

Teaching sociology in higher education: Pedagogical practices and possibilities

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Abstract

British sociology has historically devoted relatively little time to discussing the pedagogical practices and possibilities of sociological teaching within higher education. This article discusses the changing landscape of higher education and the pressures and pulls currently shaping teaching within the discipline of sociology. It then presents a brief distillation and outline of the articles that feature in this special issue, each of which presents an innovative approach to sociological pedagogy to best bring alive the discipline. In this way, the issue makes a significant contribution to the pedagogy of sociology at a time when the discipline and the wider work of the university are often under attack.

Keywords

higher education, sociological pedagogy, students, teaching and learning

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Introduction

As sociologists, ‘our students are our first and captive public’ (Burawoy, 2004: 265), yet the pedagogy of sociology has often been given relatively little attention within the UK. Although there have been some important exceptions (e.g. Matthews et al., 2018), British sociology has tended to value research endeavours over pedagogical commitments, with the discussion of pedagogical practices and possibilities often marginalised. This contrasts

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with the position in the United States, where the pedagogy of sociology is a regular feature of debate and discussion. Indeed, the American Sociological Association has an entire journal devoted to this topic: *Teaching Sociology*. We hope that this special issue will be an important means through which the British Sociological Association – via its journal *Sociology* – can intervene in and help advance debates relating to pedagogical practice, not only in the UK, but across the globe.

The special issue brings together those with an interest in the pedagogy of sociology, while also – we anticipate – engaging the general sociological reader who may have previously given relatively little thought to pedagogical scholarship. It provides a space where practices are shared, encouraging readers to reflect upon the various ways in which we might teach sociology to best bring alive the discipline and/or transcend conventional pedagogical approaches. In this way, the issue makes a significant contribution to the pedagogy of sociology at a time when, as a previous special issue of *Sociology* has demonstrated (Themelis et al., 2025), the discipline and the wider work of the university is often under attack.

In this introductory article, we first give a broad overview of the pedagogical landscape in higher education before considering more explicitly teaching in the discipline of sociology. We then introduce the various articles that make up this special issue.

The pedagogical landscape in higher education

Spatial variation

In seeking submissions for this special issue, we strongly encouraged contributions from different geographical contexts. However, as the articles that follow attest, the special issue has a strong UK focus. Although it does include articles from authors based outside the UK (in the Caribbean, Germany, Italy and the US), who discuss the national contexts within which they work, the majority – 10 of the 14 – are written by UK-based scholars reflecting on teaching in UK classrooms. While we hope that many of the points made within these articles will be of interest and use to those teaching sociology, wherever they are based, we also acknowledge that we cannot assume that pedagogical practices that are effective in one national context can always be easily transferred to another.

Indeed, there is now a sizable literature that has pointed to differences in pedagogical approaches, within higher education, across the world. One difference that is often flagged in the discourses of universities – particularly in the marketing materials of those based in the Global North – is the extent to which ‘critical thinking’ is embedded in the curriculum and/or pedagogy (Waters and Brooks, 2021). This is sometimes linked to the positioning of students from East Asian countries as ‘in deficit’: ‘the “Socratic spirit” as well as “intellectual standards” are seen as belonging to the Western educational tradition, to which the newcomer is found wanting’ (Song, 2016: 28). However, Xianlin Song has written extensively about how approaches to critical reasoning are culturally specific, asserting that, in a context like China, ‘where maintaining social harmony is paramount and avoiding social offence is of higher social value, developing a Western argument style of critical reasoning, which is adversarial and aggressive, has no long term purpose for the Chinese students’ (Song, 2016: 34; see also Song and McCarthy,

2018). Similar arguments have been made with respect to Japan, with Welikala (2008) contending that, in Japanese higher education classrooms, criticality is interwoven with norms relating to personal relationships, and thus silence on the part of students should not be read as either failure to think in an analytical manner or intellectual passivity.

Research has highlighted that understandings of the higher education student also differ geographically, which may have an impact on both how staff approach their teaching and how students engage in the classroom. For example, research conducted by Brooks et al. (2022), of students in six European countries, demonstrated how national cultures and histories, as well as shorter-term influences such as particular policy initiatives and the state of the economy, led to some significant differences in how education played out. In Denmark and Germany, for instance, students (and many staff) placed importance on courses being structured so that students could determine for themselves the pace at which they studied – associated with the Humboldtian idea of *Lernfreiheit* (the freedom to study) – a perspective not evident in the other countries in the study. The research also highlighted differences, across Europe, in the extent to which students were positioned as consumers (by themselves, staff and others), which had an impact on pedagogical encounters (Brooks et al., 2022).

Cognisant of such differences, we hope that, for readers beyond the countries covered by the special issue's contributions, the issues raised by the article authors will at least provoke reflection on some relevant pedagogical principles, even if the specific approaches taken cannot be transferred entirely to the reader's own teaching context.

Profile of teaching

A further difference between higher education institutions – across countries but also *within* them – is the relationship between teaching and other functions, notably research. Historically, in many countries, the initial focus of the university was to provide teaching to, for example, religious leaders (in the European medieval university) and/or those providing important political support, in the case of the Chinese imperial higher education system (Jia and Li, 2025). The spread of ideas associated with the Humboldtian model of higher education from the late 19th century, from Germany to other European countries and the US, had the effect of reframing understandings of teaching. From a Humboldtian perspective, education and research are closely intertwined – indeed, Humboldt emphasised the *unity* of the two (Nybom, 2003).

In the more recent period, we see further change. As universities have become important centres for research, the role of teaching has often been seen as a less prestigious and lower profile activity – with the two sometimes in conflict (e.g. Fox, 1992). Academic promotions and appointments, for example, are often more clearly tied to research performance than teaching prowess. As we discuss in more detail below, it is notable that teaching has also often had a much lower profile than research in the activities of many higher education subject associations. Writing from a UK perspective, however, this position has been challenged to some extent in the 21st century. Various policies have been introduced by the government that have had the effect, we would argue, of raising the profile of teaching – through making it a key focus of institutional attention. This has included the Teaching Excellence Framework – a scheme that assesses and rates teaching

across English universities, run by the university regulator (the Office for Students) (Gunn, 2018). In addition, teaching in the UK has been professionalised, not least through the expectation that all new staff will have a teaching qualification (Shaw, 2018). This has been accompanied by the award of high-profile 'National Teaching Fellowships' and the proliferation of institutional prizes and other awards for teaching (e.g. given out by the *Times Higher Education* magazine) and – in many institutions – the instigation of pathways to full professorship for teaching-only staff. While many would argue that actions such as these have not obliterated the status divide between teaching and research, they have gone some way to reshaping the ways in which the two activities are seen.

Changing context

Teaching in higher education institutions has also been profoundly affected by a wider set of changes that have occurred over the past few decades – in the UK and many other countries besides.

First, the social composition of university classrooms has become increasingly diverse. This is, to some extent, a result of massification and the opening up of higher education to groups beyond a small elite (demarcated with respect to both class and gender). While universities in most parts of the world have a considerable way to go to achieve equity in university admissions and outcomes (Brooks et al., 2025), many classrooms now contain students from families that would not have been able to access such opportunities 50 or 60 years ago. For example, enrolment rates in tertiary education (calculated as the number of students aged 20–24 as a proportion of the population) are over 40% in countries as varied as Greece, Slovenia, Chile, Belgium, Norway and Latvia (OECD, 2025). Diversity has also been driven by the increasing numbers of internationally mobile students. Although such students are not, by any means, distributed equally across the globe, patterns of mobility have themselves become more diverse – moving from the entrenched dominance of the Anglophone Global North (with respect to the destinations of mobile students) to a 'multi polar' world where a large number of countries compete for such students, and student flows have, correspondingly, become more complex (Glass and Cruz, 2022).

This new diversity has required a rethinking of teaching methods – encompassing both the curriculum content and the methods of teaching employed. The student protests of the 1960s were, in part, a demand for university curricula more relevant to the interests and experiences of an increasingly socially diverse student body (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2014). Meanwhile, the presence of more international students on campus has also driven a rethinking of both pedagogy and curriculum content (e.g. Lomer and Anthony-Okeke, 2019). However, in neither area is there consensus about what a reshaped education should look like and, for sociologists, this remains a fundamental point of consideration.

Regarding international students, Tannock (2018) has outlined three dominant understandings of an 'international curriculum', each with quite different ideological and political underpinnings. The first focuses on helping international students adapt to a relatively unchanged local curriculum, and is often closely aligned with a deficit framing of such students. The second positions international students largely as cultural resources

for home students, focusing on how their intercultural skills can best be fostered in an internationally diverse classroom. Finally, the third advocates for a ‘global curriculum’ – intended to benefit both home and international students – but which, in practice, often erases (important and interesting) differences between students and pays little attention to the inequalities experienced by some (Tannock, 2018). In contrast, Tannock outlines the potential of a ‘counter-hegemonic’ version of international education, one that seeks to foreground the experiences and voices of those who have crossed international borders for study (Tannock, 2018; see also Lomer and Anthony-Okeke, 2019).

Although classrooms have become more diverse, they have not necessarily become more equal. Across the world, inequalities remain with respect to outcomes by socio-economic status, as students from privileged backgrounds are more likely to be rewarded in the graduate labour market (Brooks et al., 2025). Inequalities are also played out with respect to Indigenous status and ethnicity (Brooks et al., 2026). In the UK, for example, an ‘awarding gap’ has been well-documented, between white students on one hand and those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds on the other (Advance HE, 2021), while students from lower socio-economic groups have been less likely to take up work placements, despite these often leading to better graduate outcomes (Brooks and Timms, 2024).

Second, the changing political economy of higher education has also influenced both pedagogy and curriculum content. Indeed, economic concerns have often driven the massification discussed above. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, higher education has commonly been understood by policymakers as key to developing a ‘knowledge economy’, and inculcating the kind of high-level skills deemed to be necessary in such an economy (Brown et al., 2011). This economic focus has tended to override other understandings of higher education (such as a means of developing an active citizenry, for example) and has had a direct impact on education. Many higher education institutions have sought to heighten the ‘employability’ focus of their courses and demonstrate the relevance of the skills and knowledge they teach to the workplace (Durazzi, 2021). Such trends have been hastened in some nations by specific policy measures: in England, universities are rated and ranked with respect to the employment outcomes of their students (Bratti et al., 2004), while in Denmark, the number of student places available on specific courses has been tied closely to employment outcomes (Madsen, 2021). For the higher education teacher of sociology, there is an increasing pressure to instil in our students an awareness of the employability skills fostered by the discipline (discussed below).

More generally, the wider financial environment has directly impacted university education. Although such trends have not been observed across all parts of the world – China, for example, has continued to invest heavily in its higher education institutions (Marginson, 2025) – there has been a general tendency for governments to reduce public expenditure on higher education and to encourage greater vertical differentiation within the system (with proportionally more investment going to internationally high-performing institutions) (Huisman, 2008). Significant dependency on international students, in some nations, has increased the financial vulnerability of such systems when such students’ preferences change, and/or when new players enter the market (Brooks and Waters, 2026). In England, for example, 43% of higher education

institutions were expected to report a deficit budget for the 2024–25 academic year (Office for Students, 2025). The consequences of this for teaching and learning are manifold. Courses (particularly in subject areas with low student demand, such as modern languages) have been closed, and the size of classes has been increased. In such environments, staff – if they keep their job at all – are likely to have to employ new pedagogical approaches (to better accommodate large classes, for example) and possibly teach across new subject areas, while having less time to devote to preparation and/or student interactions (Breeze et al., 2019).

In countries that have embraced market reforms with respect to higher education (largely Anglophone nations of the Global North), there has been significant debate about whether the attitudes of students themselves have changed similarly. Some scholars have argued that students have taken on ‘consumer-like’ attitudes and a highly instrumental attitude to their learning (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). Molesworth et al. (2009) have contended that students now place much more emphasis on their rights rather than their responsibilities, and on *having* a degree rather than *being* a learner. Others have, however, maintained that the picture is more complex, with students differing in their responses to high fees and other marketised reforms (Tomlinson, 2017), and valuing learning in and of itself, not merely as a means of achieving a ‘graduate job’ (Brooks et al., 2022). Research has nevertheless indicated that, irrespective of students’ responses, other aspects of a marketised system have had a direct and profound impact upon education. Sabri (2013) has shown how, in the UK, the annual National Student Survey, in which students are asked to rate the quality of their teaching, has affected how teaching staff approach their courses – seeking to avoid both content and pedagogy that could adversely affect ‘student satisfaction’ scores.

Students have also been directly affected by the wider economic environment. High levels of graduate unemployment have, in some nations, affected how students assess and value their higher education (Brooks et al., 2022). Moreover, when student funding (through loans and/or grants) does not cover the costs of living, education is often directly affected: students may miss classes – or choose modules or even whole degree programmes – in order to prioritise paid employment, and they may be hungry and thus less able to focus in class (Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022). Such experiences are likely to have fed into the soaring rates of mental ill health among students, which can also pose substantial challenges to engagement with academic work and affect classroom interactions.

Third, there have – in some nations over recent years – been direct criticisms of the curriculum taught in universities, which have led to a rethinking of what is taught and how. Some of the critique, like that referred to above with respect to international education, has been underpinned by emancipatory goals. Academics, particularly those based in countries with a colonial history, have sought to ‘decolonise’ the curriculum (Akena, 2012; Dei, 2008). Often this has been in response to student activism such as (within the UK) the National Union of Students’ ‘Why is my Curriculum White?’ and #LiberateMyDegree campaigns. Such movements have aimed to ‘question the epistemological authority assigned uniquely to the Western university as the privileged site of knowledge production’ (Bhambra et al., 2018: 3) and, in the US, have examined the role of colleges and universities as an arm of the ‘settler state’ (Stein, 2022). Critiques have

also come from the political right, associated with the rise of populism in many parts of the world (Venning and Beech, 2026). This has been particularly obvious in the US, where far right leaders have sought to control scholars and reduce university autonomy – in relation to both how campuses are run and what is taught in their classrooms (Darian-Smith, 2025). However, it has also been played out in other contexts. In the UK, for example, various national newspapers and other social actors have used Freedom of Information requests to access university curricula, and have run stories criticising the material covered (including, for example, the use of ‘trigger warnings’ to alert students to particularly sensitive material that may be covered in class) (Brooks et al., 2022). Moreover, specific theoretical approaches have also come under attack – notably Critical Race Theory. Jones (2022) outlines the ways in which politicians in both the UK and US have ‘blamed many of society’s ills on the pre-eminence of Critical Race Theory’ (p. 188), typically misrepresenting its critique of social structures as an attack on individuals. As a consequence, ‘lecturers are then invited instead to embrace neutrality, with benign-sounding appeals to *teach both sides*’ (Jones, 2022: 189; emphasis in original).

Finally, technological change has had a profound effect on processes of both teaching and learning. Online and hybrid teaching has become much more common within higher education across the world since the COVID-19 pandemic, driven also by the increasing power of EdTech companies and the desire of universities to reach new markets (in the face of financial pressures) (Komljenovic et al., 2025). Staff have improved their skills in this area, and students often now expect all courses to be accompanied by online components (such as recorded lectures). Most recently, the widespread availability of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has raised important questions about the future shape of teaching and learning in higher education (Bearman and Ajjawi, 2023; Luo, 2024).

Against this backdrop of change, there is an urgent need to consider how we can best teach sociology and what the pedagogical future of the university could and should look like.

Teaching in the discipline of sociology

As teachers of sociology, it is our job to equip students with the tools that enable them to rethink their daily experiences, to encourage them to consider – to echo Mills (1967) – how personal troubles are often linked to larger public issues, and to assist them in their pursuit of ‘making the familiar strange’. While any discussion pertaining to what sociology is and, importantly, what it is for, could constitute an entire special issue in itself, as editors, we have nonetheless included a brief distillation. Sociology equips its publics with the tools to understand the social world beyond the obvious and ordinary, and to attend to the seemingly mundane and routine aspects of social life, including the ways in which the past and present collide to shape the social (Back, 2015; Back and Wright, 2022). It is in this way that ‘sociology provides tools to generate a different form of attention to everyday life, which cannot be achieved simply through being in the world’ (Back and Wright, 2022: 192). For Back and Wright (2022), the sociological imagination requires ‘attentiveness, careful thought, living with doubt in the service of understanding’ (Back and Wright, 2022: 202). It therefore follows that, as teachers of sociology, our duty is to equip students with the necessary sensibilities to see the world

through sociological eyes; this is the *ideal* purpose of our pedagogical practice. Sociology, as we are reminded in a recent special issue of the journal, ‘trains people to think about the value of the social rather than solely of the individual. In other words, it is not a discipline that studies society. It is also a discipline *of* and *for* society’ (Themelis et al., 2025: 1026; emphasis in original). Sociological pedagogy then, is thus a pedagogy *of* and *for* society.

Sociological pedagogy is both political and politicising (Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). It is for this reason (at least in part) that sociology, as a discipline, imagination and ethic has, since its inception, come under attack (Themelis et al., 2025). While early critiques of sociology often focused on its alleged lack of ‘scientific rigour’, in the contemporary era, the value of sociology is questioned through narratives of employability, as discussed below. Regardless, sociology has a long history of having to assert its value against a background of contestation and critique, and this is also true of sociological pedagogy.

Indeed, sociology has emerged as a discipline that sides with the underdog. This is not to say that sociology is inherently biased but rather that it gives voice to the otherwise largely voiceless; whether this be along divisions of class, race, gender, sexuality, geopolitical location or, most recently, colonial histories (Bhambra et al., 2026). This is both the value and purpose of sociology and, by extension, the value and purpose of sociological pedagogy. In his famous article ‘Whose side are we on?’, Becker (1967) addresses not the question of *whether* we should take sides as sociologists but rather asks us to consider whose side are we on. For Becker, as sociologists, our research typically leads us to take the side of the underdog. Accusations of bias then arise in response to the sociological act of giving voice to the otherwise largely voiceless and, in this way, ‘express[ing] disrespect for the entire established order’ (Becker, 1967: 242). This same is true, we argue, of sociological pedagogy. Sociology has not, however, always done this to its full capability: it has not always told stories of the working-class from the voices of the working classes (Paton, 2016; Walkerdine, 2021), nor always interrogated the formation of the modern world by considering the role of colonialism (Bhambra, 2011).

As a discipline that foregrounds the experiences of the marginalised, that draws upon the past and present to identify, name and problematise the social ills of our time, sociological pedagogy is thus the pedagogy of teaching sensitive issues routinely. Sociology grapples with the ugliness of the world, while somehow retaining hope for a better future; it is by naming and confronting this ugliness that we are able to unpack it, to locate the inequalities inherent in it and work towards positive social change. It therefore follows that the sociological curriculum and the pedagogies we use have the capacity to provoke emotions – whether that be hope and possibility or discomfort and despair (Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). Our pedagogical practice is thus one that requires tact, that is sensitive and, where relevant, even trauma-informed. The minutiae of sociological curriculum and pedagogies should be carefully and critically considered. Language should be respectful, inclusive and free from sensationalism, representations free from bias and stereotypes and the inclusion of diverse perspectives the norm. Above all, such pedagogy should be delivered in learning environments that foster epistemic safety and serve to empower the very students that we are privileged to teach.

Feminisation, deprofessionalisation and precarity

The most recent era of sociological teaching is one marked by the feminisation and deprofessionalisation of academic work, coupled with an increasing division between research and teaching (Khan et al., 2024; Morris and Rowell, 2024). Within and across universities, the labour of sociological teaching is characterised by precarity and short-termism (Burton and Bowman, 2022; Leathwood and Read, 2022). Higher education teaching and learning is increasingly delivered by a reserve army of labourers, those who are often found on temporary contracts as hourly paid and/or teaching-focused lecturers. Such contracts can stifle innovation (Leathwood and Read, 2022) and operate as barriers to full participation in sociological disciplinary communities (Chalmers, 2011). Moreover, in the context of the UK from which, as editors, we write, academic staff who take up teaching-related roles have often found themselves unable to partake in the national assessment of research (the Research Excellence Framework) and are locked out of accessing various research, training and funding opportunities (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015). While the number of those working on education-focused contracts in the UK has grown annually (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022), they typically experience dissatisfactory career progression (Gretton and Raine, 2017) and weak academic identity (Smith and Walker, 2021, 2022). However, it is not simply the conditions under which sociological higher education teaching and learning take place that are increasingly problematic, but rather the question of who is doing this work, with first generation, First Nations and Black and minority ethnic and women overwhelmingly found delivering the bulk of teaching (O’Keefe and Courtois, 2019; Read, 2023); sociology does not sit outside of this trend. This has profound implications for the politics of knowledge production and, subsequently, curriculum content, as discussed below.

The politics of knowledge and the sociological curriculum

The relationship between who is doing the teaching and what is being taught is symbiotic. If non-traditional groups such as first generation, First Nations or Black or ethnic minorities are overwhelmingly found in the teaching spheres of academic life and not in research-related roles, then one must ask who is able to pursue novel knowledge generation? After all, positionality shapes research interests and commitments. If non-traditional academics are found teaching and not producing knowledge, then their interests, concerns and commitments are less likely to be reflected in the sociology curriculum. Asking who is left out of processes of knowledge production (and confined to other spheres of university life) is thus a key point of interest for consideration pertaining to the pedagogical practices and possibilities of teaching sociology in higher education.

The current epoch of sociology is one marked by calls to decolonise social theory (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021; Bhambra and Santos, 2017) and for greater inclusion of indigenous knowledges, thus crafting an ‘epistemological pluralism’, or what Connell (2011) refers to as ‘a sociology for the whole world’. This is true of both the knowledge that contemporary higher education produces and the curriculum and content that it teaches. Within South African sociology, there have been calls to centre Black perspectives on race within the curriculum (Mangcu, 2016). Within the UK, the Connected

Sociologies Curriculum Project encourages sociological teaching to break away from its largely Euro-centred histories, which have omitted colonialism and empire, and rethink the social world through the lens of the 'colonial global' (Bhambra, 2020). Despite rightly needed calls to decolonise sociology in recognition of the white Eurocentrism that underpins the discipline (Bhambra and Santos, 2017; Bhambra et al., 2026), there exists no such similar commentary concerned with critiquing the absence of working-class 'Other' knowledges that are produced and taught by the sociological canon (Walkerdine, 2021). This raises important questions for the politics of pedagogy. What knowledge is being taught? From whose perspective? And what impact does this have upon student learning and issues of ex/inclusion within higher education along lines of class, ethnicity, gender, indignity and so forth? As Danvers (2018) reminds us, even when university cohorts are dominated by female students and academic staff, the critical thinker in the university is perceived as male, given that it is male bodies that have occupied higher education since its inception. While these are not themes that the articles in the special issue seek explicitly to grapple with, they are nonetheless lines of enquiry that we, as editors, felt it prudent to raise in our consideration of the pedagogical practices and possibilities of sociological teaching in higher education.

The employability agenda

The discipline of sociology and indeed sociological pedagogy is by no means immune to the changes that make and shape the global higher education pedagogical landscape, many of which are discussed above. Sociology, as a discipline, practice and way of thinking has long found itself in need of defending its value, applicability and usefulness. As Giddens (2013) asked three decades ago, 'What is it with sociology? Why is it so irritating to so many?' (p. 1); the need to defend and make transparent the importance of sociology and sociological thinking is nothing new. However, in an ever increasingly marketised higher education landscape, the relationship between a sociology degree and the labour market has come under new scrutiny. Amid a precarious graduate labour market, sociology students (prospective or otherwise) ask: 'What can I do with a sociology degree?'. Given the need for universities to produce 21st-century work-ready graduates, it is no longer a sufficient response to simply state that sociology will equip its graduates with the skills necessary for the pursuit of a better society – despite there being a very real need for such efforts. Thus, not only must sociology equip its students with the ability to 'make the familiar strange', but it must do so while also instilling in them the skills required for the world of 21st-century work (even if what this looks like remains unclear).

In a marketised and commodified higher education system, graduates' immediate inputs into the economy are increasingly measured, and seen as the hallmarks of a 'successful' tertiary education investment (Tight, 2023). Regardless of whether we (either collectively or individually) view employability as a purpose of a sociological higher education, the issue of employability is a reoccurring theme for those designing and delivering the curriculum (Menning et al., 2025). In a world where a degree is no longer enough (Tomlinson, 2008), equipping students with the necessary skills required for success in the graduate labour market becomes a concern of sociological pedagogy, whether we like it or not. Is the discipline then to view the marketability of its graduates as a key

ethical pedagogical concern? Or rather, is it a hallmark of a commodified 21st-century higher education system and thus a pressure to resist? This is for the sociological community itself to decide.

This special issue

This special issue emerged out of the British Sociological Association's Presidential Event, 'Teaching Sociology in Higher Education: Pedagogical Practices and Possibilities', held in 2024 (British Sociological Association, 2024). This event sought to bring together those with an interest in sociological pedagogy to foster a collaborative and collegial space where pedagogical practices could be shared. Importantly, the event afforded the time to reflect upon the various ways in which we might teach sociology to best bring alive the discipline and transcend conventional pedagogical approaches. The event received far more abstracts than we could accommodate and demonstrated a clear interest and desire for space to consider – in dialogue with others – the pedagogical practices and possibilities of teaching sociology in higher education. Consequently, wishing to both capture and extend this discussion, we issued a call for papers for a special issue. What emerged is a collection of articles that address a wide range of topics and pedagogical approaches, which we describe in the paragraphs that follow. We hope this collection conveys the authors' enthusiasm for developing innovative sociological pedagogies as well as the possibilities for teaching sociology in higher education in a way that ignites and moves forward the sociological pedagogical conversation.

In *Teaching with Plants as Liberatory Practice: Posthuman Pedagogies and The Sociological Imagination*, Giulia Carabelli (2025) discusses her experience of drawing upon feminist epistemology, new materialism, posthumanism and the act of teaching with plants as a way of challenging the global 'crisis fatigue'. Specifically, she provides readers with insight into the design, teaching and assessment of an elective module called 'More than Human Politics'. Carabelli advocates for a more-than-human and decolonial sociological imagination as a way of instilling in students the desire for social change to bring about the flourishing (not just survival) of society.

In *Teaching and Learning Community-Based Participatory Research in an Underserved Neighborhood: Reflections on a Pedagogy for Graduate Sociology Courses*, Adler and Schlinzig (2025) grapple with the employability agenda in education to consider the possibilities for the translation of the sociological imagination into meaningful work upon graduation. Situated in Maryland, USA, the authors explore the possibility of community-based participatory projects whereby graduate students engage with community partners to undertake research relevant to the lives of these partners. In acknowledging the unconventional roles of instructors and graduates, the article thinks through some of the challenges – but also the rewards – of such pedagogical pursuits, guiding the reader through the lessons learned during the course.

Taking low classroom attendance as a starting point, in *Cultivating Collaboration: Reflections on Introducing Problem-Based Learning in the 'Wicked World' of Contemporary Higher Education*, Coleman-Fountain, Falcetta, Hamilton, Tutton, Campos, Gilbourne, Molina and Murphy (2025) explore the opportunities and challenges presented by problem-based learning as part of a module called 'Investigating

Social Problems'. The authors argue for the importance of collaborative working to address sociology's 'wicked problems'. The article emphasises the importance of collaboration both as a mode of learning and as a tool (though not a panacea) to resist the neoliberalisation of higher education. The authors call for sociological pedagogy to reposition students, not as consumers of knowledge, but as active agents of knowledge production (achievable through collaboration), while also equipping them with attributes that will serve them well upon graduation.

In *Sociology amid Climate Breakdown: A Call for Systemic Pedagogical Transformation*, Gardner and Müller (2025) call for a fundamental rethinking of sociology's epistemes, theories and cannon – through the 'ecologisation' of the sociological imagination – to address the profound challenge of climate breakdown within teaching and research. Specifically, they call for a sociological 'planetary reckoning' that interrogates the colonial, racial, heteropatriarchal and political-economic origins of environmental destruction.

Rojas-Gaviria, Preece and Surman (2026), in *Encountering Social Inequalities through Productive Unsettling*, propose a 'dancing pedagogy' that fosters embodied and relational learning for 'productive unsettlement' and discuss their collaboration with the Birmingham Royal Ballet as part of a postgraduate sociology of composition module. Drawing upon feminist, queer, critical race and disability theorists, the authors reflect on the possibilities of engaging the body as a teaching tool to foster critical reflection on inequality and vulnerability. While dancing was not a compulsory part of the module, it is notable that all students nevertheless opted to participate in such activities. The authors contend that this dancing pedagogy enabled students to cultivate new empathetic orientations while also giving them more agency over their learning.

In *The Unloved Curriculum: Teaching Research Methods and 'Demonstrably Alive' Sociology*, Back, Benson and Tomlinson (2025) advocate for a 'demonstrably alive' approach to the sociological teaching of qualitative research methods. Taking the digitalisation of culture as a starting point, they attest to the pedagogical power and possibilities afforded by digital tools – and illustrate this by discussing how they 'made methods sociable' through their co-produced methodological film series, *Fieldwork Fables*. In doing so, they offer a diagnosis of what is wrong with existing qualitative research methods teaching. Reflecting on the conditions of UK higher education as a constraint to pedagogical innovation, the authors guide the reader through ways of bringing the sociological craft alive in the classroom by extending beyond it.

In *Listening to Students' Voices: Engaged Pedagogy as a Pathway to Pedagogical Possibilities*, Lin-Januszewski (2025) explores how undergraduate students on a sociology degree at a German university envisage the study of the subject and their pedagogical preferences. Drawing upon participatory visual methods (sketches and photographs) and semi-structured in-depth interviews, Lin-Januszewski documents preferences for learning environments that challenge forms of domination, promote active knowledge acquisition and foster mutual respect, while also centring students as active subjects in their learning. She concludes by arguing for learning communities based on respect, and in which teaching staff are approachable and sensitive to issues of race, gender, sexuality and class, and intervene when unequal power dynamics arise.

In *A Discomforting Pedagogy of Poverty: Discourses, Representations and Vulnerabilities*, Hutton and Heath (2025) offer readers a practice-based reflection on

their ‘discomforting pedagogy of poverty’. Their practice aimed to encourage students to embark on a critical inquiry of poverty, unsettling normalised views to uncover the structural realities of poverty. Through both academic and personal discussions of poverty, a disconnect was revealed – between hegemonic constructs of poverty and lived experience – with most students experiencing animated moments of realisation. Hutton and Heath argue for the importance of pedagogical discomfort in helping students develop a critical consciousness and worldview.

In *Nurturing Students’ Reflexive Approach to Data Analysis by Crafting Collective Zines*, Pizzolati (2026) guides us through their experience of drawing upon the pedagogical tool of zine-making as part of an Applied Social Research course. Responding to a series of prompts, students engaged in an asynchronous introspective activity using a mobile messaging app to record their voice messages and photos. Pizzolati then worked with students to create a zine from the research data, a pedagogical possibility made possible through the friendship and kindness of the student community. Using zine-making as an approach to data analysis served as a powerful pedagogical tool of developing students’ ability to co-research.

Massey, Cain, Scott Jones, Corder, Harris and Ismail (2025), in *‘What’s the Fucking Point of This?’: Addressing Student Attitudes towards Quantitative Methods in Sociology for Enhanced Graduate Outcomes*, grapple with the challenging, although familiar, task of making quantitative research methods (QRM) both accessible and exciting for otherwise daunted undergraduate students. Recognising the demand for data skills, the authors assert the importance of QRM within the sociological curriculum. While Massey et al. acknowledge that sociology students can fear QRM, they argue for sociology curricula to embed QRM from the outset and throughout. They go on to illustrate their pedagogic approach, which draws upon playfulness and community, through, for example, using a Spotify statistical playlist, memes and weekly ‘silly stats’. Such activities, they assert, inject humour as a way of dispelling negative attitudes towards QRM, while activating inclusive and accessible learning.

In *Walking Sociologically, Teaching on the Move: Thinking with London’s Street*, Jackson (2026) guides us through the possibilities of walking as a pedagogical resource. Framing it as a collective practice, Jackson explores the generative nature of walking as a tool of embodied and situated knowledge. Moreover, she contends that collective walking, as a critical feminist practice, can reconfigure traditional classroom dynamics.

In *Teaching Sociology in Turbulent Times: Ethical Pedagogy and the Politics of the Classroom*, Piacentini (2026) grapples with the issue of teaching sociology in ‘turbulent times’ and asks: what does an ethical praxis of teaching sociology entail, and how do we navigate its politics? Piacentini argues for the need to consider explicitly the politics of knowledge production within our pedagogic practice. In doing so, she calls for us to centre marginalised voices through ‘counter-stories’ and ‘counter-empirics’. She also argues for the importance of pedagogic discomfort as a key tool.

In *Advancing and Sustaining Pedagogies of Resistance within Global Sociology: Critical Insights and Learnings from the Caribbean*, Esnard (2026) examines global knowledge hierarchies, power structures and epistemic (dis)obedience and resistance. Esnard’s contribution draws our attention to Caribbean contributors’ relevance to the discipline of sociology, as well as to the formation of a global sociology and sociology

as a political project. The article calls for greater scrutiny of global curricula alongside everyday classroom practices and engagements, outlining the pedagogical possibilities of 'New World Thinking' for enhancing the teaching of global sociology.

Lehtonen, Roeschert and Jones (2026), in *Practice-Based Education in Sociology: What, Why and How?*, explore the role of practice-based education within sociology and consider the pedagogical possibilities it offers. They review practice-based provision within UK undergraduate sociology curricula, arguing that existing pedagogy does not always meet the needs of students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds. They conclude by arguing for a substantially practice-based pedagogic model within the discipline, what the authors refer to as 'critical practice-based education'.

Conclusion

The special issue provides a space whereby pedagogical practices can be shared. We hope that it encourages readers to reflect upon the various ways in which we might teach sociology to best bring alive the discipline and/or transcend conventional pedagogical approaches. Moreover, we hope that it will make a significant contribution to the pedagogy of sociology at a time when the discipline and the wider work of the university is under attack (Segers, 2025; Themelis et al., 2025; Wald et al., 2026).

In drawing this editorial to a close, we wish to reflect on the magic that can often occur over the course of a sociology degree and of the collective nature of sociological pedagogy. Students may move through their university degree and graduate with memories of 'eureka' moments that shaped their sociological imagination. However, such magic is seldom a one-time moment, but rather the accumulated outcome of a joint effort between scholars from across departments, disciplines and, at times, across universities (Greenwood, 2013). These pedagogical efforts all too often, within the current confines of the marketised metrics of the contemporary university, go largely unacknowledged and unrewarded (Nguyen et al., 2023; Ross et al., 2020). It is for this reason that the sharing of sociological pedagogical practice is both vital and necessary if we are to forge a way through the manifold challenges facing the contemporary university.

While higher education is slowly recognising the value of teaching through its various awards and teaching accolades, pedagogy too often remains a niche concern within higher education (Connelly and Joseph-Saisbury, 2019). As a discipline, we need to continue to work to actively establish formal credit and reward systems for effective teaching. These can make visible the pedagogical practices that bring alive the discipline, and which make sociology accessible, relevant and exciting. We hope that this special issue is one small step towards providing this recognition. Pushing the boundaries of sociological pedagogy is no easy task, but how we teach is just as important as what we teach. As a collective, we need to work together to find ways to ensure that sociological pedagogy, while often a labour of love, is one that is sufficiently resourced, recognised and rewarded. This special issue is thus as much a call to action as it is a celebration of sociological pedagogical possibilities. To echo the late Burawoy (2004), and to reiterate the point made at the start of this editorial, we wish to remind ourselves that, as sociologists, 'our students are our first and captive public' (p. 265). We must find ways to best capture their imaginations within our classrooms, and we hope that this special issue offers inspiration for this endeavour.

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