Course Details

Instructor: Brian Powers. Ph.D.
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Phone: (510) 642-4766
Office: 488 Barrows Hall
Office hours: Sign Ups at: wejoinin.com/brpowers@berkeley.edu
Monday, Wednesday, 2:15 - 4; Friday, after 2, by appt.

GSI: Jaren Haber. Contact: jhaber@berkeley.edu.
ACES Facilitator Elise Levin-Guracar. Contact: elisesaadet@gmail.com

Lecture: Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 11-12
Location: 160 Kroeber

ACES course: Our course is included in the American Cultures Engaged Scholarship (ACES) program, so our students will have the opportunity to integrate their study of the sociology of education with service learning activities with educational programs of community partners affiliated with our course in Oakland. All Soc 113AC students carry out guided observational research over the semester at an educational study site, leading to a final course paper at the end of term. Our partner sites -- Oakland International High School, for immigrant, refugee and English learning youth, and after school programs operated through the OASES project of the East Bay Asian Youth Center -- welcome our students’ support and offer them supportive and structured opportunities to observe and learn about educational processes directly. All students will have a study site for a project, but study sites need not be limited to our community partners’ programs. You may use an appropriate program or project with which you already are involved as the location for your observation this term.

Sections and GSIs: We are fortunate to have sections and GSIs to support your work in the sociological study of education. Sections will meet in formal sessions once per week, in the first scheduled section meeting time. Half of our section meetings (in even numbered weeks 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 14) will be focused on review and discussion of course readings and lectures. Headings for these “academic” section sessions are highlighted in the course schedule (below) in blue. The other half of our sections will be dedicated to developing your skills in conducting observations at your educational study sites and analyzing your observations sociologically using course concepts and readings. For these “field engagement section sessions” in odd numbered weeks you will need to submit before section a one-page, single-spaced field note describing and reflecting on your experience observing at your study site. Headings for these are highlighted in yellow in the course schedule!

GSI Facilitated Workshops for Research and
Writing analyzing their observations, and writing their midterm and final papers. These workshops will supplement GSI office hours and will be held in weeks 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, and 14. A theme will be announced for these workshops, but students can bring up topics for group consideration as well. We expect students to attend at least TWO of these workshops over the semester.


Online readings: Several items of required reading are available electronically at the course bcourses site (bcourses.berkeley.edu) and through the UCB library’s e-books collection (site.ebrary.com/lib/berkeley/)

Electronic Readings at bcourses: Required readings not in the Arum and not available electronically on oskicat are available electronically at our course bcourses site. Look for readings in the FILES tool, in the Assigned Course Readings folder, organized in folders for the week they are assigned to be read.

Course Background

This course examines social influences on education and, in turn, the effects of education and schooling on the social experiences and identities of individuals and groups in contemporary society. We thus will look at the effects of schooling on the structure of society itself. To understand why teaching and learning have taken the form we are familiar with in “standard model” of schooling, our main focus is on the social “embeddedness” of schooling in the culture and institutions of the contemporary US. We also look at examples of the organization, content and effects of education in other countries, and at different moments of historical time in the US.

As an AC course we look at the social and institutional dynamics of education to better understand differences in the experiences with schooling of the principal racial and cultural groups in the US. As we explore core sociological themes of order, power, change, difference and equality in the organization and delivery of education in the US, we will be foregrounding systematic differences in the ways schools have worked for different racial groups in the racially configured American social order. A strong interest in this class is “the achievement gap” and recent policy debates about changing schools to try to reduce systemic intergroup differences in students’ achievement and attainment.

Throughout this course we explore the paradox that, although education is conventionally assumed to be a race-blind, meritocratic institution of opportunity and mobility, in the US and elsewhere, it is also systematically linked to disparities in the educational achievement and social and occupational attainments of individuals, especially those in different races and social classes.

In the readings, lectures, small group discussions, visual media, and students research based assignments, we study how the numerous *social* effects of schooling emerge as schools carry out their routine tasks of cultivating skills, knowledge, and values in learners, preparing young people to contribute to the well-being of their families, workplaces, and communities.
All students will apply their learning about the social foundations and effects of schooling in a semester-long study project, in which they will observe teaching and learning activities at a teaching and learning site of their choice. They will conduct research with guidance from lectures and posted handouts, leading to a short, original analytical or interpretive paper at the end of the term about schooling in the real world.

**Course Requirements**

The instructor reserves the right to make modest, announced adjustments to the schedule of assignments, the weighting of assignments, and the schedule of readings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Handout date</th>
<th>Due date</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Occasional one-page overnight quizzes</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Part of 20% Section Grade</td>
<td>1 page response to a prompt question based on a specific reading assignment(s) or course themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Field Note 1</td>
<td>Week 2 M, January 25</td>
<td>Week 3 M, February 1</td>
<td>Part of 20% Research Grade - 3 points</td>
<td>defining a plan for studying a teaching and learning venue of your choice</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Paper 1 High School and Its Effects on Educational Attainments</td>
<td>Week 2 F, January 29</td>
<td>Week 7 W, March 1</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Comparison of formal learning settings and educational attainments of two individuals: high schools, communities and post high school attainments 5-7 pages based on interview data</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Field Note 2</td>
<td>Week 3 M, February 1</td>
<td>Week 5 M, February 17</td>
<td>Part of 20% Research Grade - 3 points</td>
<td>1 page on visiting your study site: background, context and first impressions</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Field Note 3</td>
<td>Week 5 M, February 17</td>
<td>Week 8 M, March 7</td>
<td>Part of 20% Research Grade - 3 points</td>
<td>1 page on the sociological significance of a teaching and learning activity observed at your study site</td>
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<td>6. Field Note 4</td>
<td>Week 8 M, March 7</td>
<td>Week 9 W, March 16</td>
<td>Part of 20% Research Grade – 3 points</td>
<td>1 page summarizing the sociological significance for students from different social backgrounds of several teaching and learning activities observed at your study site</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Project Field</td>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Week 11</td>
<td>Part of 20%</td>
<td>3 Page Status Report on Course</td>
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Report 1
Report on Five Interviews or Three Observations with Bibliography

|        | W, March 16 | M, April 4 | Research Grade – 5 points | Research Project: Emerging Analytical Themes from the Field |

8. Project Field Report 2
Preliminary Thesis Statement and Inventory of Data and Bibliography

|        | Week 11 M, April 4 | Week 13 M, April 18 | Part of 20% Research Grade – 5 points | Status Report on Course Research Project: Data Round-up, Thesis, Evidence, and your Argument |

9. Paper 2 Educational Field Study

|        | Week 12 M, April 11 | RRR Week W, May 4 | 30% | 8-10 Page Paper: Report on a Field Study of Educational Practice |

8. Final Exam

|        | Week 14 F, April 29 | Tuesday, May 10, 7-10 pm | 10% | Take home essay distributed/posted in the last week of classes. |

Note: Make sure your exam schedule does not conflict with obligations for other classes

Grading and Credit

All requirements must be met for course credit. All assignments must be completed and submitted for this class. A missing assignment, even a quiz, will result in an “F” for the course.

Participation/Section Grade – 20 percent

Full credit for your participation grade requires:

- At least one visit to professor office hours. You are welcome to visit alone or in a group. We may schedule occasional Sociological Chat Sessions.
- A visit to your GSI office hours.
- Attendance at all Section Meetings – 2 unexcused absences are allowed
- Attendance at the GSI Facilitated Research and Writing Workshops – at least 2x over the semester
- Conscientious and Regular Activity (as specified, if specified) at your Educational Study Site
- Active Participation in Section Activities – volunteering field notes for discussion; heading group work; commenting constructively on peers’ and colleagues ideas.
- At least three contributions to the bcourses conversations, one in each of three areas:
  - A response or comment that you post on course materials, including readings, lectures, or media.
  - A comment or response you post to another posting already up at a discussion.
  - A comment on an incident, topic, issue on campus or in the real world which you find sociologically interesting and to which you can apply sociological ideas.
Satisfactory submission of responses to several announced overnight quizzes covering course content, interpretation, and application of course readings, graded P/NP. They will not be surprise quizzes.

Grades

Except for the section grade, course grades will be based assessment of on written work. Papers will be graded for their sociological reasoning, and not for writing mechanics or language skills per se, but students’ weaknesses in expository writing and inattention to details of presentation will be noted and can affect grades, especially when they obscure or weaken students’ sociological thinking.

Successful papers are original, well-organized, well-researched and well-supported, with ideas clearly expressed in solid prose. Papers submitted that literally reflect the guidelines of course assignments, even if they do so in a polished way, are considered “good work,” and can be expected to earn a grade of B. As an incentive for creative thinking and writing, grades higher than a B should reflect students’ original contribution to the course material, weaving together themes and material from different parts of the curriculum, reflecting students’ creativity, imagination, initiative, independent scholarship and special insights in ways that show initiative, diligence, and add value to the assignment.

Grading Scale

The grades for the three major assignments for this course, as well as the final course grade, will be set using letter grades and the standard 4-point GPA scale. That scale will determine the weighted point value of each letter-graded assignment grade toward a final course grade.

See http://registrar.berkeley.edu/Default.aspx?PageID=gradeskey.html: A (4), A- (3.7), B+ (3.3), B (3), B- (2.7), C+ (2.3), C (2), C- (1.7), D+ (1.3), D (1), D- (0.7).

Course Materials


Additional required materials will be made available at the course website at bcourses in the FILES folder.

PowerPoint slides, lecture notes and study guides will be posted online. These will summarize and supplement lectures and conversations in class. These items will be posted at the “Files” tab at the course site. Please use these materials to help integrate readings, lectures and class discussions in your understanding of the course.

Course Schedule

Note: This segment of the syllabus is a map, not a train schedule. Lectures may fall out of sync with the schedule of assigned readings. Please read on schedule to manage the material assigned for the class. Students need not read each item on or for the designated date. The dates were attached to readings to help students pace themselves.
**Week 1: Education and Sociology**  Overview of Education and Sociology – Social structure, the school, the individual, processes of social attainment.

*Wednesday, January 20*
- Packet of Media Clips from Press on US Education Issues and Some from Abroad

*Friday, January 22*

**Week 2: States of American Education: The Achievement Gap and Social Embeddedness of Education**

*Monday, January 25*

*Wednesday, January 27*

*Friday, January 29*

**SECTION FOCUS: 2 A**
Sociology and the study of Education
Structural analysis and the role of policy shaping schools
Text Focus: Russakoff on approach
to the “achievement gap” in Newark, NJ. Lessons learned?

**NO WORKSHOP THIS WEEK**

**Week 3: The Experience of the Socially Situated School**

*Monday, February 1*

*Wednesday, February 3*
  o RECOMMENDED: Chapter 4, “Do I Make My Kids Smart or Get them Into College?” pp. 78 – 91.

Friday, February 5

SECTION FOCUS 3B
The “LONG PROJECT”
Submit and discuss in class: FN 1
What is your possible educational study topic and preferred study site?
Text possibility: Sacks and BHS.

WORKSHOP THEME
The “SHORT PROJECT:”
Selecting an interviewee for the one-on-one educational comparison for the midterm.

Week 4: Sociological Theory Hierarchies, Harmony and Conflict and the Contributions of Education.

Monday, February 9

Wednesday, February 11

Friday, February 13

FILM SCREENING:

SECTION FOCUS 4A
The Achievement Gap and Reasons for it: Structural, Institutional, and Individual Factors.
Text Focus: Suskind on Cedric Jennings; “The Class”

NO WORKSHOP THIS WEEK

Week 5: The Forms of Capital in Education
Monday, February 15


_PRESIDENTS’ DAY HOLIDAY – classes not in session_

Wednesday, February 17


Friday, February 19


_Screening: The Class (continued)_

SECTION FOCUS 5 B

Discuss and Prepare for FN 2
Beginning a Set of Observations
Describing the venue, first impressions;
the community and demographics
of the study site context
Possible Text Focus: Relevance of Theory and Four Capitals

WORKSHOP THEME

Searching Databases online:
Ed.-Data: California Dept of Education
school profiles; US Census as data source
for community profiles

Week 6: Organizational Aspects of Education: Governance and Financing

Monday, February 22


Wednesday, February 24


Friday, February 26


_FILM SCREENING: Making the Grade, KQED TV, 1999_
SECTION FOCUS 6A
Socially situated schooling and theoretical perspectives in the sociology of education
Text Focus: Comparison of Theoretical Perspectives

NO WORKSHOP THIS WEEK

Week 7: Working Schools: Tracking, Class Size, Culturally Relevant Teaching

Monday, February 29

Wednesday, March 2

Friday, March 4

RECOMMENDED

SECTION FOCUS 7B
Brainstorming for FN 3, due week 8
First observations in the field;
Describing teaching and learning, the curriculum, pedagogy styles, organizational features
Text Focus: Oakes; Delpit

WORKSHOP THEME
What is sociologically important in your study site?
Strategies to capture how social structures, institutions, and
socially located individuals affect the design of schooling, its practices, and effects?

**Week 8. Improving Access and Policies of Inclusion**

*Monday, March 8*
- Claude Goldenberg, “On Teaching English Learners.” *American Educator* Summer 2013, pp. 8-23 (article jumps through pages through this magazine piece; see pp. 42 - 44 for references).

*Wednesday, March 10*

*Friday, March 12*

**SECTION FOCUS 8A**
Public and Institutional Authority in the design of education, disparities in funding patterns, and differential access to educational “goods.”
Text Focus: Goldenberg; Special ed; Edsource documents on California school funding and reform.

**WORKSHOP THEME**
How to answer pose and answer “how?” and “why?” questions about sociologically significant features of schooling that you have observed.

**Week 9: Inclusion Through the Curriculum and Public Desegregation Policy**

*Monday, March 16*

*Wednesday, March 18*

*Friday, March 20*

**FILM SCREENING:** *Eyes on the Prize: The Keys to the Kingdom: The Battle over School Desegregation in “Liberal” Boston in 1974*

**SECTION FOCUS 9B**
Brainstorm for FN 4, due after Spring Break:
A second set of field observations linking
Week 10. Social Class and Education (Economic Inequality)

Monday, March 30


Wednesday, April 1


Friday, April 3


SECTION FOCUS 10 A

Exploring Overt and Covert Stratification in Education.
Text Focus: Lareau; Chung

WORKSHOP THEME

Neutralizing Inequalities: Activities of Community Partners and other Study Sites. Effects of Mentoring and After School programs; Models of Language Development; Inclusive Schooling;

Week 11: Identity Construction and Structural Reproduction Through Ordinary Life in Schools

Monday, April 6

- #12 Shamus Rahman Khan, “Privilege.” In Arum, Beattie, and Ford, *Structure*, pp. 120 135

Wednesday, April 8

Friday, April 10

**SECTION FOCUS 11 B**
Brainstorm for Project Field Report 1, due Week 12:
Describe three observations that help to define study variables, defining features of social context that affect schooling and educational effects; or features of the educational setting and practice that affect students’ characteristics (identities, aspirations, achievement). Link incident selected to course texts.

**Week 12: Racial Construction (by Policy) and Self Construction in Schools**

Monday, April 13

Wednesday, April 15

Friday, April 17

**SECTION FOCUS 12 A**
Educational Design and Practice Reflecting and Reconstituting Racial Categories in Identity and Attainment:
Text Focus: *Diversity Report; Gonzales*

**WORKSHOP THEME**
Preparing for Second Project Field Report, due week 13 Thesis Claim and Data Roundup

**Week 13: Higher Educational Attainment: Institutional Processes and “Racial” Paths**

Monday, April 20
**Wednesday, April 22**

  - Online resource with CALNET ID
  - [http://oskicat.berkeley.edu/search~S55/?tAsian+American+Achievement+Paradox/1%2C1%2C2%2CB/frameset&FF=1%2C%2C2](http://oskicat.berkeley.edu/search~S55/?tAsian+American+Achievement+Paradox/1%2C1%2C2%2CB/frameset&FF=1%2C%2C2)

**Friday, April 24**

**SECTION FOCUS 13 B**

Review and Learn from Findings in Second Project Field Report

**Week 14: Reforms in US Education. “The Charter Revolution” and Newark again**

**Monday, April 27**


**Wednesday, April 29**

**Audio-cast:**

*Fresh Air*, with Terry Gross, National Public Radio.

  September 21, 2015

  Interview with Dale Russakoff on *The Prize*


**Friday, May 1**


**SECTION FOCUS 14 A**

Paper Writing Workshop

Thesis Statement; Supporting Evidence; Integration of Research and Theory

**WORKSHOP THEME**

Reviewing Paper Drafts Together
Course Format

This course requires independent reading and synthesis of assigned materials. It is important for you to show in your writings that you understand the meaning of the work of particular course authors and course concepts and that you know how to apply the ideas to issues in the social world, more than that you simply know what someone said or wrote on a specific topic.

The course has several components:

- MWF Course Meetings – We will loosely follow a lecture format. Sessions have a theme and curricular goals. Class time will not be used exclusively in formal exposition of course material by the instructor – the typical lecture. Group work, full class discussion, and media presentations will take place in “lectures.” Students are responsible for understanding the linkages between in-class activities, the learning goals of the class and the content of readings in the syllabus, although the framing conversation by the instructor will make these connections clear.
  - Sections
  - Reading assignments
  - Research tasks/ACES
  - Media (audio/video, tables and charts, still images)
  - Free writes
  - PowerPoint presentations
  - Supplementary postings from the news media

These components complement and reinforce one another. They have been chosen to help you understand the content of course ideas and help you apply them to topics in the real world and research papers that will require you to know, understand, and apply concepts at play in the world of educational research and practice.

Each class session will address a set of concepts drawn from readings, with some data, references to the real world, or references to course media. To do well in this course you will have to attend lectures. However, success in this class requires more effort. The content of lectures will not be limited to facts you need to know for an exam. Instead, lectures are opportunities for you to observe and practice sociological thinking.

Please do not allow yourself to drift or mistakenly think that nothing of value is taking place in class discussions or presentations. If you find yourself thinking that way, see me for help getting back on track.

Course Sites: bcourses.berkeley.edu

You will need immediate and regular internet access to the course site. At bcourses, I will post:

- Administrative announcements
- Downloadable assignment instructions
- Handouts
- Power Points, occasional lecture notes, and media stories and links

Access to the course site is also necessary for you to participate in online course discussion groups at bcourses DISCUSSIONS.
Make sure you have an active email account on record with the registrar (bearfacts.berkeley.edu) that you actually look at. I will also email you often via bcourses, which uses an automatically generated course mailing list from the registrar’s data base of student information. I will use the course web site starting today, to which you will have access automatically as an enrolled student.

**Office Hours and Contact Information**

Email is the best way to communicate with me, at brpowers@berkeley.edu.

My office hours will be in 488 Barrows Hall, on Monday, Wednesday, 2:15 - 4; Friday after 2, by appt.

It is best to sign up for office hours in advance at wejoinin.com/brpowers@berkeley.edu. Advance requests for office hours get priority. If others are waiting, please circulate a sign-up sheet to establish an order.

**Each student must visit at least one office hour with me as an individual or in group before Week 13 for participation credit. We can arrange conversations on particular topics as the semester moves along.**

**Assignments**

All assignments must be submitted on paper in class or section as directed and electronically through the bcourses site under the “Assignments” tab. PLEASE DO NOT EMAIL WORK TO US WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION.

Course papers must be typed, double-spaced, on one side of the page in 12-pt font (no smaller) and with one-inch margins. You are responsible for keeping a backup of all work submitted. If any work is misplaced, you must be able to furnish a duplicate.

**Course Citizenship**

*Email Etiquette*

When you use email, please remember to write clearly and professionally. Imagine that you are speaking directly to your recipient when you write an email, and monitor the content, tone, and attitude of your message accordingly. Please avoid writing emails in a state of panic or extreme stress. If you do not receive a response from me or your GSI when you wish, please remember there other students in the course who may be contacting me, and I have other obligations, so I will appreciate your patience.

Despite the many advantages of email, it may not be the best venue for all concerns students have. For example, it is not a good means to resolve issues you may have about the evaluation and grading of your work. It is better to come to office hours to discuss such a topic.

Some emails are not always welcome, especially those that re-ask a question that has been addressed in class, at the course site as an announcement, or in an email to the class. Pay attention to notifications of updates, schedule changes, new materials, and other clarifications. By all means use email for clarification, but monitor your use. Before hitting the send button on a message for information about course procedures, please double check for earlier information and updates.
Emailing the GSIs

Your GSI is an accomplished, advanced student and deserves your respect and support for the role played in supporting your sociological learning. Please write with respect and in ways that respect your GSI’s time. Please don’t anticipate instant responses from your GSIs if you email. Your GSIs will set policy for how best to communicate with them.

THE MANDATORY CAMPUS HONOR CODE

Plagiarism and academic dishonesty.

The campus administration has asked that all instructors refer students to the campus-wide statement of principle and policy about academic integrity and honesty, and I am happy to do so in this class. This campus-wide commitment to an honor code adopted was adopted by the ASUC Senate and the administration.

Visit the website www.asuc.org/honorcode information on the Honor Code movement.

You should be aware that we will be especially vigilant in responding to academic dishonesty and plagiarism in this class.

MOST IMPORTANT DETAILS:

- You must submit work written by you, in your own words, following a plan of your own design, unless explicitly told otherwise by your teacher (in a collaborative project cleared for credit).
- You must properly cite sources of all work that is not your own.
- Consult me for advice in case of uncertainty.

You should be aware that penalties for plagiarism are outlined by the university and can include expulsion. Students in my classes have been failed for the entire course for breaching rules of academic honesty. When in doubt about proper use and citations of other’s writings in your work, ask for guidance.

Review the principles and polices pertaining to Academic Honesty and penalties for violations at the Center for Student Conduct site:

Visit the website www.asuc.org/honorcode information on the Honor Code movement.

A mutual agreement

In Sociology 113AC, I will be present during lectures with an agenda for discussion and reflection based on curricular readings and supplemental sources. I will be available for questions and discussion in office time and via email. I will work at mastering new electronic technologies for to support your learning and use those that I already know. I will post notes, reading summaries, and study questions, as needed, along with power point presentation files at the course website. I will offer staged guidance as you conduct your research, including written handouts, in class elaborations, demonstrations, and help provide the tools to enable you to carry it out successfully. I will work with course readers to assure that your work is evaluated thoughtfully, constructively, and fairly.
If you enroll in this course I expect that you will complete all course assignments, make an effort to introduce yourself to me or the reader(s), keep up with the readings and devote as much time to this course and its learning tasks as you devote to other courses with equivalent unit value, especially those closest to your professional aspirations and academic specialization.

I ask that you open your mind to theories about society that are unfamiliar to you; seek out opportunities to learn with and learn from your co-course members; and continually think about ways to participate in the class sessions, especially to teach your co-course members about the social world you know about may be different from theirs;

I hope that you will listen respectfully and openly to ideas that may challenge your own, and contact course personnel if you need help sorting through new ideas about new parts of the social world.

I expect you to attend all lectures, including video showings, and reserve the right to take attendance at different points in the semester. I ask that you be prepared to participate in discussions that emerge during class sessions.

**Entering the scholarly conversation**

The best way to grow intellectually through the material in the class is to develop your own dialogue with it. Sociology is a skeptical field, asking questions about the world in an effort to make some novel sense of it. You should feel free to be as demanding of sociology as it is of the world it analyzes. Do not expect to get much from this course unless you invest time and energy in the readings, lectures and research.

**Following the Direction of the Course**

Consider this syllabus a map of the territory in sociology and the social world we will cover in readings, lectures, and other course activities. It does not describe a strict timetable for what will be covered and exactly when materials will be explicitly addressed. Lectures and class activities may move in and out of sync with the schedule of assigned readings. When this happens, I will always tell you which readings are relevant to particular lectures, media presentations, or course activities.

**Topics and Learning Goals**

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Recognize links between the theories and methods of sociology and the conduct of educational studies.
- Appreciate the stratified nature of education design, practice, and outcomes as systematically linked to a racially diverse, hierarchical and economically unequal social order.
- Recognize the structure and some components of educational processes and institutions.
- Distinguish the perspectives on educational thinking, practice, and effects available from sociology from those provided by other disciplines.
- Trace the embeddedness of educational processes and institutions in social and historical contexts.
- Identify social reasons for the diversity of educational practices, forms, and their effects.
• Conduct research at a formal learning site and observe its form, practices, technologies, social relationships and create an analytical account of reasons for its particular characteristics in sociological terms, using course texts as exemplars and inspiration.

**Topical and Controversial Material**

Conversations about social structure and the self inevitably touch on the subject of differences and disparities in the experiences of individuals and members of social groups, including those defined by race and other socially-defined characteristics. These can be sensitive matters to address, mostly because we are unused to talking about them in analytical terms as artifacts of social processes, as opposed to speaking of them as “natural” differences or regarding them in moralistic and judgmental terms, as matters of personal opinion or subjective experience. It is easy for them to stir up passions and fan misunderstandings because the ideas often touch on our identities and experiences. This class looks directly at experiences and disparities of the races, genders and other groups in education, but you should pay close attention to the *institutional* view it follows in exploring group disparities and the ways we think about them analytically.

Since we assume that race is a concept that is a creation of the social world which somewhat impersonally imposes interpretations of their personal attributes upon individuals and groups, we feel a bit more comfortable in sociology taking up topics often viewed as too hot to handle in general conversation. Based in the approaches available in our field, this course shows the parts institutions like schooling have played in creating and making use of racial and other forms of categorical classifications in the US.

**Social Ideals and Human Possibilities: Fairness**

Most sociologists are motivated by hopes that the benefits of systems of human cooperation be fully realized and distributed fairly and widely among individuals or groups differently situated in the social order. American ideals about equality, fair play, and shared values define a high standard for our society to live up to, with hopes and expectations of the fruits of social cooperation equally high. The realities of social life are often experienced as disappointing. Sociology helps us measure the distance between reality and the ideals and potential of society. It also suggests reasons for the gaps between hopes and disappointing realities and it sketches out possible pathways and strategies of action to narrow the gap between them.

This is an important point for anyone considering this class to consider. To follow the logic of the course, students may need to entertain some different assumptions about the world they already know pretty well, including topics on race and other social differences. The course has been designed to create space for rational and research-based reflection about different kinds of experiences in the US. In examining the workings of social institutions and their effects on individuals’ attainments and life experiences, we want to avoid the “blame game” that can emerge (or is thought to emerge) when this set of topics arise. Please remember we are not trying to assign personal responsibility or induce guilt for aspects of US historical and social development that have worked out differently for different groups in the population.