

American Sociological Association launches first-of-its-kind teaching tool

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The American Sociological Association today launched a first-of-its-kind educational tool to promote high-quality teaching and to improve the way college and university professors provide evidence to support their promotion and tenure.

"Success in the academic world is commonly predicated on judging a professor's contributions to scholarship through peer-reviewed publications," said Sally T. Hillsman, ASA's Executive Officer. "While teaching well is acknowledged to be extremely important, it is more difficult for university peers and administrators to take the measure of a great teacher, independent of student evaluations. This contributes to undervaluing the core academic skill of teaching when colleges and universities make tenure decisions and promote faculty."

ASA is trying to change that through the Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology (TRAILS), an archetypical interactive website that combines qualities of a digital library and an online journal to promote rigorous, up-to-date scholarly content and teaching tools for successful learning.

TRAILS offers a wide range of sociologist-submitted, and peer-reviewed, teaching and learning resources that will include continuously updated and revised syllabi, class activities, assignments, tests, essays, lectures, PowerPoint presentations, film lists, video clips, bibliographies, and website lists—all of which can be downloaded and edited, making it easy for users to adapt the materials for their own classroom needs.

The expectation is that a record of publishing materials in TRAILS can become a new type of evidence of teaching accomplishment. When coupled with systematic peer review of teaching in the classroom, this evidence can help schools more objectively measure teaching excellence.

"Students expect to learn from great teachers and often pay handsomely for that privilege. Yet professors are often not evaluated on their powerful lectures or innovative class activities that lead students to significant intellectual growth," said Margaret Weigers Vitullo, Director of ASA's Academic and Professional Affairs Program and the creator of TRAILS.

"ASA hopes that TRAILS will enable college and university professors to teach better, share their successful teaching and learning tools—just as they share other forms of scholarship—and receive greater respect and reward for their teaching from their institutions and students. We believe that TRAILS could serve as a model for other disciplines across the academic spectrum." Ultimately, ASA may collaborate with other disciplines to explore whether the TRAILS model is transferable.

All the teaching materials in TRAILS go through an editorial review process, similar to the procedure scholarly journals use for research articles. Thirty-three ASA members serve as editors for subject areas ranging from public policy and social change to racial and ethnic relations and the sociology of the family.

Once an editor has approved a submission, TRAILS automatically generates a cover page with a citation that includes the name of the author. Subscribers to TRAILS will electronically sign an agreement to use the citation when making use of TRAILS resources, both in original and modified forms. "In this way we hope to influence the culture of the professoriate, encouraging academics to cite each other's scholarship of teaching and learning, just as they cite other forms of scholarship," said

Vitullo.

Professors who modify TRAILS materials are encouraged to submit their adaptations for peer review and inclusion in the TRAILS digital library alongside the original resources.

Built initially on the ASA Teaching Resources Center (TRC) print collection, TRAILS currently has over 2,700 teaching resources. The TRC materials were digitized and converted into modules that are now individually indexed and searchable in TRAILS.

"With TRC materials, professors had to purchase a whole printed volume to get a single teaching resource and even then they might not find what they were looking for because it was in a volume they didn't purchase," Vitullo said. "TRAILS enables professors to do a targeted search across the entire collection for what they want. They may even end up finding new and relevant material that expands their scope of expertise. Once they find what they need, they can download and modify the resource to fit their needs."

In an effort to gauge the effectiveness of TRAILS as a tool for diffusing innovative teaching in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines, the National Science Foundation has provided ASA with a grant to conduct a multi-year evaluation. Led by ASA Director of Research and Development, Roberta Spalter-Roth, the evaluation will address issues such as: What are the institutional and demographic characteristics of TRAILS users? Does the web-based, interactive nature of TRAILS increase the size and scope of teaching and learning networks compared to the early ASA print materials? And, are there interventions ASA can introduce over time that will increase the contributions to and use of TRAILS materials by faculty in different types of educational institutions?

"For a scholarly society, it is not enough to simply develop a new [teaching](#) tool," Spalter-Roth said. "ASA and the academic community need to know whether and how usage increases among a broader cross-section of sociologists compared to the earlier print materials. Our research will help us determine whether TRAILS has the potential to be beneficial to the sociological community and perhaps beyond."

More information: For more information about TRAILS, visit trails.asanet.org

Provided by American Sociological Association

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