "a sociological *habitus*", which entails studying sociology as a discipline with a multidisciplinary approach.

Without this "sociological *habitus*", sociology students can pass through the university with good knowledge of many disciplines but will be less able to apply their knowledge of sociology in the society. The modularization of some of the courses offered in the department could help the students in the process of identification as sociologists (Bourdieu, 1990).

From the tests on sociology, one finds out that the students, when asked to define sociology, see the discipline as a collection of issues or history that deals with human beings and their society. There are other fields of study that deal with human beings and the society, e.g. psychology. The method of study, and indeed of teaching sociology in GOuni, would enable the students to achieve a better understanding of the complex conceptualization of sociology as a discipline and go beyond the mediocrity of understanding sociology as a "discipline interested in the collection of issues or history that deals with human beings and their society". It is based on effective learning, which includes the ability to work with others (both with peers and mentors). The pedagogical styles include project based learning.

In the first year of their study, the students of sociology are already positioned to value sociology as a discipline that is known for its critical reflexivity, which is also the root of its crisis for ages. Introduction to sociology involves an immediate introduction to its internal divisions and fractured history.

## 8. Conclusion

The central argument in this article is not a holistic shifting to multidisciplinary approach in the teaching of sociology as a way of integrating 21st century skill. Such would devalue sociology as an independent discipline in the higher education level. The arguments for a multi-disciplinary approach were done on their own merits as progressive. It goes to follow that for any modern organization or business enterprise to achieve a meaningful result, technology needs to be incorporated into every aspect of its practices. Sociology as a science of the society should maximise the impact of ICT as well and its study should apply the 21st century skills in an interdisciplinary form.

While applying the 21st century skills, the stakeholders should encourage extracurricular activities as an integral part of the whole process (Mckinney & Naseri, 2011). However, resources may hamper this approach but there are others that could be based on faculty/departmental level. The students could participate in a faculty directed journal as members of the sociology community engaging in academic discussions on a variety of issues (Neville et al., 2012).

With the 21st century skills, students are able to be assured of new innovations in sociological

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<sup>3</sup> See picture 1. Accessible through the following link: You can access it via the following link: <http://www.eduacademy.at/phdl/course/view.php?id=1560> 22.02.2017.

fields. With the skills, they can display clear arguments in any research issues with persuasive evidence and intelligent analysis. Applying the 21st century skills in the study of sociology have advantages over the traditional learning methods in many ways, for example, in flexibility and coverage. ICT makes it easier to obtain resources and data faster. Accessibility and updating of contents and archiving them are more effective and efficient with the 21st century skills.

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