Teaching for Social Justice: Searching for Pedagogy

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Abstract

Two university professors investigated whether or not specific pedagogy contributes to raising students' self-awareness and development of critical thinking regarding issues of social justice. This paper describes two pedagogical tools used in the study: the Roundtable and the GRECSO model. The Roundtable is a whole-class activity that explores ideals of equity, shared leadership, appreciation of differences, authenticity, values clarification, and self-reflective listening and speaking. GRECSO is an interactive classroom activity exploring six socially constructed categories of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and ability. This paper reports on research investigating students' perceptions of the influence of the Roundtable and GRECSO activities on their understanding and actions concerning issues of social justice, especially in their organizations and workplaces.

Purpose of the Study

Instruction that is designed to cultivate critical thinking and insight into the learner's social reality ultimately might contribute to a more just society. The disappointment is that typical coursework across the disciplines may do very little to help students begin the process of critically examining their own thinking, feelings and desires about issues of social justice. The overarching purpose of our study was to discover if the design of university coursework using specific pedagogical elements can raise student awareness of social justice issues, help them begin to examine the issues more critically, and ultimately help provide students with an impetus to work for change in their communities and organizations. In this paper we describe two key pedagogical elements we have used in our courses and what we found concerning students' thinking and action around issues of social justice.

The study asked two main questions:

1. In a one-semester course designed to acquaint students with issues of social justice, did students experience a change in their:

   a. definition of social justice,

   b. recognition of practices relevant to social justice in their organizations, and

   c. sense of responsibility for contributing to change in the distribution of justice

2. How did these specific pedagogies promote movement toward change?

Theoretical Framework

We have chosen the framework developed by Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, and Peterson (1994) that comprise what they call "a social justice classroom" (p. 4) to guide our choice of pedagogy to study. These authors believed that classrooms should become laboratories for creating a more just society. They believe educators should "confront" rather than perpetuate race, class, gender and other inequities in our society that help shape children's lives. Eleven years after the publication of *Rethinking our classrooms* (Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, & Peterson, 1994), this challenge still exists. Thus, consistent with the authors' eight components of the equitable, socially just classroom, the design for our coursework is: 1) grounded in the lives of students, 2) critical, 3) multicultural, antiracist, pro-justice, 4) participatory and experiential, 5) hopeful, joyful, kind and visionary, 6) activist, 7) academically rigorous, and 8) culturally sensitive (p. 4-5). Theoretical support for these elements overlaps with several other conceptual frameworks, such as constructivism, critical thinking, and educational systems design. In the next sections, we link these frameworks to the eight components of the equitable, socially just classroom.

Constructivism

Constructivism supports the belief that learning is enhanced when it is grounded in and part of the learner's participation in real experience. Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, and Peterson's (1994) first component of a socially just classroom argues that the classroom should help students connect the subject(s) to their lives in the broader society with its potential limitations. Their fourth component calls for "participatory, experiential classrooms" where students question, challenge, make real decisions, and collectively solve problems. Constructivist epistemology's central tenet is that the individual learner constructs knowledge of the world by interacting with it. Knuth and Cunningham (1993) propose several critical principles in designing constructivist learning:

- authentic student tasks are embedded in contexts that are relevant in the real world
- social context where dialogue and negotiation of meaning provide students with the means for developing, testing and refining ideas;
- students are encouraged to have voice and ownership in the learning process;
- students experience the knowledge construction process
- students reflect on their own thinking and decision making process.

In their paper dealing with how educational leadership can support social justice in schools, Furman and Shields (2003) also suggest that meanings of social justice are context-based and are constructed by the members of the community in the midst of their unique local context. They believe that injustice occurs when there is no space created into which students may bring their lived experience. It is also their idea that deficit

thinking by educators implies "some students are intrinsically less able to learn than others" (p. 17).

Critical Thinking

The second component of the socially just classroom is "critical" meaning that the curriculum should "equip students to talk back to the world." Elder and Paul (2002) agree that to become critical thinkers, learners must develop their abilities to monitor egocentric and sociocentric tendencies, and to examine critically their point of view and conformity to the thinking of their social group. Elder and Paul suggest that the mind has three distinct functions: *thinking, feeling and wanting*. A dynamic interrelationship of these functions is constantly being communicated to individuals in their minds as they ponder the following:

- What is going on in my life

- Feelings about those events

- Things to pursue, where to put my energy

Components three (multicultural, antiracist, projustice) and six (activist) of the socially just classroom work well with critical *thinking, feeling, and wanting*. First, a socially just curriculum "must strive to include the lives of all those in our society, especially the lives of the marginalized and dominated" and secondly, students should be encouraged to learn, act upon and "feel connected to this legacy of defiance" (Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, and Peterson, p.4). When learners are given a context for exploring the strengths and weaknesses of how they are thinking and acting and how others are thinking and acting, they can become more fair-minded. "We need to develop critical thinking skills in dialogical settings to achieve genuine fair-mindedness. If

critical thinking is learned simply as atomic skills separate from the empathetic practice

of entering into points of view that we are fearful of or hostile toward, we will simply

find additional means of rationalizing our prejudices" (Elder and Paul, p. 340).

Educational Systems Design

The fifth component of the socially just classroom, admonishes us todesign

"activities where students learn to trust and care for each other and experiences that

prefigure the kind of democratic and just society we envision and thus contribute to

building that society" (p.4). This component is reinforced in the guidelines of social

systems design of education. Bela Banathy one of the fathers of the field suggested that

the design of educational systems should include learner decisions in the design. He

considered it a basic right of people to guide their own destinies by taking part in

decisions that have an impact on their lives, to take responsibility for the creation of

communites that are caring, nurturing and healthy. To design one's own future is a

fundamental human right. He further held that it is only once these rights are ceded to

stakeholders in communities that a truly democratic civil society will emerge. This

democratic civil society will continually reproduce within its practices these same rights

that brought it about (Banathy, 1996).

Methods

This study was conducted at a small Midwestern comprehensive university and

attempted to isolate the value of particular pedagogical tools and strategies in promoting

students' critical thinking about social justice issues, problems and concerns. The study

was initially conducted as a pilot in one course in the College of Education's Department

of Educational Leadership during the summer semester, 2003. This course, entitled

Special Education for Educational Leaders focused on the inclusion of students with special needs into regular education as a social justice issue. The following semester, Fall 2003, the research expanded to include courses in educational leadership as well as courses in the University College's Bachelor of General Studies Program. This paper is drawn from research during the fall semester of 2004 in two sections of Cultural Foundations of Diverse communities in Educational Leadership and one course in the Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) program entitled ProSeminar in Critical Skills.

Initially, to answer the research questions, we introduced five major activities or what we call pedagogical elements into our coursework. The five elements were pre- and post-course surveys, focus and roundtable group activities, explorations of a model of socially constructed categories (GRECSO) and the classroom discussion guidelines, reflective journaling (online and offline), and selected texts and readings. The two elements that we describe in detail in this paper are the Roundtable and the GRECSO model.

Roundtable

The Roundtable (Appendix A) is a whole-class activity to explore a new way of meeting together to think about "shared principles and ideals—ideals of equity, shared leadership, appreciation of differences, authenticity, values clarification, and self-reflective listening and speaking" (Gabriele, 2003). A facilitator, who introduces the Roundtable, reads a script organized by the following categories: purpose (sharing and exploration), format (time constraints), guidelines for speaking (topic constraints), guidelines for listening (personal application), and responding (constraints and respect).

In our study of the Roundtable for this phase of our research, we introduced and facilitated Roundtable sessions following the viewing of the video *A Class Divided* (1986). The video shows a classroom experiment conducted in Riceville, Iowa in 1970 by an elementary teacher, Jane Elliott. After learning of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. she felt compelled to teach her students in her third grade classroom how stereotyping contributes to racism. After viewing the video, we facilitated the session with a trigger question based on the concepts in the video. The Roundtable script handed out in the first session includes specific guidelines for how participants must speak about their own ideas and feelings during the Roundtable process being careful not to respond to the previous speaker's ideas. Each speaker is allowed a set amount of time and is to speak uninterrupted. Immediately following the Roundtable session, students recorded their reactions to the session in their journals in class. The BGS course used the Roundtable four times throughout the semester. After the first Roundtable facilitated by the professor, the following three Roundtables were facilitated by students who designed the trigger questions around chapters in the text on critical thinking.

GRECSO Model

GRECSO (Dalmage, 2003) highlights six socially constructed categories of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and ability. The GRECSO model (Appendix B) is introduced early in the semester as an interactive process for exploring social construction of diversity categories. In class, before the model is introduced, we ask students to write their definitions of social justice. The acronym GRECSO is written on the board vertically with each term written out. A horizontal line is drawn and students are asked to come up with the traditional categories for each of the terms. As the

categories of privilege and power are placed on top, the model ends up looking

something like this.

Gender	Race	Ethnicity	Class	Sexual Orientation	Ability
Male	White	American	Have	Heterosexual	Abled
Female	Black/People of color	Alien/Foreigner	Have not	Homosexual	Disabled

As the model is drawn on the blackboard, students were asked, "Where do you

place yourself on this grid? What do you notice about the values society assigns to the

different categories?" After the first presentation and discussion of the model, students

worked in small groups to answer several trigger questions. Students responded to the

trigger questions by writing in journals and reported both online and offline the outcomes

of group discussions. We addressed the GRECSO model throughout the semester to

promote critical thinking about the categories in relation to students' personal contexts

and experiences.

Data Sources

The guiding research question that framed the study was concerned with whether

or not students experienced change in their ideas about social justice as a result of the

chosen pedagogies. Data came from several sources for the Roundtable and GRECSO

activities. Students responded to broad questions in their journal reflections posted

online and offline. More specific questions for in-class journaling followed both

Roundtable and GRECSO activities. Students also answered questions in their final

course evaluations regarding changes in their beliefs and/or ideas about the socially

constructed categories in GRECSO and regarding the role of the Roundtable's impact on their thinking about social justice issues, concerns or problems.

When we first began looking at the data, we separated student responses according to the specific pedagogical tool. A second look at our data began to reveal particular themes and patterns that addressed our research questions. Questions in the final course evaluations revolved around the issues of defining social justice, recognizing relevant practices in the workplace, and issues of responsible action for change. Student answers to these questions contributed to data that directly corresponded to our research questions.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Research Question One

Our first research questions asked:

1. In a one-semester course designed to acquaint students with issues of social justice, did students experience a change in their:

   a. definition of social justice,

   b. recognition of practices relevant to social justice in their organizations, and

   c. sense of responsibility for contributing to change in the distribution of justice.

To address the first research question of change, we looked to the final course evaluation in all three classes. One question specifically asked students how their personal definition of social justice had changed or not changed during the semester. When looking at the data, we realized there were some students who came into the course without *any* definition of social justice. For example, one student stated, "I now see social justice as a way we bring equality to all individuals. Before I didn't know what social

justice meant." Another student's comment was, "I couldn't really think of a definition before this class. Social justice means something to me now." Other students had a definition of social justice when they began the course and at the end of the semester were able to refine their definition through thinking "about the issues more and to ask questions, seeking answers." This consciousness about definition of social justice is reflected in one student's comment. "My definition of social justice is definitely broader than at the beginning of the semester – I also realize that social justice encompasses every level of our everyday lives."

Another question in the course evaluation asked students how their organization's practices agreed or disagreed with their current definition of social justice. Students agreed overall that their organizations' practices were consistent with their personal definition. For example, students said: "My organization agrees with my definition . . . that there are definitely right and wrong practices." "My organization has the highest expectations when it comes to social justice, anything less won't be tolerated." "I feel that my school does a decent job accepting all and teaching everyone equally." Others thought their organizations were changing but ". . . would like to see changes more favorable to those of us on the lower echelon." And some students felt their organizations' practices were inconsistent, as evidenced by the following comments: "[School leaders] gave in to ignorance" by stereotyping; workplace members "required reminders for fair mindedness goals"; and school staff were "more into categorization and one size fits all models."

The final question in the course evaluation asked students how they took responsibility at any level for social justice. Two themes emerged from the data: self-development and activism. Students were developing their own sense of responsibility

and mentioned becoming fair minded and objective, having empathy, educating themselves, becoming more mindful and tolerant, and putting prejudice and assumptions aside. The theme of activism emerged from ideas of actively working on behalf of others, bringing awareness and acceptance to others, and acting as mediators. Students said: "I volunteer for causes that I see benefit those truly in need;" "[I take responsibility] by discouraging or stopping any unjust actions I witness by other coworkers;" and "I try to voice not only my perspective, but others who I feel may not be treated justly."

Research Question Two: Roundtable and GRECSO

Our second research question asked: How did the specific pedagogies, Roundtable and GRECSO, promote movement toward change? In our data analysis, three themes emerged from the Roundtable activities and two themes emerged from GRECSO activities.

Roundtable

Three themes emerged from the student response data concerning the Roundtable. Those themes that the Roundtable fostered were: 1) an equitable speaking process, 2) critical thinking, and 3) good reflective listening skills.

Equitable speaking process. Many students described the Roundtable activity as just, fair, and "gives every person equal opportunity to speak." One student said: "The thing I liked most about the Roundtable was the opportunity for everybody to speak openly, but for a short period of time. No one person stole the spotlight. Plus, you have time to organize your statement." Some students felt too limited by time constraints while others felt that a one-minute format for speaking was sufficient.

Critical thinking. In the second theme that emerged from data, students described the Roundtable as self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective. One student stated that the Roundtable allowed for self-analysis which is "always humbling." Another student said: "It [Roundtable] was really interesting but also different to listen to my peers' responses which in the grand scheme of things really forced me to think more in terms of my own biases." Some students were not all that positive about whether the Roundtable fostered critical thinking as evidenced by this student's statement: "I think it's more effective when you can challenge and constructively criticize."

Good reflective listening skills. This third theme that emerged from the data, good reflective listening skills was a benefit that they saw the Roundtable process provided them. This benefit was described by students as helping them to develop an interest in what other people in the group have to say, and develop respect for another person's "inner wisdom." Students said "It [the Roundtable made you look deep inside yourself . . . as many times we overlook our biases and act like they are just the way it is. The Roundtable made us reflect on our biases." Another student liked the Roundtable because it helped the student "hear others' opinions on social justice in an anecdotal way. . ."

GRECSO

The two key themes that the GRECSO activities fostered were: 1) insight/no insight, showing that students were divided on whether or not the activity provided new insights into social justice issues, and 2) reactions to inherent categorization in the model, in that reaction to GRECSO sensitized and sometimes offended students.

Insight/No Insight. One student's comment showed that GRECSO helped her see "both sides – [It] makes me better help to overcome challenges; makes me a better daughter,

wife, friend, student, coach, and teacher." Another woman stated that before GRECSO she saw ". . . genders as equal, now [I] see men as more powerful." Several students mentioned that they experienced no change in their beliefs as a result of GRECSO activities.

Categorization. Some students thought the binary view showed by the model was harmful as evidenced by one student's comment that binary thinking was "detrimental to society." Several mentioned they were raised not to discriminate; they were open to equity and treated people equally regardless of the categories of GRECSO. Our interpretation of these types of comments showed that these students did not have a deep understanding of the binary, socially constructed categories that the GRECSO model represents. They weren't able to look beyond categorization to develop their thinking given trigger questions that asked specifically how the fact that the categories of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and ability are socially constructed and how that might shape our experiences when thinking and talking about issues of social justice.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

University professors share the responsibility of preparing citizens for participation in a just society. Given this responsibility, course design must promote critical thinking among students who are regularly confronting diversity and complex social changes in the workplace and in the larger community. Indeed, in one semester of coursework, we found evidence that students began to articulate and question their belief systems regarding the key socially constructed categories in GRECSO of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and ability. Although we encountered resistance to the recognition of how these categories are socially constructed we realized how important it

is that students begin to think about the problems of binary thinking and connect to their own experience regarding this way of thinking about the society and the world in which they work and live. We found good evidence that with the particular pedagogy we used, students who had not formulated a definition of social justice were now able to do so; students who had a definition, were now able to think more deeply and critically to refine it.

As researchers we are interested in exploring the specifics of various pedagogical tools and developing them completely. The Roundtable activity is the pet project of a small group of researchers in social systems design and we would also like to work with these researchers to refine this valuable tool. The GRECSO model is the subject of a colleague's research that we are following closely as well. Since beginning our research, we have been using these pedagogical tools in other classes that we teach and have found them to be helpful whenever we enter into discussions with our students about issues of social justice. Whenever these discussions crop up in our classes, we find GRECSO and the Roundtable enlightening for all the participants.

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Appendix A – Roundtable Guidelines

Facilitator Guide

(Don't read words in parentheses.)

Welcome everyone. We are exploring a new activity, the Roundtable. We would like to suspend judgment and experience it without stopping for 30 minutes today. Afterwards we will talk about it for 5 minutes to determine its value for us, and to consider possible revisions and applications.

I'll ask some of you to volunteer to read our Roundtable Guidelines **(on the right).**

Will ___read OUR PURPOSE?
    …Thank you, _____.

Will ____read OUR FORMAT?
        Thank you, _____.

Will ____read OUR GUIDELINES FOR SPEAKING?
        Thank you, _____.

Will ____read OUR GUIDELINES FOR LISTENING?
        Thank you, _____.

Will ____read OUR GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING?
        Thank you, _____.

(please read…)
The suggested topic is the DVD A Class Divided **(read on next page and trigger question)**

(read…)
We are now open for your comments. With today's attendance, please take about _1_minute(s). We will go around the circle.

(In 15 minutes please notice if we are about halfway around the group. If not, say…)
Its half time; let's shorten our comments to allow everyone a chance to speak. **(OR…)** let's go around again and develop the topic more deeply.

(In 30 minutes, please announce…)
It's time to close the Roundtable. If you have something more you want to say, please speak about it afterwards. Thank you for your attention and comments!

Social Foundations of Diverse Communities
Roundtable Guidelines

Our Purpose: In the Roundtable we are exploring a new way of meeting together to think about our shared principles and ideals—ideals of equity, shared leadership, appreciation of differences, authenticity, values clarification, and self-reflective listening and speaking. The activity is also intended to explore the Roundtable as a learning tool for critically thinking and sharing our understanding of principles and issues in this course.

Our Format: Today's Roundtable is designed to take 25 minutes. Five minutes are allotted for reviewing the Roundtable Guidelines and to allow for the facilitator's role. This leaves twenty minutes for individual comments with the time distributed equally among all present.

Guidelines for Speaking: After the trigger question is posed, signal when you are ready to speak or you may pass until you are ready. Let's each take only one turn to speak and limit our comments to about one minute the first round.

Talk only about what YOU are thinking, feeling and wanting, not responding directly to what someone else said. We want to hear you say something about the video. What are your thoughts about it? How did it make you feel? What did you like? Dislike? What was interesting? Surprising? What did you learn? What did you already know? What would you like to know more about? What were you reminded about in your own life? **Or anything else you'd like to say.** Support your comments with facts, details, examples, anecdotes or experiences.

Guidelines for Listening: As we think about the trigger question, we relate our thinking to all contexts of our lives. As we listen to each other's comments we move from mindless hearing to mindful listening and thinking about the other person's point of view. We reflect on what is said as it applies to our lives and we become conscious mindful listeners, open to the speaker's point of view.

Guidelines for Responding: As a matter of course, we support the person who spoke with "Thank you." We will save any other responses until after the Roundtable.

Appendix A – Roundtable Guidelines (p. 2)

SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Goals
This course, designed for individuals preparing for careers as educational leaders, will require critical thought and systematic reflection. Students will be introduced to a variety of ideas, values, and beliefs surrounding social life, cultural identity, educational reform, and historical practices. They will then be challenged to explore these constructs from numerous, diverse, changing perspectives.

Topic For Today: A Class Divided: Brown Eyes/Blue Eyes

"Calculations of the slow changes that take place in human DNA over the millennia indicate that everyone alive today may be a descendant of a single female ancestor who lived in Africa 140,000 to 280,000 years ago, scientists at the University of California have reported."
Source: *Working Woman*, September, 1986

"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning . . . Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue until they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both."
Source: Frederick Douglass, in Foner, Phillip S., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Vol. II.

"If you don't have the capacity to change yourself and your own attitudes, then nothing around you can be changed."
Source: Anwar Sadat, quoting the Koran.

Trigger Question: How does self-awareness of our biases play a role in working towards social justice in schools?

Appendix B
GRECSO

What does social justice mean to you?

G	**R**	**E**	**C**	**S**	**O**
Male	White	Citizen American	Have	Hetero	Abled
Female	Black POC	Alien or Anti-American	Have not	Homo	Disabled

What is obvious about these categories?
What is binary thinking? How does it reproduce privilege and power?
How do socially constructed categories shape our experience?
Why do many Americans resist talking about race, gender, and class inequalities?
How does the universalizing of experiences diminish the complexity of human experience?
Where on this grid can you locate yourself?
What difference does it make as a student that you are . . . (on the grid)?
Are their inherent constraints or privileges that you recognize given your place on the grid?

Note: Heather Dalmage, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, College of Arts and Sciences, Roosevelt University introduced this exercise at a Teacher Quality Education (TQE) workshop Spring semester, 2003.