Formal learning in Western societies usually emphasizes information assimilation rather than active experience. This article reports the application of experiential learning to a course in the social consequences of disability. Although the traditional readings-lecture-examination method is also used, students are encouraged to "learn by doing" on two levels: by participating in the world of the handicapped and by managing their own learning processes. Students are thus stimulated to develop self-awareness concerning both their attitudes toward the handicapped and their attitudes toward learning.

The Social Consequences of Disability

An Experiential Approach

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The policies of deinstitutionalization and public school mainstreaming are moving the handicapped into general society at a steady rate. This trend is sustained by a new social movement of the disabled which presses for even more integration. But although change is occurring, there is much to be learned. Both able-bodied and disabled people require information and intellectual stimulation concerning the place of disabled individuals in society.

A sociology course entitled "The Social Consequences of Disability" has been developed in an attempt to stimulate comprehension of disability as a social characteristic. Course topics range comprehensively from social-psychological adjustment to the political and economic implications of disability. An equally broad range of student interests is brought to the course, since the topic attracts students from psychology, counseling, social work, special education, gerontology, physical therapy,

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speech therapy, and nursing, as well as sociology. All students meet the prerequisite of having had an introductory sociology course or two other social science courses, and students must hold either upper-division or graduate-level standing at the time they take the course. For sociology majors the course fits into an informal career track consisting of courses in social problems, sociology of aging, medical sociology, and the social consequences of disability. Furthermore, the disability course is cross-listed for credit in gerontology and social work, and is applied toward external credit in physical therapy, speech therapy, nursing, and special education. Such an interdisciplinary foundation supports the purpose of studying disabled individuals in a broad social context and also offers an opportunity to demonstrate the sociological perspective to a diverse audience.

The purpose of this article is to describe a teaching/learning approach which presents sociological concepts and methods while meeting a variety of students needs. Specifically, The Social Consequences of Disability course encourages students to discover relationships between personal feelings, real-world experiences, and academic topics concerning disability. The course also allows students to exercise personal responsibility for accomplishing their own goals within a framework of individual needs and academic standards. Such a nontraditional approach serves two purposes. First, it meets the needs of a highly varied student population, and second, it elicits students' subjective involvement in the learning process.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

An active involvement of self in the learning process is especially suitable to sociology because experiential learning is supported by the concept of *verstehen,* or subjective understanding. The concept of verstehen has usually been applied in field research, but it also can be employed in the learning process. A useful interpretation of the term states that "investigators [students] must become sufficiently involved in situations to be

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able to get inside the subjective world of actors" (Turner, 1978). By getting close to the world of the handicapped, students can take their own insights and behavior into account and thus expand their comprehension of the subject. Student values and attitudes can be subject matter which is encountered and examined in light of sociological concepts and research findings.

This relationship between personal awareness and broader patterns and concepts is developed throughout The Social Consequences of Disability course. During course projects, students acquire experiences which can be interpreted sociologically and can also contribute to self-awareness. For example, when a student simulated the hearing impairment and hand deformity with which her son had been born, she developed a personal comprehension of the alienation concept. Having experienced depersonalization and powerlessness during the simulation, the student could better comprehend the isolating effects of disability. She also acquired insight into her own response to the child, learning that her attempts to "help" him could be interpreted as a form of social control.

Personal involvement also produces humorous situations. One woman simulated blindness with dark glasses and white cane, went to a local restaurant for dinner with her husband, and heard later that gossips had perceived her as "another woman" stepping out with the husband! Apparently the disability had become her most identifying characteristic, although her hairstyle and clothes had not changed.

According to learning theorists, such personal involvement has several advantages. First, while "learning by doing" is only one of several learning processes, active learning reinforces other learning forms by making connections to the real world and to the student's feelings and values (Bruner, 1966; Postman and Weingartner, 1969). Second, experiential learning is associated with student perception and control over the learning process and thus facilitates growth in personal awareness and problem-solving (Chickering, 1976; Coleman, 1976). Third, this instructional method is flexible according to individual needs and abilities (Knowles, 1973). These advantages are appropriate to a new area,

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such as the sociology of disability. Since standard topics and methods are not yet established, researchers and students should use the full arsenal of exploratory tools, including subjective awareness and active participation.

COURSE PROCESS

Teaching this course is largely a matter of coordinating and integrating experiential learning with information assimilation. A syllabus provides the selection of major topics within a time framework. The course begins with an examination of demographic and cross-cultural characteristics of disability, and then builds from the microsociological topics of attitudes, adjustment, and interaction to the macrosociological perspective of the disabled as a minority group sharing similar social experiences in social institutions such as the family, religion, and economy. Lectures, readings, and examinations are initiated by the instructor. Within the guidelines of the syllabus, instructor and students negotiate concerning individual projects and particular experiences appropriate to the course and student interest. Student experiences are consistently associated with reading material. Although the existing literature is relatively small and widely dispersed through several disciplines, adequate material is available for both required classwork and individual projects.[1]

The course process itself becomes part of the learning experience and is often discussed in class. Because students make decisions concerning selection, management, and evaluation of coursework, they have a personal investment in the class. According to Patton (1977), such involvement produces deeper and more lasting learning.

CHOOSING

In the first class meeting students are introduced to the idea of student involvement in the learning process and to the possibility of applying concrete experiences toward class credit. Along with

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a syllabus describing general topic areas, basic readings, and approximate time-frames, students receive a list of possible projects. The list suggests short experiences, such as disability simulation, interviews with handicapped adults, attendance at conferences concerning disability, and tours of facilities for the handicapped. From contacts with disabled adults in the community, the instructor also presents lists of more extended community projects and activities in which students can participate. For example, an advocacy group planning an "awareness week" requested that a student prepare a slide presentation showing methods for assisting disabled individuals in public. Another student observed local efforts to establish recreational programs for the disabled and linked his observations to a review of the literature. Each of these projects is associated with a particular topic area, so a deadline for completing each project is known in advance. Students may select several small, short-term projects or they may choose a single, semester-long project.

Choosing projects operates directly in relation to the evaluation process; therefore, the grading procedure is also presented in the first class meeting. Students are given the semester grading scale, which shows the number of points necessary for each letter grade. Each project or test has a known point value, and students may select individual means for accumulating points; all projects are negotiable, so possible points and deadlines are variable. Stasz (1976) has described a similar grading system, "contract menu grading," which enables students to combine activities of varying weight toward the semester grade.

The idea that students should be sensitive to their own feelings and assumptions about people with handicaps is also presented as part of the learning process and as a good source of project ideas. Most students are "concerned" about the handicapped. They may want to know how the handicapped find jobs, housing, or suitable recreation. These concerns can be investigated as projects, and they can also be used as probes for students to discover their own feelings and values about the handicapped. Students also are given the opportunity to take tests which measure their attitudes toward the handicapped. While individual scores remain confi-

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dential, class results are discussed and become the basis for inquiry into the idea of the handicapped as a minority group. When research findings concerning attitudes toward the handicapped are presented in class, students may refer to their own scores for comparison.

By actively participating in the examination of their own assumptions and in the investigation of disabled persons' social environments, students may experience attitude change. Although the relationship of active participation to attitude change is not fully understood, research indicates that new experiences produce new information about oneself, others, and the environment. New information may alter beliefs and thus alter the nature of interaction with others (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). When students search through and utilize their own belief systems to initiate projects, they confront the significance of attitudes to social relationships. From this heightened awareness, more positive attitudes may arise.

Attitudes and values are confronted again when students utilize the various assumptions implicit in their chosen professions for selecting projects. Physical therapists, social workers, nurses, gerontology students, police officers, and counselors are asked to probe their professional ideologies. How are occupational doctrines likely to direct responses to the handicapped? One state social worker who inspects facilities for the handicapped used an interview experience as an opportunity to discover a handicapped person's view of certain facilities. What she discovered was that she was extremely anxious about meeting a severely disabled person who had complaints about the licensing procedure, and that he was nervous about talking with her. Their interview nearly failed to take place. When it did, they gave each other insight into a complicated situation, and the social worker stated in her report that although she felt the handicapped person's complaints were shortsighted, she could see that he had been hurt by a rigid system. Since she was in a position to enforce regulations, she perceived a responsibility to be less strict and to consider more variation.

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Other choices are made in addition to the selection of projects. Class field trips are selected by students. One semester, students chose to tour a rehabilitation center *during semester break* in order to have more time there. When relevant events, such as conferences on developmental disabilities, occur in the community, students may choose to attend for class credit. When handicapped individuals are members of the class, they may choose to lead discussion of their social experiences. For example, a recently blinded student led a class discussion of the socialization process he had experienced in a state rehabilitation center. Repeatedly he made the point that the center "taught him how to be a blind man" by teaching him to be pleasant and accept help graciously. His presentation led to discussion of socialization and social control.

Choice of coursework is not entirely granted to students, for the instructor has a responsibility to maintain standards appropriate to upper-division and graduate students. All proposed coursework is approved by the instructor on the written contract. However, both student and instructor may open renegotiations of the contract.

MANAGING

The class as a group frequently discusses the progress of the course and may alter its direction. If, for example, microsociological topics (such as interaction patterns between the able-bodied and the disabled) have been emphasized, students may negotiate to modify the direction of lectures and experiences. Instructor-student relationships are collaborative, with students as active partners in decision-making.

Most student management occurs during execution of projects, however. While the instructor is available as a resource person, students are encouraged to utilize the expertise of service agency personnel, handicapped individuals, library materials, and other students. Since the course attracts students with diverse abilities and backgrounds, one student may benefit from anoth-

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er's community contacts or reading materials. Different viewpoints sometimes do produce conflict, however. Throughout one semester a police officer in the class reminded the younger students that rehabilitation does not prepare the disabled for emergency situations, that rehabilitation trains the handicapped to be passive. When he challenged the good intentions of rehabilitation specialists he sparked a student investigation of physical therapists' goals in rehabilitation. Findings showed that physical therapy students were more concerned with teaching mobility than with teaching initiative.

Disability simulation is a suggested project which calls for student management within instructor-defined guidelines. Those students who choose to be "impaired" for four hours choose their disability—visual impairment, hearing impairment, wheelchair confinement, facial disfigurement, or another disability. The instructor helps to provide necessary equipment (such as scars from the theater department, sunglasses with waxed paper taped behind the lenses to simulate cataracts, earplugs and chest-type hearing aids, or wheelchairs). Students locate an assistant to help with mobility and to note responses of the able-bodied public. A written report summarizes the physical, social, and emotional experience—and it nearly always reports high anxiety about the simulation. Students who choose this project tend to refer to it in class discussions throughout the semester.

Some students manage this project very cautiously; some challenge others and themselves by testing social expectations for the handicapped. A "facially disfigured" girl tried to buy makeup in a department store and could not get service. A woman student who chose wheelchair confinement found her college-aged son too depressed to be her escort; he didn't want to imagine her as "helpless." When a physical therapy student fell out of "his" wheelchair, he was deeply embarrassed about asking someone to pick him up. Even students who restricted their simulations to less risky situations experienced dependence as part of their role. In this case, managing the experience developed awareness of relative powerlessness.

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The temporary acquisition of disability increases both personal and sociological awareness of the labeling process. Students perceive themselves identified as deviants and the experience produces a small degree of affiliation with truly disabled persons. As one able-bodied student reported after attending a new church in a wheelchair and receiving cold stares from the congregation, "I wanted to shout, 'We have a right to come to church, too!'" To be designated different and inferior on the basis of a visible physical characteristic emphasizes the social processes of categorization and social control.

But perhaps the most important aspect of managing one's learning projects occurs when things go wrong. Students work with the instructor to plan projects but very often find the project developing a character of its own, and then must decide how to manage this challenge.

One student planned to do a literature search on the economic aspects of disability. However, even extensive efforts produced little material and she was forced to redirect her efforts to interviews with disabled persons, medical supply store owners, and rehabilitation counselors. After learning the potentially high cost of disability, the student questioned the lack of professional literature available.

It is in the management process that student-instructor collaboration can be most productive. This is an opportunity for the instructor to offer a hands-on experience with the sociological tools, participant observation, the interview, and the questionnaire. For example, one semester-long project involved documentation of a community decision-making process for locating a small housing facility for disabled persons. The student investigator conducted systematic interviews, kept a newspaper file, and observed meetings held by those who protested against the facility. Although the student had lived in the small city for 40 years, she discovered that her own perception of rational, humane community leadership was undermined by the emotional response to disabled adults which she observed. The disabled persons awaiting the accessible housing were found to be

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powerless in the face of resistance from important families and city leaders; at semester's end the housing facility had not yet been accepted. Another student conducted a systematic random-sample telephone survey of church programs available to the disabled. In a metropolitan area of 330,000 she found three accessible churches which were serving individuals with disabilities. The deeply religious student questioned the contradiction of religious teachings and church practices regarding a disadvantaged group, and she initiated an outreach program in her own church.

Such projects require the instructor to guide student work toward systematic analysis and interpretation. Since many students in the course are not sociology majors, actively managing sociological projects is a potentially exciting, but challenging, process.

EVALUATION

Two elements are continually evaluated during a semester: student learning and course effectiveness.

Student learning is evaluated in both its information-assimilation and experiential learning aspects. Evaluation processes include grading by instructor and by negotiated agreement. Because each student may choose an individual combination of tests, small projects, and a full semester project for acquiring grade points, evaluation processes are necessarily flexible, but they are also well known to students. Generally, tests and small projects are graded by the instructor and larger projects are evaluated by student-instructor negotiation.

Course effectiveness is frequently discussed in class and in individual conferences. The pace, topics, and instructor standards are discussed openly and may lead to alterations. Course effectiveness is also evaluated with formal questionnaires, once at mid-term and again at semester's end.

Although this emphasis on frequent and pervasive evaluation is time-consuming, the process provides important feedback to students and instructor. Because students know the grade scale

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and the means for accumulating points, they can choose individual tracks for achieving the desired grade. Furthermore, having the opportunity to choose a unique track demonstrates to the student that he or she may prefer a particular style of learning. The responsibility for learning also falls more clearly upon the student here, and the feedback of evaluation clarifies both the objectives and the means. For example, two students began early one semester to produce a videotape of architectural barriers. Both students wanted to earn 100 points on the project, but they needed clarification of the scope, purpose, and future use of the tape. After several conferences with the instructor and media resources personnel, the students modified their original idea to suit a more limited scale (architectural barriers in housing) and contained their time expenditures, within reasonable limits. They learned that although they preferred an active learning experience, their activity should be related to specific goals which can be evaluated.

Not all students are comfortable with evaluating their own work. Evaluation has not been a part of the traditional student role, and the process of appraising one's own work is a new skill for many. It is the instructor's responsibility to see that evaluations of both student learning and course effectiveness refer to the quality of *sociological* work. In the field of disability, students tend to be attracted to exotic physical and psychological factors. By maintaining a clear focus on the social aspects of disability, the course can teach the sociological perspective to students who might not otherwise grasp the applications of the field to their own work. Sociology is the subject matter, not disability.

SUMMARY

The course process is one medium through which the course message is transmitted. By facilitating student involvement in selection, management, and evaluation, the course process underlines the experiential nature of learning. When students choose individual learning tracks, they may discover not only their own values and interests, but also relationships between

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personal perception and broader concepts or problems areas. The management of coursework offers an opportunity to apply sociological methods directly and gain immediate reinforcement for the effort. The evaluation procedure calls for close examination of goals and methods, both for individuals and the class. All elements of the course are thus directed toward combining subjective and conceptual comprehension. Just as introspective understanding (verstehen) can be employed in research, the development and utilization of personal awareness can be utilized in the teaching/learning process.

DISCUSSION

Like all selected approaches to a problem area, the experiential approach to the social consequences of disability has benefits and disadvantages. Among the important benefits have been student demonstrations of high motivation: good class attendance, hard work, and long hours spent on projects—long-term interest demonstrated in the social aspects of disability. Class evaluations are consistently positive, and students also tend to demonstrate increasing ease in association with the handicapped. This last observation is consistent with the findings of Anthony (1977)—that attitudes toward the handicapped tend to become more positive following *both* personal contact and information receival. Also, by semester's end many students can express an understanding of the verstehen concept; that comprehension may be subjective as well as rational is now a viable idea.

However, the experiential approach also carries certain disadvantages. The foremost difficulty is its time-consuming nature, making a small class size of 15 to 25 students a necessity. Also, since experiential learning is a nontraditional approach, it calls for some risk-taking by both instructor and students; not every personality type would be comfortable in this class. The out-of-class experiences may stimulate cheating as well as learning. Although the instructor may establish a climate of trust, certain students are likely to exploit that atmosphere, making evaluation

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problematic at times. On the few occasions when the instructor has good reason to believe that experiential reports have been falsified, he or she discusses the issue with the student, requesting further evidence of actual work completed or asking the student to repeat the experience in a different form. But if the instructor can maintain the class theme that understanding the learning process is an essential aspect of learning subject matter, then such problems should be kept to a minimum.

Several gaps in the learning process can be bridged by joining the experiential approach to the traditional information-assimilation approach. In this particular class, the distance between the worlds of the handicapped and the able-bodied is shortened. Teacher-student roles move toward the closer collaborator roles. The assumptions and values of other fields are tapped and employed within a sociological framework. Most of all, instructional knowledge is explicitly coordinated with experienced knowledge. What one studies about the handicapped becomes a part of what one feels and expresses toward the handicapped.

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1. The following materials provide readings and extensive bibliographic resources:

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