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Using Social Justice Vignettes to Prepare Students for Social Action Engagement

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Abstract

One of the learning goals for social justice education courses is to prepare students for social action engagement. Teaching students about issues related to social justice are complex. Prior studies have found a positive relationship between student enrollment in social justice education courses and action-oriented outcomes. While these findings are promising, we as social justice educators need to know more about effective teaching strategies used in social justice education courses that prepare students for social action. In this paper, I describe one method I designed using social justice vignettes to help students recognize social oppression in their daily lives and practice interrupting various “isms” in a safe classroom environment.

In my roles as a social justice educator and a teacher educator, I seek to prepare students for positive social engagement with diverse social groups and issues of social justice. A key learning objective in my social justice education course is to prepare students for social action engagement (Bell & Griffin, 2007). Banks (2010) describes this as “students making decisions on important social issues and taking actions to help solve them” (p.238). Other scholars have described this learning objective as “students’ desire to take actions in their communities and relationships in order to end social injustices” (Nelson Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, 2005, p. 468).

There are three types of social action (Alimo, 2012; Zúñiga, Williams, & Berger, 2005). First, self-oriented action is when an individual confronts her or his own prejudice. Second, action is other-directed when a person challenges someone else about oppressive behavior. Third, action-taking can be collaborative by joining an organization to end poverty for example. The focus of social action can take place at the micro-level (interpersonal) and macro-level (institutional) (Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin, 2007). For the purposes of this article, I define social action engagement as students’ ability to recognize and respond to “isms” (e.g., classism, racism, sexism, etc.), individually and collectively in their daily lives (Burrell Storms, 2012). When I teach about social action, students often share stories of their difficulty confronting family, friends, or colleagues about incidents of oppression. As a result of taking my class, I want them to feel prepared to challenge incidents such as sexual harassment, bullying, or racist jokes. However, as an instructor, I often wonder am I effectively preparing students for social action?

Prior studies that have examined the relationship between enrollment in social justice education courses and action-oriented outcomes have found that students who complete these courses showed more confidence and commitment toward taking action against social oppression

(Burrell, 2008; Gurin-Sands, Gurin, Nagda, & Osuna, 2012; Nagda, Gurin, Sorenson, Gurin-Sands, & Osuna, 2009; Nagda, Kim, & Truelove, 2004; Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003). In addition, students placed greater importance on social action engagement over the course of a semester (Nelson Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, 2005). In three of the studies (Nagda et al, 2003; Nagda et al., 2009; Gurin-Sands et al., 2012), active learning strategies had a greater impact on students' commitment to social action than the course content. However in another study, Nagda et al., (2004) found that both the course content and pedagogy increased students' confidence and willingness to engage in other-directed actions by the end of the course, but not self-directed ones.

While these findings are promising, as a scholar-practitioner, I want to know more about what strategies social justice educators use (and how) in the classroom to prepare students for social action. In this paper, I illustrate how I use social justice vignettes in a social justice education course to prepare students for social action. I first describe social justice education. Next, I discuss how vignettes have been used to promote social justice in classroom-based studies. Afterward, I present the vignette design and the process used to implement them in my course.

SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

Social justice education (SJE) is an approach that examines how power and privilege are used in educational institutions to unintentionally and intentionally, reproduce social inequality in society based on citizens' social group membership (Picower, 2012). For example, exploring how the curriculum and pedagogy in schools can encourage males to pursue STEM careers and track females toward "nurturing" careers or how color-blind policies and practices in schools can lead to an overrepresentation of African American and Latino males in special education and

white students, males and females, in gifted and talented programs (Banks, 2010). Educational strategies such as culturally relevant teaching, critical pedagogy, and critical multicultural education are examples of SJE (Dover, 2013). SJE is different from diversity education in that the goal is to move students from awareness to action for social justice (Gorski, 2013, Skubikowski, 2009). I use SJE to prepare students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to recognize social inequality and take action within their sphere of influence (Adams, 2010). Through an examination of the “isms” and their intersections (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, linguicism) and use of an inclusive pedagogy (Skubikowski, 2009), I explore with students different dimensions of education (e.g., content, pedagogy, knowledge construction, school culture) and how they can marginalize non-dominant groups and privilege dominant groups (Banks, 2010). In addition, students learn to critically analyze social issues, self-reflect about their own biases, and practice strategies to respond to acts of discrimination and promote social change (Adams, 2010; Banks, 2010; Picower, 2012).

STUDIES USING VIGNETTES TO PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE

Vignettes have been used in fields such as sociology and mental health to help students explore complex social issues (Barnatt, Shakman, Enterline, Cochran-Smith, & Ludlow, 2007). Vignettes allow students to apply their understanding of social justice issues to a concrete situation by asking them to consider whether an incident is an example of oppression and identify appropriate action strategies in a real world context (Barter & Renold, 2000). In addition, vignettes encourages student to reflect and use critical thinking skills when engaging complex social justice issues (Angelides & Gibbs, 2006). Furthermore, students can examine sensitive issues and receive feedback in a safe environment before engaging in action outside the classroom (Barnatt et al, 2007; Barter & Renold, 2000).

However there are few classroom-based studies in education that used vignettes to assess students' learning about issues of social justice. For example, Lopez, Gurin, & Nagda (1998) used vignettes to assess whether students enrolled in a course titled, *Introduction to Intergroup Relations and Conflict* would provide more structural causes for two intergroup conflicts described in scenarios about sexual orientation and race/ethnicity. Using a pre/post design, students were asked to respond to both open-ended and closed-ended items included in the vignette questionnaire to measure their learning over the course of one semester. Findings indicate that students enrolled in the course showed an increase in structural thinking about group inequalities more than those who did not take the course.

In two classroom-based studies, Darvin (2011a; 2011b) used vignettes to prepare teacher candidates to address cultural and political issues in elementary schools. The first study (2011a) employed a qualitative design that included written reflections, observations, and interviews. The study included 17 students enrolled in a course titled, *Teaching Content in Multilingual Classrooms*. The vignettes focused primarily on issues in the classroom related to race/ethnicity and language. A four-stage process was used in the course to assess student learning. First, students responded to the vignettes in written form and discussed them in class. Second, students wrote their own vignettes, exchanged them with their classmates and discussed solutions. Third, students created role-plays using the original vignettes. Finally, students read a text that reflected a cultural or political issue from one of the vignettes. Findings indicate that teacher candidates increased their awareness about cultural and political issues in the classroom over the course of one semester.

In a second study, Darvin (2011b) explored teachers' perceptions of the cultural and political vignettes (CPV's). The study included 43 teachers enrolled in two graduate education

courses titled, *Literacy Instruction for Diverse Learners*. Using a quantitative design, the author asked students to provide feedback about the CPV's and the four-stage process described above in three different surveys administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester.

Findings indicate teachers found creating and exchanging vignettes and role-playing, more effective than instructor-designed vignettes. In addition, teachers indicated that the CPV's did influence their cultural and political thinking and felt greater comfort engaging cultural and political issues in the classroom.

In this paper, I build on this emerging literature by developing a method that social justice educators can use to teach students about social action and begin to assess their readiness to recognize and respond to various forms of oppression in their daily lives.

SOCIAL JUSTICE VIGNETTE DESIGN

I have taught SJE courses for over 20 years and witnessed students' stories about the challenges they faced confronting and educating others about social oppression. Based on these experiences, I wanted to design a process that would make learning more relevant to students' daily lives. Furthermore, in a recent study (Burrell Storms, 2012), students enrolled in a SJE course indicated that teaching strategies (e.g., experiential activities) that included their lived experiences and increased their personal awareness, empathy, confidence, and knowledge about tools for social action, were helpful in preparing them for social action engagement. I contend that vignettes can be an effective teaching strategy to incorporate students' lived experiences with social oppression and increase their personal awareness, empathy, confidence and knowledge about tools for social action needed to recognize and respond to social oppression.

The vignettes I use in the classroom are student-centered—meaning that their experiences with oppression form the foundation for each scenario. This process allows students' lived

experiences to become integral to the curriculum. As we cover each “ism” in the course I keep a teaching journal so that I capture students’ stories and experiences with racism, sexism, classism, etc. Afterward, I create the vignettes (with permission) to use when we discuss how to take action against each form of oppression. I find that allowing students to first connect with each “ism” personally is effective when teaching such abstract concepts. While this process is a necessary step of becoming self-aware about one’s own experience with social justice issues, I believe guiding students to examine and connect their experiences to macro-level social issues is critical in understanding the systemic nature of privilege and oppression.

IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL JUSTICE VIGNETTES

I implement the following process once several “isms” have been discussed in class so social action becomes a theme as we explore topics throughout the semester. In my experience, students provide more effective action strategies by the end of the course if they learn to apply abstract concepts to their lived experiences and have more opportunities to practice taking action over the course of the semester. In preparation for the vignettes, the students will have read several course readings to help them understand a particular “ism” and will have discussed their lived experiences with each “ism.” The vignette assignment takes approximately 60 minutes to complete including the discussion and debrief. I recommend using at least two different scenarios on the same topic to help students learn a myriad of action-taking strategies. In addition, I recommend that social justice educators model what they are teaching students. To help students feel safe and provide them with ideas, I take on a role and perform in the first vignette of the semester. This assignment can be used with undergraduates and graduate students.

To introduce the assignment, I show a PowerPoint slide that describes the purpose of the activity (e.g., reflect on the complexities of taking action against oppression and discuss and practice action-taking strategies using social justice incidents they have experienced in their daily lives) and its connection to the course goals. Afterward, I ask students to form five groups (4 students per group). An additional PowerPoint slide is shown that describes the process for the assignment. Next, each student in the group is given the vignette (See Appendix for sample vignettes) and is asked to read it individually first and write down how they would respond to the incident. Each student then shares their response with the group. My approach is non-directive, allowing students to make-meaning of the scenarios in her or his own words rather than selecting from a list of fixed-choice responses that may not represent their actual beliefs and actions (Finch, 1987) or limit students' insight about social action engagement (Barnatt et al, 2007). A non-directive approach "brings us one step closer to understanding [students'] behaviors" (Scheonberg & Ravdal, 2000, p. 64).

After the students share their action-taking strategies with the group, they develop a role-play based on the vignette to demonstrate social action engagement using the strategies they shared. Darvin (2011a) describes role-plays that include critical reflection, revision of the performed actions, and dialogue as situated performances. Each step is necessary for students to understand the complexity of action-taking and learn how to help one another as allies during the process. The students are given approximately 10 minutes to design their role-play and bring the social justice incidents to life. Each group reads the social justice incident described in the vignette aloud to their classmates and conducts the role-play including their strategies chosen to challenge the "ism" illustrated. After each performance, I ask other students in the audience to describe what they saw, discuss the effectiveness of the strategies, and suggest what they might

do differently. In addition, I ask students to discuss what risks might arise from their taking action and predict the outcome. While students are suggesting additional strategies I type their suggestions into a PowerPoint slide, add additional strategies, and upload the slides into a course management system so that students have access to them throughout the semester.

To help students critically reflect on their action strategies further, I give them the *action continuum* (Griffin & Harro, 2007; McClintock, 2000). The action continuum helps students explore a range of possible responses to oppressive behavior, and more importantly, determine where the strategies used during their role-plays lie along the continuum (working against social justice or working toward social justice). This step is important if we want students to increase their self-awareness and empathy about the impact of oppressive behavior as well as their confidence to take action and the tools available to them for social action. During the 10 minute debrief I ask students what surprised them, what it felt like taking action and what they learned about social action engagement. To help students connect the “personal with the institutional” (Zúñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002, p.13), I conduct a whole group discussion to examine how the vignettes reflect class readings to help them understand the content knowledge on a deeper level.

To explore how this process might prepare students to recognize and respond to the “isms,” I conducted a mixed method study using vignettes and interviews to assess students’ readiness for social action engagement (Burrell, 2008). Using a pre/post design students were presented with two different vignettes reflecting a social justice issue (i.e. racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism). Afterward, students responded to six open-ended questions that asked them to assess the incident; whether action should be taken and if so, what type(s) of action; what would facilitate or impede their willingness to take action; what risks they foresee if action is taken; and what knowledge and skills they need to take action effectively in the

scenario. In addition, students responded to two Likert scales that measured their confidence and willingness to take action in the incident described. Students were given approximately 30 minutes of in-class time to complete the survey. An analytic rubric was used to code students' responses to the open-ended questions. Cross-tabulations were then used to measure students' change over time. Means were calculated for the Likert scales. Findings indicated students who responded to the sexism, classism, and heterosexism vignettes showed the most change over time, while students who responded to the racism vignette showed the least. In the following example, I show a student's response¹ to the sexism vignette (See Appendix, Vignette #5) on the pre/posttest to illustrate how their response to the scenario changed over the course of the semester: (Pre) "I would assume that Michael has something against women and that he would prefer something different. If I did intervene I would just tell him to lighten up and relax that men will be learned about." (Post) "My interpretation of this incident is that Michael doesn't understand what is happening that women have been oppressed all throughout history and that is important to recognize women in history. The action I would take would be to try to educate him on the situation and the plight of women. That women are an essential part of history." In the posttest survey this student acknowledged the incident as a form of oppression and went from just telling Michael to "lighten up" to educating him about sexism.

In addition, I asked students to reflect on how the vignette assignment prepared them for social action engagement during interviews (Burrell, 2008). The following statements are representative of what students indicated in their responses. For example, one student who

¹ This response is representative of the sample for the study conducted in 2008.

responded to the racism and sexism vignettes stated that the assignment increased his knowledge about tools for social action:

I realized there are other ways to look at it than just the one side I looked at before. It was enlightening because you have all this knowledge now. You make more rational decisions than you did before. It was enlightening to know that you can make better decisions if you are just educated about it, how to do it, what not to say, how to paint a better picture, word things differently so you don't cause a rift between people. This helps when you have a disagreement with people. It's good to know that you have other options when a situation like that occurs dealing with race or sexuality.

Another student who responded to the heterosexism and sexism vignettes describes how the vignette assignment increased his self-awareness about oppressive behavior and the need for social action engagement:

It seems like people just kind of took it as a joke and I think I would had been one of the first ones to laugh, but it seems like after [this assignment] every action that I do in the back of my head its like what, what are you laughing at? What are you doing, especially since I'm so much more aware and the things that other people are doing? I pick up real quick so if I hear some kind of racial put down or something about a lesbian or gay person I pick up quick, where as before I might have just heard it and keep walking. Right now it makes me think. I'm not to the point where I'll say something yet, and I know I need to get to that point.

Final Thoughts

In this article I have illustrated how social justice vignettes can be used to prepare students for social action engagement in a social justice education course. Social justice vignettes

can be used in other ways as well. For example, I use vignettes with pre-service teachers in a service-learning course to prepare them to become literacy tutors in an urban elementary school. In addition, I collaborated with two international studies instructors to conduct a study using a vignette to assess students' readiness to respond to humanitarian crises such as natural disasters (Burrell Storms, LeBonte, Siscar, & Martin, in press). Beyond the classroom, Barnatt et al. (2007) have explored using vignettes to assess teacher candidates' dispositions regarding social justice issues at the program level. Currently, our department is in discussions to use vignettes in our admissions process to assess potential teacher candidates' dispositions.

One of the advantages of using vignettes is that they are practical and can require less time depending on class size and how they are used (Angelides & Gibbs, 2006) in the classroom. In addition, in my experience students have been consistently engaged throughout the process and frequently comment on how vignettes help them to understand the complexity of social justice issues and how to respond them. As with any process there are limitations. For example, vignettes serve as a proxy for action-taking. Therefore, students may not "take action" in the ways discussed in class. To reduce this limitation, social justice educators can use the vignettes in preparation for social action projects so that students can apply what they learned outside the classroom. This would give instructors additional evidence to assess students' readiness for social action engagement. Another limitation is that vignettes may only tell us if students have the knowledge, willingness, and skills to take action; not if they will take action when presented with an opportunity to do so or if they have moved from awareness of oppression to action-taking. However, if social justice educators use the process as described, they can assess students' readiness at three different points during the semester and adjust their instruction at least twice, if necessary. My next steps are to conduct a follow-up study with our graduates to

explore how they have taken action inside and outside the classroom and in what ways the vignettes were helpful in the process.

While preparing students for positive social engagement with issues of diversity and social justice is complex, I believe using vignettes is an effective method for social justice educators who want their students ready to recognize and respond to social injustice in their daily lives.

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Appendix*Sample Vignettes*

1. While you are participating as a youth advocate at a local elementary school, you hear two teachers talking in the hallway. One teacher asks the other how their day is going. The other teacher responds, “my day would be better if the students were willing to learn and stopped being lazy.” The other teacher agrees, “I know what you mean. I swear these kids don’t want to do anything.” The teachers work with students who are predominantly Latino and African American. What would you do? (Instructor designed)
2. You are a middle school teacher. One day you invite the school psychologist into your classroom to observe a particular student because she appears to be high energy. The school psychologist tells you that the student is “on the spectrum”. You ask what kind of accommodations will the student need. The psychologist provides you with various strategies and states, “Really you just need to lower your expectations for the student.” How might you handle this case? (Student designed)
3. You are in a meeting with the AP teacher, ESL teacher, principal, and school counselor to discuss a student who wants to take an AP English course to improve her English. You suggest contacting the student’s parents to discuss the situation further. The AP teacher states that it would be a waste of time because the student’s parents do not speak English. What would be your next step? (Student designed)
4. You send a letter to parents letting them know that you will be teaching a lesson about families next week and that you make ask them to participate on a panel. Several parents who identify as Christians call to question the principal if the lesson will include a discussion about LGBTQ families. You are not tenured. How would you proceed? (Instructor designed)
5. A group of students enrolled in a world history course are meeting to discuss the group project assigned to them for the semester. During the discussion, you overhear Michael share how disappointed he is that the project focuses on women in history. He states, “If I wanted to do a project about women, I would have taken a women’s studies course.” The other students in the group laugh at his comment. (Instructor designed)
6. You notice several students in the back of the classroom looking at their cell phones. You ask them to please share what they are discussing with the rest of the class. They tell everyone about an invitation on

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Facebook and Twitter to attend a party on Friday night with the following theme: *Come One, Come All, to the Greatest Poor White Trash Ball.* (Instructor designed)