Coming Home: Teaching Demography Then and Now

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Introduction

The first class I taught, "Population and Society," met on Tuesday evenings at Temple University in 1974. At, 25, a fourth year graduate student in demography at the University of Pennsylvania, I was the youngest person in the room. A year later, I finished my Ph.D.   After a six year engagement at Washington University in Saint Louis teaching demography, statistics, and urban sociology, I took a "brief break" from academia.   My career took me to financial markets, trading firms, and investment banks, earning a Chicago M.B.A. along the way, but I was never really very far from the classroom, often conducting training on technical aspects of financial derivatives and finding opportunities to guest lecture on college campuses.   So nobody was especially surprised when, after twenty years, I once again "found myself" on a college campus.

At Gordon State College. I served first for three years as Director of Institutional Research, finding time to teach a few statistics classes, and then moved on to chair the Division of Business and Social Science, putting me back in the classroom on a regular basis. Seven years later, I relinquished the chair to assume full time teaching responsibilities. Initially, I taught accounting and general business, and as we developed baccalaureate programs, finance and applied statistics. But I never lost my interest in demography, always my first academic love, and last year, finally, I was able to propose, plan, and deliver SOCI 3090, Population and Society, in the Fall 2016 semester.   It felt like coming home.

The last time I taught demography was Fall 1980, during my last year at Washington University. Things, obviously, have changed. Gordon State College is not Washington University; 2017 is not 1980; a 68 year old tenured full professor is not a 31 year old assistant professor. There are those, I

know, who miss the "good old days" of higher education; I'm not one of them. As I brought demography to millennial students in a Twenty-first century classroom, I found an environment where I could engage my students in ways I could not have imagined 30 years ago.

Demography: Then and Now

The field, of course, has evolved, but substantive change has not been as great as I might have expected. Population growth still equals fertility plus mortality plus or minus net migration, and the demographic transition model, the process by which populations shift from relatively high and uncontrolled fertility and mortality to relatively low and controlled fertility and mortality, is still foundational to our thinking, even as our understanding of its underlying determinants and lack of uniformity in timing across populations has grown. Indeed, a quick comparison between the tables of contents of the text I used in 1980 (Smith and Zopf, 1976) with that I used last year (Weeks, 2012) shows clear parallels, both books including sections establishing a demographic perspective, elaborating on vital processes, analyzing population structure, and discussing future growth, with just a few tweaks in ordering.

It's the change in <u>doing</u> demography that has transformed my teaching it. Fifty years ago, my first forays into demographic research as a sophomore in college inevitably led me to library stacks and dozens of census and vital statistics volumes; armed with magnifying glass and legal pad, I withstood the ravages of book dust in pursuit of quantitative truth. Today, a few weeks into my class, I took my students to one of our computer labs to visit, hands on, data sites at the U.S. Census Bureau's magnificent American Fact Finder, the CDC's "WONDER" (which actually isn't really), the Georgia Department of Public Health's OASIS, and the Vinson Institute, where it's all there for the clicking! Students can engage with the data and hence the field immediately and in real time. Further, we can all follow developments in the field not only with online access to scholarly journals, but with resources more intellectually accessible to all my student like the population blog maintained by John Weeks, the author of my textbook (Weeks 2017). Hence demography today jumps out from the

textbook and data to motivate students to look at their world through a demographic lens almost as soon as the semester starts.

My Classroom: Then and Now

Forty years ago, I walked into the classroom with only a piece of chalk, aging notes on cheap yellow paper, a pack of cigarettes, and a lighter.   Had I hibernated for thirty years and walked into the modern classroom, I'd be clueless. Computer. Multimedia Station. Screen. Shiny whiteboard. Dry erase markers which often don't work. Overhead projector. Surely I am meant to do more than simply pace around the room, holding forth on demography!

First entering the twenty-first century classroom to tach a statistics class in 2003, I felt like a kid in a candy shop, using all the toys, putting together PowerPoints, and losing only two shirts before learning to replace the cap on my markers! I found, of course, that PowerPoint, and later on Prezi which I have grown to prefer, is a mixed blessing. At first, teaching statistics, I laid out solutions on PowerPoint, but quickly learned that I HAD to work them on the marker board for the student to actually witness my thought process, mistakes and all. I learned to use my video display as an outline and exhibit, not a text.

In my general business classes, I learned about TED talks and integrated videos into my classes, but sparingly. In my demography class, however, I showed several videos, usually accompanied by "graphic organizer" to guide the students in note taking. Not only, believe it or not, are there people who can explain some concepts better than I, but the videos inspired engaging conversations in my classroom which were far more lively than any I recall from forty years ago.

It has not escaped me that classroom technology extends beyond the multimedia station to every student's desk. Of course, many students are "trained" to keep their cell phones quiet at the threat of severe reprimand or worse, but why deny them access to so much information at the touch of their fingertips?   In, my first class, I asked something like "What's the population of Luxembourg?" and disdainfully watch their blank faces asking WHY CAN"T YOU TELL ME? before picking up my own

iPhone and asking Siri who replies, as of the moment I'm drafting this, "The population of Luxembourg is about 576,200." Any of these tools, especially students' smart phones and tablets, can be distractions. Properly used, however, they transform the "Let's look it up and try to remember to get back to it next time" of forty years ago, to "Let's find out now!"

My Students: Then and Now

"Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents." (Stein, 2013)

I suppose I could go on and on about Millennials, but I won't, first because it's getting old, and second because it simply doesn't appear to be about my students. Thirty years ago, when I taught at Washington University, then beginning to strengthen its reputation as an "elite" institution, my students were upper middle class, well prepared, and privileged. Perhaps the millennial stereotype fits students at such institutions today, but I really have no way of knowing. Most of my students at Gordon State College are, as described by "Professor X" in *In the Basement of the Ivory Tower*, generally "those whose names don't come up in the debates about advanced placement courses, adolescent overachievers, and cutthroat college admissions." Often first generation college students, many of our students are struggling to find their way. Often starting out with modest ambitions; they're simply not used to academic success. This is not entitlement; no, my students thirty years ago were the entitled ones.

I hesitate to generalize, though, for indeed, my students at Gordon State give meaning to the word "diversity." I teach high school valedictorians, and I teach developmental learning students; I teach students from small towns, from farms, and from inner-city Atlanta; I teach adolescents, and I occasionally teach sexagenarians. My challenge, therefore, is not to teach lazy entitled narcists, but to teach diverse students who often have simply fallen "into the cracks" in their previous academic endeavors.

Nonetheless, my students display two generational characteristics which I can't ignore. First, they are every bit as technologically savvy, though often not as materially well equipped, as their elite-

institution counterparts. "Hiding" cell phones on their laps, they are not content to just sit there, listen, and take notes. Second, students themselves report that pedagogic techniques emphasizing community learning are more engaging than those more directed toward individual learning. They report favoring learning strategies involving class discussion, simulations and role plays, small group discussions, and examples from the professor's own experience over more traditional text and lecture approaches. (Kraus and Sears, 2008)

Is it really such a departure from the past, however, that they simply don't like sitting there and listening to the professor talk? I would argue that "Active Learning," an expression I avoid because it has negative connotations to so many "traditionalists," has not only been with us for at least the last half-century, but was our preferred mode of learning as well. We had language labs, music recordings, science labs, nascent computer facilities, and even occasional student presentations, and they engaged us. Even the act of going into the library, transcribing census data, and then hand drawing the data onto charts and maps was active learning, which I myself found especially engaging, hence my choice of demography. The difference now is that there are so many more avenues to active learning, evolved through both technology and pedagogic creativity, and our students want to embrace them. Their enthusiasm at, for example, a "fishbowl discussion" of segregation, or a "chalk talk" exploring the nature of demographic theory is for me something to celebrate, not to lament.

Alan: Then and Now

I readily admit to having become a technology junkie. When I come across a technology that looks "cool," I look for a way to incorporate it into one (or all) of my classes. Often, what initially looked useful does not work well in the context of my subject, my teaching approach, or my student mix, and I end the "experiment" without regret. No technology works well for everyone. In feeding my technology habit, therefore, I look for tools which complement my own approach to the classroom.

When asked to define my approach to teaching, I emphasize two concepts. The first has always been part of my classroom, but it was only a few years ago that I learned the term for it, classroom immediacy, defined as behavior reducing the perceived distance, both physical and relational, between instructor and student. (Rocca, 2007) Such behavior has always been part of my teaching. I have always managed my classroom in close physical proximity to my students, moving about the classroom, trying to learn not just their names, but some of their individual peculiarities, using humor, making frequent eye contact, shaking hands when appropriate, even "high fiving." Such behavior has always felt natural to me, and I have never felt vulnerable or compromised. Despite my collegial interaction with my students, they know that I'm the professor and they're the students. After my twenty year break from higher education, I wondered if it would still work, fearing that in my fifties and sixties, I would not be able to relate to students as I could in my twenties and thirties. I was wrong. Students can tell who's really taking an interest in them and who's merely going through the motions, and today, I have so much more to share with them to help them pursue their dreams than I did "back in the day."

While immediacy has always been part of my approach to teaching, the second characteristic of my approach, collaboration, is more recent. The first thing that visitors to my classroom, who are always welcome, notice is the arrangement of the desks into teams, not just for specific team activities but throughout the class. I assign students to teams, chosen in advance to reflect and benefit from their diversity, on the first day of class as students enter the room. The team approach goes back to my first accounting class in 2007, when I came across an "ancillary" to the text called "Cooperative Learning and Instructors Guide," which intrigued me. (Ingram et al 2004) On the first day I taught accounting, I tried a "think-pair-share" on the question "What is accounting?" Seeing my classroom come alive with conversations among students, I was immediately hooked and over the last twelve years have made collaborative learning teams an integral part of my classroom. I often receive comments in my student evaluations such as "I was worried about the teams at first, but now I

really like them." Of course they do! What better way to tap into their preference for community learning activities?

Active, collaborative learning, enthusiastically embracing relevant technology, is just the ticket for engaging millennials. And it's not just millennials. When I taught my first evening class at Gordon State five years ago, I decided to drop some of the bells and whistles which one of my colleagues, not especially admiringly, once referred to as characteristic of a "game show host" approach to the classroom. I quickly learned, however, that my older students appreciate the active engagement of my approach even more than traditional age students. Had I only known on those Tuesday evenings in 1974!

Is teaching demography today different from 35 years ago? Of course! For me, teaching demography today is an active, collaborative process, integrating academic literature, a variety of media, and nearly a half century of my own experience both within and outside of academia into classes featuring lecture, discussion, and collaborative learning activities which engage my students in ways I could not have imagined forty years ago. Now, if only I could find dry erase markers as reliable as chalk…

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