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Envisioning New Forms of Praxis: Reflective Practice and Social Justice Education in a Higher Education
Graduate Programs

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Student affairs graduate programs tend to prepare individuals via theory but do not engage in dialogue that addresses how to transfer that theory into practice. In many cases, social justice issues are neglected. As student affairs scholars/practitioners and women, we find ourselves engaged in conversations with colleagues about a shared concern: entry-level student affairs professionals are not adequately prepared to survive the political environment of higher education. In an effort to illuminate our understanding of this dilemma, we focused on this shared concern with a deep interest in creating some type of actionable change within student affairs preparation programs. Our research indicates that understanding individual social action theories is intrinsic to building a community that supports diversity. Habermas (1990) speaks to the theory of “communicative action,” or a process of building understanding among groups of individuals. Habermas’ concept of communicative action can serve as an analogy for both the instructor and the student in a student affairs graduate classroom. In accordance with this analogy, the instructor and students are oriented toward discovering their own meaning, personally and as a group, while accessing theories that are applicable in student affairs practice.

Context

In recent years, student affairs Master’s programs throughout the United States have enhanced and diversified approaches to student development by incorporating cognitive-structural theories, human development theories, and postmodern writings. Such curriculum augmentations introduce a diverse array of theories to students. However, many programs lack both a deliberate incorporation of the actual act of critical discourse among students and instructors and the purposeful infusion of social justice issues into the practice. As educators of student affairs practitioners in training, it is necessary to facilitate critical discourse and learning congruent with the ideologies of the “Learning Paradigm.” This occurs by encouraging the intentional inclusion of social justice theories as students develop their own theories of praxis.

According to Bell (1997, p. 3), “the goal of social justice education is the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs.” In order to be agents of social change, students must first learn how to critically analyze postmodern approaches to knowing. They must also be familiar with “praxis” and how to effectively utilize personal praxis techniques to address issues of social

justice in academic, professional, and personal situations. Praxis includes both theory and practice as “intertwining parts of the interactive and historical processes” that assist students with active participation in discourse and reshaping their learned belief systems (Bell, 1997, p. 4). In order to most effectively fulfill our roles as student affairs professionals, it is important to recognize the “isms” present in our learned belief systems and those of our students, peers, and colleagues. Such “isms” include the following: Racism; Sexism; Ageism; Ableism; Anti-Semitism; Heterosexism; and Classism. The incorporation of social justice education into student affairs programs is one means of utilizing theory to enable students to recognize “isms” that manifest themselves in both formal and informal ways in practice.

Conceptual Map

First, we address the significance of incorporating social justice theory in higher education preparation programs. We then examine the use of reflection in social justice education. Next, we describe two action experiments conducted to examine reflective practice and the incorporation of social justice theory in practical experiences. The paper concludes with our reflections about social justice education based on the theory and our own action experiments.

Why Social Justice?

Student affairs masters programs validate the importance of moral and interpersonal development. This is reflected in many of the student development and cognitive development theories that are found in program curriculums. What is often missing in the classroom, however, is a process that teaches individuals to work as social agents with students as they (the students) develop. Cranton (1996) highlights the idea of transformative development in which individuals have the ability to be agents of change in both the learning and work environments. According to Bell (1997), practice is always shaped by theory and theory provides a framework for questioning and challenging our practices, creating new approaches within our profession.

In order to be agents of change in the classroom and in practice, students must develop an awareness of the daily acts of oppression woven into the threads of modern society. Moreover, students must understand the manner in which such oppression affects their own practice and interactions with others. Creating learning environments in which open and honest discourse about the aforementioned “isms” may take place provides students with the tools and confidence to participate in public learning. Additionally, it may result in an increase in the level of influence new student affairs professionals have on overall institutional transformation and learning. Social justice education provides an area of knowledge from which student affairs professionals may draw in order to enhance their professional praxis and reshape their learned belief systems (Bell, 1997).

The coupling of social justice educative practices in a student affairs classroom provides participants with an opportunity to experiment with critical theories and gain experience by transferring those theories into practice. Both aspects are crucial to the level of preparation of the entry-level student affairs practitioner, as well as his or her perceptions of that preparation. Although student development theory helps students gain a better understanding of what both they and others are experiencing at any given time, more recent studies demonstrate that this area of theory has not concerned itself with concepts such as social status, positionality, or different life experiences (Bell, 1997; Bidell & Fischer, 1992; Rogoff, 1984; Rogoff, Gallvain, & Ellis, 1984). Social justice education fills this gap in the literature by recognizing and supporting both personal and systemic oppression that may affect students and those with whom they interact in the professional work environment.

The Use of Reflection in Social Justice Education

Reflection has been defined as “a process or activity that is central to developing practices” (Dewey, 1938;

Loughran, 1996, as cited in Leitch and Day, 2000, p. 180). Two types of reflective thinking are commonly discussed in the literature. The first, reflection-on-action refers to the “systematic and deliberate thinking back over one’s actions” (Russel and Mumby, 1992, p. 3). The second, reflection-in-action, is described as “a way of making explicit some of the tacit knowledge embedded in action so that the agent can figure out what to do differently” (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985, p. 51). During reflection-in-action, the practitioner pauses and reconstructs an actual situation in order to better understand and learn from it.

Reflection is recognized by Bell (1997) as a personal tool that informs practice and enables student-centered learning to take place. Congruent with the “Learning Paradigm”, which emphasizes the student as an active partner in the construction of knowledge, reflection enables each student to individually design a format that results in the acquisition of meaningful and useful information. Incorporating reflection into student affairs Master’s programs creates a learning laboratory in which they can better learn to navigate the unique environment of a university. Reflection contributes to “public learning” within an organization, providing platforms for critical discussion and a culture that welcomes change (Ramaley, 2000). Infusing reflection activities into assistantships, practicum experiences, or into the traditional classroom encourages students to document behavioral, cognitive, and affective experiences in a structured manner and provides opportunities for critical discussion and analysis. By engaging in reflection experiences in a structured and intentional setting, students develop cognitive tools that assist with the identification of “isms” within everyday interactions and experiences. Once recognized, students may address such “isms”, make informed choices, and contribute to a “community of learning” (Ramaley, 2000).

Reflective Practice and the Incorporation of Social Justice Theory in Practical Experiences Schön (1987) proposed the use of a reflective practicum as a means to bridge the gap between the world of the university and the world of practice. Application of learned theory and technique contributes to additional learning with reflection facilitating the learning process. Additionally, Schön identified the practicum experience as an opportunity for students to: “1) apply knowledge and skills in a practical setting; 2) progressively develop competencies through participation in a range of practical experiences; 3) test their commitment to a career; 4) gain insight into professional practice; and 5) evaluate progress and identify areas where further personal and professional development is needed” (as cited in Ryan, Toohey, and Hughes, 1996, p. 357). During such experiences, students engage in activity in environments that encourage the discovery and construction of knowledge in ways that have individual meaning and provide powerful learning experiences (Barr and Tagg, 1995). According to Schön, individuals may reflect on practice more frequently than they realize, in the form of “unarticulated intuitions, a detailed review of an experience, a logical analysis, or an evaluation of feelings” (as cited in Cranton, 1996, p. 78).

Without awareness of one’s own reflection techniques, however, actual enacted theories remain unassessed and behavior remains incongruent with espoused theories. Practicum experiences provide forums for students and professionals alike to explore personal theories-in-use in a purposeful and structured manner and enhance both personal and professional life.

This prompted us to conduct two action experiments that are highlighted in the following paragraphs. The first action experiment was conducted in the spring of 2001. The results of this action experiment provided rich information that compelled us to examine some of the feedback we received in greater detail. This led to a second action experiment conducted in the spring of 2002. Our goal for this experiment was to follow-up on the findings of the practicum research in greater depth, particularly focusing on the ways in which graduate students learn about and utilize action theories, social justice theory, and reflection.

First Action Experiment

During the fall of 2000, we designed a practicum discussion group curriculum based on reflection and critical dialogue. Three main objectives guided our work: 1) connect students’ course content to their

practicum experiences; 2) stimulate the examination of espoused theories and actual practices, and 3) develop effective communication within the professional context. We based the design on suggestions from past practicum participants and facilitators, in addition to information gleaned from two focus groups of a concurrent research project that queried second year higher education Master's students about their perceptions of various facets of the degree program.

The feedback demonstrated frustration about assistantships that were required for matriculation in the program but which were rarely discussed once classes began. Program faculty assumed that students made connections between theory and practice, but students felt that more could be done. Moreover, focus groups prior to the spring semester indicated a tendency for individuals to withhold feelings of dissatisfaction. The containment of negative perceptions stemmed from a number of factors including the fear of repercussions, an inability to envision improvement in complex professional dilemmas, or a lack of energy/motivation/commitment to pursue potential improvements.

Results of preliminary studies indicated a definite need for tools for developing effective communication within the professional context and with regard to social change. The new practicum design was viewed as a means of enhancing the program. Such a design aided in the formation of connections between theory and practice and connected critical dialogue about student affairs.

In order to build the trust necessary for students to feel comfortable engaging in critical reflection and dialogue, we included a number of activities in the practicum discussion group design. For example, the group engaged in quadrant exercises at the beginning of each meeting in which students shared personal ideas based on common themes. Additionally, "high-low exercises", in which students shared one positive and one challenging practicum experience from the prior week, provided a mini-reflection activity; these prepared students for more in-depth reflection exercises later in the discussion group experience. In order to promote the development of practices more congruent with enacted theories and augment social change, we incorporated intentional dialogue about espoused theories and theories-in use. Based on the Model I and Model II theories of Argyris and Schön (1974), students dialogued, utilized organizational theory, and critically reflected in order to assess personal theory and effectiveness in communication. The process also illuminated the various models of communication and theories in use in professional practice.

Student feedback at the conclusion of the practicum experience indicated that the experience was valuable. The students also noted the effectiveness of the combination of action theory and reflection for connecting theory and practice. Time constraints stemming from the one-hour time frame of the practicum discussion group meetings limited in-depth dialogue and reflection opportunities, providing for only an overview of the tools and theories for the participants. The students praised the utility of the tools and information provided; however, they articulated a need for more in-depth work with the model in order to determine its true merit.

Second Action Experiment

We then examined the ways in which graduate students learn action theories, reflect on their own practices, and deal with social justice issues in their professional practice in greater depth. In spring 2002, we embarked on a semester-long journey with nine student affairs master's students. The study employed classroom research to examine the use of reflection, action theories, and social justice readings in a student affairs master's course. Case studies, literature, and exercises introduced professional situations and enabled both students and instructors to collectively examine and reflect upon their own experiences and discourse within the field of student affairs. Exploration of the following questions provided the backdrop for this study:

1. How do student affairs master's students learn action theories?

2. How well prepared were student affairs master's students to deal with issues of social justice in their professional practice?
3. How did the use of action theories in a student affairs master's course on professional development enable students to reflect and make meaning of their experiences, both inside and outside the classroom?

Institutional Setting and Participants

The institutional setting chosen for this part of the study is representative of many student affairs master's programs across the United States in size, curriculum, and institutional type. The student affairs master's program is housed within a school of education at a Midwestern Doctoral/Research-Extensive university.

Nine of 10 students enrolled in the professional development course chose to participate in this study. Of the participants, five were female and four were male. Some participants self-identified themselves during the first interview session. These self-identifiers described ethnicity, regionality, religious affiliation, traditional or non-traditional student, and sexual orientation. Of the nine participants, two identified themselves as being born in a Latin American country. In addition, one participant self-identified as a "Southerner", and another identified as Jewish. Three identified as "non-traditional students" ranging in age from 44 to 53 who were all in the midst of a career change. Finally, one student identified as gay, while another identified as bisexual.

The participants, overall, ranged in age from 22 to 53. A few students had several years of professional experience in student affairs, however, the majority of participants had two to four years of primarily paraprofessional experience.

Approach to Learning

The course was modeled after the Professional Development course previously taught at the doctoral level, in that it was frontloaded with readings and assignments for a two-credit master's level course. The second half of the course was more loosely structured using open dialogue as the primary means of engaging theory, practical information, and insights. We added exercises and tools as needed in order to mold the structure of the second half of the course to best meet the needs of the entire class. We outlined guidelines regarding confidentiality and the group process during the first class and encouraged the students' mutual contributions to a supportive classroom environment. The professor introduced us as action researchers and teaching fellows who would not be leading group discussions because of human subject guidelines but who would actively participate in the course. Primarily, the professor conveyed a message that all participants in the course (i.e., 10 students, the two teaching fellows, and the professor) were equals and we worked to create an atmosphere of trust in the classroom. The professor had certain responsibilities, such as acting as lead discussant when we were working with the literature for the course, but the group shared joint responsibility for the direction of the course.

Data Collection

Interviews. Data collection included the audiotaping of two sets of one-to-one interviews conducted with course participants. The first set of face-to-face interviews occurred midway through the spring 2002 semester. The second set of interviews took place via the telephone during the summer of 2002.

Written data. Participants produced two types of written data and a group project that we analyzed in this study:

1. Professional Dialogue 1 and 2: Students selected a dialogue from a professional situation, described

the content for the dialogue, scripted the dialogue (in accordance with Argyris and Schön (1974) Model I and Model II behavior theories) to mirror a scene from a play, and engaged in critical reflection of the dialogue.

2. **Group Project:** Students participated in mini action experiments that engaged aspects of action theories. The projects required the student to collaborate on developing the design, conducting the experiment, and presenting the findings, insights, and conclusions.
3. **Praxis Paper:** Students composed papers examining the evolution of their professional praxis and informed by course content.

Findings suggest that students benefited from the introduction of concrete exercises that helped to illuminate theories of action within a classroom setting. Though initially struggling with the introduction of social justice frameworks into the classroom, many students later noted that they felt more equipped to effectively address the assumptions that they traditionally held with individuals who were different from them at the conclusion of the course. The risks the students took in the classroom, as well as in their personal praxis papers, illustrated such growth.

Our Reflections

The aforementioned action experiments provided insight into the professional challenges that student affairs practitioners may face on a daily basis. We introduced the notion of social justice within the framework of an academic community in order to provide the students opportunity to learn effective management skills in a supportive environment prior to professional practice. What is clear from a review of existing literature in student affairs, as well as from the participants in these two action experiments, is that a guiding educational philosophy is welcomed and needed within student affairs preparation programs. What remains to be seen, however, is a clear vision of how such an educational philosophy might be integrated into the student affairs field.

Upon a review of the data from focus groups, in and out-of-class discussions, and written assignments, we noted that students have difficulty describing who they are as professionals and why they make professional decisions. In some cases, particularly where social justice issues are concerned, many participants felt uncomfortable because they were not accustomed to a forum within a classroom or within their master's program where challenging others, as well as being challenged, was perceived as being safe. As educators, we must ask ourselves the question: Is the student affairs profession providing the foundation necessary for student affairs practitioners-in-training to become successful agents of social change? Is providing this foundation the responsibility of student affairs preparation programs? The answers are still unclear. It can be gleaned from these action experiments, however, that reflection, achieving individual critical consciousness, and the testing of assumptions are matters of importance to the participants that we surveyed.

In an effort to illustrate the experiences of students which culminated in the second action experiment, we suggest a "Social Justice Development Model for the Student Affairs Scholar - Practitioner-in-training" ([see page 15](#)).

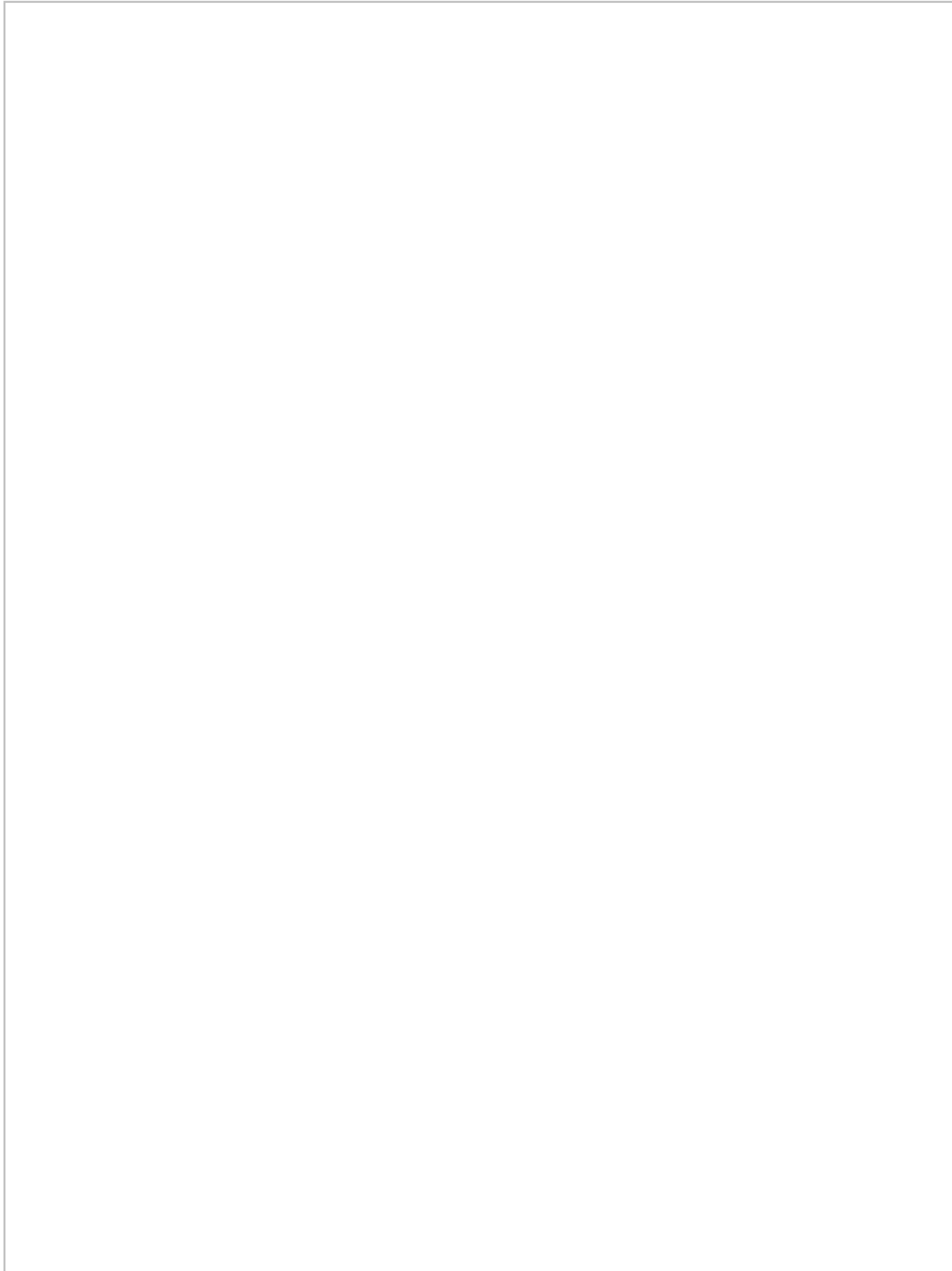
Students identified pre-existing attitudes toward the discussion of diversity issues in the classroom. As illustrated in the model, we attribute students' pre-existing attitudes to three factors: 1) past classroom experience; 2) their perception of social justice issues; and 3) socioeconomic class.

During the semester-long course, students encountered social justice texts, dialogues, and theories of action and experienced new methods and approaches to discussing difficult issues. In addition, students reflected, both orally, in class as well as in written assignments. The teaching team utilized action science as a process

for co-constructing a communicative classroom setting among the instructor, teaching fellows, and students.

The reactions of students are categorized in two primary ways: resistance towards discussing diversity issues and open conversation. Both open conversations regarding issues of social justice and learning theories of action, along with a considerable amount of resistance to these issues took place simultaneously.

Eight of the nine participants initially expressed some form of frustration, anxiety and, in some cases, anger about discussing diversity issues “again”. These participants attributed their initial resistance to both personal and prior educational experiences; and, many cited that such resistance stemmed from past educational experiences or courses *at the master’s level*.



Friere (1970) speaks about the notion of situated pedagogy and dialogic education. Situated pedagogy presents students with critical issues that may be most difficult for them to perceive. In the practicum and subsequent semester-long course, students utilized a syllabus situated within a critical framework. For some

of the participants, it was difficult to grasp and discuss issues such as actionable knowledge and social justice. A majority of the latter half of the semester during the second experiment focused on issues, projects, and dialogues that the students experienced in the workplace. It can be compared to Freire's definition of dialogic education "that is situated in the culture, language, politics and themes of the students" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 4). Students expressed initial discomfort with this format during both the practicum and semester-long course. Many participants had never experienced "social connectedness and mutual responsibility" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 4). The analysis of written assignments, interview transcripts, and informal conversation suggested that laying a social and critical foundation within an educational setting may give students in preparation programs confidence that is necessary to achieve individual critical consciousness. Achieving this consciousness could, in turn, provide opportunities for student affairs practitioners to act as agents of social change.

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