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Facilitating Student Engagement: Social Responsibility and Freshmen Learning Communities

ABSTRACT

Human rights education is advanced as a method for promoting social responsibility, with an emphasis on promoting ideals of “global citizenship” among undergraduate students. At the same time, the practice of learning communities is widespread on college campuses for retaining freshmen and promoting student success. However, there is limited research on the effectiveness of combining these approaches. In response to this literature gap, this article first provides an overview of key concepts—social responsibility, human rights education, and learning communities—and outlines how these terms are currently understood within higher education. Second, the methods and initial findings of a longitudinal study within Webster University’s Social Engagement Learning Community focus on gauging and assessing human rights knowledge and social engagement. Initial findings suggest that most freshmen respondents lack basic human rights knowledge and an activist orientation, yet their empathy and perspective-taking abilities provide foundations for building awareness of human rights issues and social responsibility. Lastly, recommendations are outlined for addressing learning goals related to identity awareness, helping students step outside of their “comfort zones,” and promoting awareness and solutions.

KEYWORDS

learning communities, social responsibility, social engagement, human rights education, student activism

INTRODUCTION

Social responsibility is an issue addressed within the literature at both theoretical and practical levels. Cosmopolitan scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) asserts that responsibility lies at the heart of morality, and that “each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities” (p. xiii). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1997) focuses this emphasis on university education, arguing that students should be taught to critically examine their own traditions, understand the ties that bind all people together, and have empathy for the experiences of others. Being an educated citizen, according to Nussbaum, “means learning how to be a human being capable of something more” (p. 14). These theoretical frameworks encourage educators to integrate teaching and activism—two activities previously kept separate within academia—in order

to emphasize social responsibility, global interconnectedness, and universal human rights (Andreopoulos & Claude, 1997).

Human rights education (HRE) is advanced as a method for promoting social responsibility, with an emphasis on promoting ideals of “global citizenship” among undergraduate students. The Social Engagement Learning Community at Webster University (USA), for instance, is embedded in curricular changes designed to reflect the institution’s mission to provide “high quality learning experiences that transform students for global citizenship and individual excellence” (Webster University). For this learning community (LC), preparing students for global citizenship means integrating human rights education, social responsibility, and co-curricular activities to help students extend their learning beyond the classroom. Global citizenship connects to the principles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by emphasizing universal rights and inherent human dignity. More than simply becoming aware of their place in a globally interconnected society, global citizens should learn the principles of social organization that embody a belief that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and should “act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (United Nations, 1948).

Although the ideals of HRE and global citizenship continue to gain prominence within higher education and the practice of LCs is widespread on college campuses, limited research analyzes the effectiveness of combining these approaches. Educators have little data on what inspires undergraduate students to engage in activism, for instance, or what propels them toward socially responsible career paths. This article responds to this literature gap.

Social responsibility and human rights education

If we are to take the liberal ideals of social responsibility and global citizenship seriously, it is imperative that HRE be included in undergraduate programs of study (Kingston, 2012). This approach is encouraged by well-respected organizations such as Amnesty International, which defines HRE as “a deliberate, participatory practice aimed at empowering individuals, groups, and communities through fostering knowledge, skills, and attitudes consistent with internationally recognized principles.” The goal of such education is to “build a culture of respect for and action in the defense and promotion of rights for all” (Amnesty International, “Human Rights Education”). The international community has increasingly expressed interest in HRE, as well: the United Nations declared 1995-2004 the International Decade for Human Rights Education, and the UN General Assembly made 2009 the International Year of Human Rights Learning. The UN drafted the Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, reflecting growing interest in HRE and its potential for rights promotion. Ultimately, the United Nations (2006) contends that HRE builds “a universal culture of human rights through the sharing of knowledge, imparting of skills and molding of attitudes” directed to

- (a) *“The strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;*
- (b) *The full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;*
- (c) *The promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups;*

- (d) *The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free and democratic society governed by the rule of law;*
- (e) *The building and maintenance of peace;*
- (f) *The promotion of people-centered sustainable development and social justice” (United Nations, 2006, p, 12).*

An approach that stresses HRE’s potential for global citizenship is particularly important for our purposes. From this perspective, human rights education repositions students as members of a global community instead of simply as national citizens. This form of HRE seeks to cultivate “vibrant global citizenship” with an emphasis on interdependence, global knowledge, and a commitment to counter injustice wherever it takes place in the world. This approach corresponds to a worldwide rise in human rights content in textbooks, with increasing emphasis on individual rights and personal agency in topics such as history and social studies (Bajaj, 2001). Although critics contend that the ability to exercise global citizenship is an elite activity given the realities of global power imbalances, discussion of the ethical and institutional implications of such citizenship still provides potential allies and resources for promoting positive change (Dower, 2008). For instance, HRE with an emphasis on global citizenship can prompt students to re-examine their own ways of life and work toward sustainability. An awareness of human rights issues, combined with an interdisciplinary approach and willingness to listen to local voices, may lead students to extend conceptions of justice and develop solutions that fit a diverse array of circumstances. By stressing the ideals of global citizenship, we can move toward the establishment of a more rights-protective environment that not only responds to crises, but provides the foundation for future peace (Noddings, 2005). Those who accept global citizenship are generally making the claim that all human beings have a certain moral status, and that we have a moral responsibility toward one another within this world community (Dower, 2008).

This global citizenship approach has also been termed a “values and awareness model” (which helps to transmit basic human rights knowledge and foster its integration into public values) or the “internationalization” of the curriculum (put simply, education for world-mindedness). Learners become critical consumers of human rights, with the goal of building a “critical human rights consciousness” that will bring international pressure for protecting universal human rights (Tibbits, 2002, p. 163-164). This consciousness (sometimes described as “empowerment”) includes the ability of students to recognize the human rights dimensions of (and their relationship to) a given conflict or problem, to become aware and concerned about their role in the protection or promotion of rights, to critically evaluate potential solutions, identify or create new responses (along with being able to judge which choice is most appropriate), and to recognize their responsibility and influence in making decisions and impacting rights issues (Meintjes, 1997). Additionally, students should be provided with models for applying this knowledge to solve human rights problems in their community, nation-state, or world. For many educators, a key reason for building this consciousness is ethical: “it helps students to examine their implicit and explicit beliefs about whose well-being matters, and to develop a more globalized sense of responsibility and citizenship” (Kahane, 2009, p. 49).

Inherent obstacles for HRE—and particularly for models that emphasize the ideal

of global citizenship—are issues of identity and nationalism. Only within the past twenty years have mainstream political philosophers (at least, in the English-speaking world) begun to question the assumption that justice and responsibility apply only within bounded political communities (Kahane, 2009). Within the West, education is closely linked to citizenship and national identity formation. As a result, educators often lack the full vocabulary and images necessary for teaching world mindedness (Richardson, 2008). Wilinsky (1998) warns that the West’s comprehension of the world is directly tied to conquest, and that educators must uncover the global prejudices perpetuated in the classroom. Others argue that it isn’t enough to simply know what is happening in other countries, or how we are connected to other communities; students need to be conscious of how the “global village” fits in making sense of their own lives, including the fundamental belief systems that govern thoughts and actions. This requires revisions of historical “legends” (such as confronting colonialism, racism, and sexism) and representing a more inclusive spectrum of the world’s population (Pike, 2008). In the case of global citizenship, the “architecture” of educational systems makes it difficult to identify the roots of such world mindedness, much less recognize any sort of superstructure that represents visible aspects of global citizenship or how students could apply such concepts, were they defined. Furthermore, contemporary geopolitical context and forces of nationalism obstruct calls for a broadened world community. Developing a global imagination that provides students with a “deeper structure of identification with the world as a geopolitical whole” is a daunting task because

“We need to see how citizenship has been continually read through the nation, but we also need to see the emergence of a global civic imagination on the part of young people. In the context of educating for global citizenship, the persistence of nation is much more than a problem to overcome; it is a presence to be acknowledged.” (Richardson, 2008, p. 57-59, 62).

To accomplish this task, HRE teaching models are usually interdisciplinary and internationalized. Indeed, most human rights academic programs and research institutions stress the value of collaboration and exchange across curricular, co-curricular, and administrative units. The tie that binds various HRE courses and experiences together is the human rights ethos that fosters respect for human rights and dedication to their protection. This ethos is not based in any particular academic discipline or national identity, but rather transcends boundaries to encompass scholarship and activism occurring at various levels. Human rights educators must intellectually examine human rights issues and themes, identify models of human rights activism to emulate, urge action in accordance with human rights principles, provide opportunities for action, and create a classroom environment and institutional culture grounded in rights-protective principles (Flowers & Shiman, 1997). Furthermore, internationalized curricula must reflect a plurality of knowledge that draws from various sources and engages students in different ways; this HRE approach “requires that we extend our actions far beyond concerns of course content to include pedagogies that promote cross-cultural understanding and facilitate the development of knowledge [that enables students] to successfully engage with others in an increasingly interconnected and dependent world” (Van Gyn, Schuerholz-Lehr, Caws, & Preece, 2009, p. 26-27).



Learning communities

While LCs can be defined in a number of ways, most definitions stress two key commonalities: shared knowledge and shared ways of learning. Shared knowledge relates to common knowledge about a particular topic, such as human rights or sociology. Shared ways of learning relates to the process of learning and evaluating shared knowledge, and may include common active learning techniques or common co-curricular activities linked to the curriculum. To achieve these goals, LCs are usually organized in ways that stress community, cooperation, and a common curriculum or set of courses. For instance, the same group of students is enrolled in at least two classes together, may live on the same floor of a residential hall, and may have common co-curricular experiences. Specifics related to shared courses or living arrangements may vary, but a shared philosophy of learning that includes academic, social, and physical components is central to the LC model. Brower and Dettinger (1998) write that the academic component of an LC centers on its curriculum content, while the social component involves interpersonal relations among students, faculty, and staff. The physical component of an LC relates to the space where the community meets or resides (Brower & Dettinger, 1998). This perspective echoes that of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), which also gives primacy to integrative learning among curricular and co-curricular activities (Rhodes, 2010).

Most research on LCs, originally termed “living-learning communities,” focuses on benefits related to academic success, retention, and student community-building. LCs are often praised for helping freshmen develop peer groups during their first year (Tinto, 1997b) and for motivating students to both engage in the classroom and participate in co-curricular activities (Kuh, 2008). LC participation lowers students’ risk of academic withdrawal (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000-2001; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999-2000), increases their cognitive skills (Lindblad, 2000; Walker, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), and leads to a higher overall satisfaction with their college experience (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000-2001; Tinto 1997a; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). LCs have also been linked to the more efficient integration of course content, the promotion of deeper learning, and increased personal development (Mahoney & Schamber, 2011), which allow LC students to make basic connections between ideas and empirical observations, or transfer new knowledge to increasingly complex settings within and beyond the university. Although LCs should not be treated as “silver bullets” to solve all problems, they are recognized as effective tools for addressing issues related to student success (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

When linked with HRE, LCs should facilitate deeper learning and engagement with human rights while establishing the foundation for global citizenship. In fact, some evidence on the effectiveness of LCs implies that they may be helpful in developing a community orientation and an appreciation of cultural differences, components of global citizenship as embodied by a HRE curriculum. A large-scale comparative study between LC and non-LC students conducted by Inkelas et al. (2006) analyzes the effect of LC participation. Researchers utilized the findings of a 2003 National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP), which collected data from 5,437 undergraduate students at four large public universities in the US: the University of Illinois, the University of Maryland, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin. Of those who completed the

survey, 2,449 were part of “living-learning” communities and the remaining 2,998 students were traditional residential hall students (TRH) or other non-LC students. Inkelas et al. (2006) found that students in LCs where students both live together and take courses together make strong connections between knowledge gained in multiple courses and are more likely to discuss social and cultural issues with their LC peers, compared to non-LC students. Considering the emphasis in HRE for respect for universal human rights, it is telling that LC students are more likely to embrace “an openness to new ideas and an appreciation . . . of different cultures” (Inkelas et al., 2006, p. 64). These findings are consistent with smaller-scale classroom studies. For example, Mahoney and Schamber (2011) found that 18 students in their LC (which included a first-year seminar course paired with a public speaking course) developed what they call a “global perspective,” and the instructors noted that their LC students “lived the life of an informed citizen” (p. 239).

Despite these promising initial findings and a growing interest in the impact of LCs, limited research documents how LCs affect student perspectives related to social responsibility, human rights, or global citizenship. Few LCs include social responsibility and HRE as part of their learning outcomes and objectives. In fact, our review of the literature found no research on LCs that specifically incorporates a social responsibility or HRE perspective. However, Scholarship in Teaching and Learning on incorporating social justice research into the curriculum may be a good point of comparison.

In one case, Fuentes and his colleagues (2010) developed a first-year course emphasizing social justice principles designed to prepare students for social activism. Their course, “Education for Social Justice,” provided a case study to discover what students would do with their awareness of social justice principles. In this case of 18 students, awareness of social justice principles did not lead to social activism. The researchers concluded that emphasizing social justice principles may not lead to social engagement or activism. However, these findings are based on one course and that course was not linked to other courses or co-curricular activities around a theme of social responsibility. It is possible that the community-building benefits of a learning community may interact with a curriculum designed around social responsibility to develop an orientation towards community outreach, activism, or social change.

This preliminary study of the Social Engagement LC at Webster University (Missouri, USA) aims to expand the limited scholarship on LCs and social engagement, and hopefully spur additional research and dialogue. Webster’s Social Engagement LC focuses on building student awareness of global social justice, including the promotion of HRE and social responsibility. Started in 2010, the LC is composed of three core courses: an interdisciplinary first-year seminar on social responsibility, a sociological introduction to social movements, and an introduction to human rights course.

First, the social responsibility course relies on readings emphasizing conflict resolution and community engagement, drawn primarily from the fields of psychology, sociology, social work, international relations, and religious studies. The final assignment for this course, a public service announcement focused on a social problem, requires two iterations of literature reviews. Students have selected topics for this assignment including sustainability, sexuality, disability, rape and domestic violence, race, terrorism, torture, and war. Second, the social movements course includes theories of social movement development, change, and dissolution, and requires students to research and give presentations on one contemporary or historical social movement. Third, the human

rights course introduces students to theories and legal frameworks, as well as current human rights issues and strategies for promoting and protecting rights around the world. Students write a series of research-based essays, prepare group presentations on a specific human rights issue, and engage in dialogue related to human rights issues in the news. These courses are complemented by a range of co-curricular programming, emphasizing engagement and responsibility. Past events include volunteering at local non-profit organizations, attending a lecture about race and class by renowned poet Maya Angelou, watching a human rights documentary at an Amnesty International screening event, attending theatrical performances that relate to course themes, and learning about global poverty at an Oxfam “hunger banquet.”

ANALYSIS

Methods

Participants for this longitudinal study were recruited from the Social Engagement LC. The students were both residential and commuter first-time freshmen during the fall semesters of 2010, 2011, and 2012. Class sizes are intentionally small in this LC; cohort one had 14 students, cohort two had 14 students, and cohort three had 12 students. Students majored in a variety of disciplines, including sociology, business administration, political science, English, psychology, film production, legal studies, biology, international relations, finance, journalism, French, and undecided. Student respondents were between the ages of 17 and 19, with slightly more female students (approximately 60%) in each cohort. The majority of students identified as white, although a minority of students identified as African-American and Latino. Although we do not have a direct measure of socioeconomic status for the students in this study, 69% of undergraduate students at Webster University qualified for and were awarded some amount of need-based financial aid. All Social Engagement LC students were invited to participate in this study, although they were free to opt out or withdraw at any time. Participation in this study had no impact on students' grades, and the research project received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before the study began. No students declined to participate.

A pretest survey was used to evaluate pre-existing human rights knowledge and to measure various aspects of social engagement among Social Engagement LC students at the beginning of the fall semester. The survey was developed after the first cohort completed its fall semester. As a result, the first cohort did not receive the pretest. In subsequent academic years, students in cohorts two and three were presented with the pretest survey on their first day of class. The pretest was also taken in several non-LC sections of “Introduction to Human Rights” for comparison.¹ The survey instrument included five factual questions related to human rights, 15 questions from the Perspective Taking and Empathetic Concern scales in the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), and five questions to assess activist orientation. Questions to assess students' knowledge of human rights knowledge included four multiple choice questions and one true/false question, in the style of a traditional exam. Scores were reported as the percent of questions students answered correctly. For example, students who answered one of the five questions correctly earned 20% on the human rights knowledge measure; students who answered two questions correctly earned 40%, etc. The percent correct was averaged over all the students in that cohort.

Questions related to the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and political activism asked students to assess a series of statements using a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from A to E, where A (0) was “does not describe me well” and E (4) was “describes me very well.” Reverse-coded items were re-scaled so that higher scores indicated higher levels of perspective taking, empathetic concern, or activist orientation. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index is recognized as a highly reliable and valid measure for aspects of empathy (Davis, 1983), and is currently the most widely used scale to measure self-reported empathy (Lawrence, et. al., 2004; Pulos, Ellison, & Lennon, 2004). The validity and reliability of the IRI and its subscales have been analyzed repeatedly, with results consistently confirming its utility in measuring empathy (e.g., De Corte, et al, 2007; Gilet, Melia, Studer, Grünh, & Labouvie-Vief, 2013). The IRI includes subscales to assess cognitive empathy (Perspective Taking), the capacity for warm or compassionate feelings for others (Empathetic Concern), self-oriented responses to others’ distress (Personal Distress), and the ability to identify with fictional characters (Fantasy). The last subscale of the IRI (Fantasy) has the least reliability, as it is unclear if this measures actual empathy (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). As a result, we dropped the fantasy subscale from our analysis. Answers from the Perspective Taking scale are used to assess students’ ability to adopt the perspective of someone else. For example, the Perspective Taking scale asks students to assess statements such as “I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision.” The Empathetic Concern scale assesses students’ ability to feel warmth and concern for another person by assessing statements such as “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.” Questions to assess activist orientation were designed by the authors and include statements such as “In times of social unrest, I want to become involved but don’t know how.”

In the spring semester of their freshman year, students received the same instrument as a posttest and were separately interviewed about their orientation to community service, activism, and human rights. Students were asked open-ended questions about whether the LC affected their orientation to activism or community engagement. Questions included “What volunteer work have you done since your participation in the Social Engagement learning community?” and “Have any of your values, behaviors, or beliefs changed as a result of your participation in the Social Engagement learning community? Why or why not?” Interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, and were conducted by the authors in on-campus faculty offices or at a nearby coffee shop. To improve the validity and reliability of interview responses, Johnson (1997) recommends soliciting feedback from participants; as a result, the authors reviewed the responses of the students they did not interview and contacted the students for clarification or elaboration where the responses were vague.

RESULTS

Although current data for this study are limited—pretest data from the second and third cohorts and posttest data from the first cohort, preventing us from analyzing changes resulting from direct exposure to HRE—initial findings provide us with an exploratory understanding of the human rights knowledge of incoming freshmen, characteristics linked to social engagement, and activist orientation (Table 1). For instance, the pretest data provide a baseline for students and an assessment of how familiar first-time freshmen in this sample are with basic principles related to international human rights. The

Table 1. Summary measures for Interpersonal Reactivity Index, Activist Orientation, and Human Rights Knowledge

	POSTTEST (COHORT 1)		PRETEST (COHORT 2)		PRETEST (COHORT 3)	
	MEAN	(SD)	MEAN	(SD)	MEAN	(SD)
Interpersonal Reactivity Index	0 (low) – 4 (high)					
Perspective Taking	2.89	(0.48)	2.66	(0.48)	2.81	(0.48)
Empathetic Concern	2.95	(0.53)	3.18	(0.29)	3.00	(0.50)
Activist Orientation	1.84	(0.38)	2.12	(0.82)	2.48	(0.45)
Human Rights Knowledge	84%	(17)	37%	(8)	47%	(23)

human rights knowledge assessment indicates that these students entered college with very little information about basic human rights, and provides support for the claim that students need more explicit education in human rights. First-time freshmen from the second and third cohorts answered fewer than half of the basic human rights questions correctly; the second cohort averaged 37% correct, while the third cohort scored 47%. Pretest results from non-LC sections of “Introduction to Human Rights” were similarly low, indicating that student interest in “social engagement” did not translate into greater pre-existing human rights knowledge. In other words, students who had self-selected to join the LC did not have more exposure to human rights issues/norms than non-LC students when they first started their classes. The posttest data from the first cohort—who did not get the pretest—indicate a high level of knowledge of basic human rights issues; they answered 84% of the human rights questions correctly. If they entered the LC with levels of human rights knowledge that were similar to cohorts 2 and 3 (for whom we have pretest data), that would indicate a positive effect of HRE on knowledge of human rights issues.

The Perspective Taking and Empathetic Concern scales from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index provide an objective measure of characteristics that are linked to social engagement. At pretest, the second cohort scored an average of 2.66 on the combined measures of the Perspective Taking scale and 3.18 on the Empathetic Concern scale. The third cohort scored an average of 2.81 on the Perspective Taking scale and 3 on the Empathetic Concern scale. The scores on both the Perspective Taking and Empathetic Concern scales indicate that students rate themselves highly in perspective taking and empathy. If the first cohort, which did not get the pretest, came in with scores similar to the second and third cohorts, then the third cohort’s score on the Perspective Taking scale could suggest that perspective taking might be improved with this curriculum, although future studies would need to confirm this. The interviews with the first cohort show additional support for this claim. When asked if his values, behaviors, or views had changed as a result of his participation in the LC, Trey² said

I came in with a sense of public service. I did a lot of public service in high school. But I think [as a result of] being in the LC classes, a lot of my values were reinforced and I was able to advance those values. Being in [the] social movements [class] . . . I wasn’t really involved in protests, [but]

just gaining knowledge through the social movements class I was able to strengthen my knowledge.

Lee discussed a similar trend:

There is a change in the way I view things on campus and in St. Louis. My view towards how useful activism has been has changed. Now I think I am more active. Before I used to read up on situations and not really put myself out there but now I feel like I put myself into situations.

The learning community also seems to help students develop a global sense of responsibility and to link course material to other areas of their lives. “I probably didn’t know much about [global citizenship] until I took the classes and found out about other people’s struggles that you don’t hear about on the news,” said Eric. Students further indicated that participating in the learning community helped them build connections between the content of courses within their major:

I mean, learning about the world, I guess. Yeah, even within the learning community, all the classes kind of related to each other in a way. What we learned in one was similar to what we were learning in the others. It all kind of connected together. Sometimes in the [political science] courses, some of the things we learned in there were playing in with what I was learning in the [learning community] classes. It all kind of came together to help me learn better. (Josh)

Data also suggest that students entering the Social Engagement LC are not highly oriented towards activism in general. The second cohort scored 2.12 on the Activist Orientation scale and the third cohort scored 2.48; students entering in the third cohort had a slightly stronger political orientation than the second, but neither cohort exhibited high activist orientations. In interviews, students from the first cohort were also not oriented toward activist activities. However, students noted that they were more aware of social issues after participation in the LC, as well as more inclined to read the newspaper and get involved in campus organizations. Iris said, “I started attending meetings for the American Association for African American Collegians. I want to be more involved and I’m not sure how involved, but I want to get involved.”

Initial findings suggest that most freshmen arrive at college lacking basic human rights knowledge and are not oriented toward activism, yet their empathy and perspective-taking ability provide foundations for building awareness of human rights issues and social responsibility. Within the Social Engagement LC at Webster University, courses and co-curricular activities that emphasize values of global citizenship build upon students’ pre-existing empathy and perspective-taking ability by providing knowledge and skills to enable students to engage with contemporary social problems while building awareness of current human rights issues and moral problems. What Brower and Dettinger (1998) call “transformative learning” (p. 18) must take place in a setting that is conducive to “civic responsibilities” (p. 18). A LC built around ideals of social responsibility may provide such a setting. Survey data also indicate that the LC for cohorts two and three helped them integrate ideas from multiple courses, that they can effectively work with others, and that they have learned to think critically and analytically. While some LC students

may eventually become activists, the ultimate goal is for all students to improve their capabilities necessary for responsible citizenship.

LIMITATIONS

This study provides an interesting introduction to the utility of HRE for empathy and engagement. However, the lack of pretest data for the first cohort limits the generalizability of changes resulting from exposure to this curriculum. Further, the limited sample size and being focused on just one institution further limits generalizations from this study. While Webster University caters to non-traditional students and, therefore, these results may have wider application than a traditional liberal arts university, being located in the Midwest and relying on a sample of students self-selected into a LC focused on community engagement limits the robustness of the findings. Because these findings suggest that human rights education may be not only beneficial to increase human rights knowledge, but also to increase a sense of global citizenship, engagement, and connection with people of differing life experiences, other researchers should replicate this study with a more robust sample from a variety of different educational institutions. It is likely that a sense of empathy or engagement may differ with samples of students from public institutions, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), or largely commuter institutions, for example.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, developed as a result of our experiences implementing this curriculum, are aimed at encouraging social responsibility among undergraduate students to help students develop a stronger sense of social responsibility and develop a sense of global citizenship, through courses and co-curricular activities designed to enhance complementary goals. These strategies promote identity awareness, encourage students to step outside of their “comfort zone,” build issue awareness, and promote solutions to social problems. Although these goals align with HRE and global citizenship, these recommendations are not limited for use in human rights-specific courses or programs; they are strategies for promoting social responsibility across disciplines and throughout the university curriculum.

Goal 1: identity awareness

Self-reflection and identity awareness are crucial for building an ethos of personal responsibility. For many students—and particularly those located in the global North—that process may require a better understanding of inequality, wealth gaps, nationalism, cultural bias, and stigma based on factors such as race, class, and gender. While advocates of HRE often promote the adoption of a global citizenship perspective that embraces belonging in a human community—as opposed to an identity based on nationality or ethnicity, for instance—in reality those identity markers are not always obvious to students or easy to set aside. A goal for educators, therefore, is to expose underlying identities and assumptions in order to promote self-awareness and, eventually, a growing sense of community and social responsibility.

From the beginning, students should be encouraged to consider their salient identities and critically consider why and how they categorize themselves and others. For instance, students can write a list of words that fit into “I am _____” statements (“I am

a woman . . . an American . . . an Agnostic . . . a lesbian . . . a white person . . .”). Students are then encouraged to share some of their identities on the list; these often relate to identity markers such as race, gender, age, religion, sexual identity, social class, and even family relationships such as “mother” or “uncle.” This exercise first provides students with an opportunity to discuss class commonalities and differences, as well as sometimes offers students opportunities to reveal identities (such as identities based on sexuality) in a safe space. Notably, many of the minority students write about their racial background while members of the mainstream racial group (in the US, whites) do not; the white racial identity is normalized in mainstream society, while a minority identity is often salient and important to its group members. From these starting points, students have a framework for discussing how their social identities become politicized in a social climate where race-based, gender-based, class-based, and sexuality-based discrimination is still evident. This work is necessary to identify social privileges (male privilege, heterosexual privilege, white privilege) that many students unknowingly enjoy, as well as to realize that others may not have those same privileges. By seeing peers who do not have the same privileges (or disadvantages) as them helps students recognize the importance of using social justice principles to discuss inequities in society.

Another identity activity to help students think about their status is the Social Identity Wheel.³ This activity requires students to reflect those statuses they often take for granted, such as race for white students or gender for male students. Students fill in the identity wheel, which asks them to identify their race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, primary language, ability status, and religion. Students then respond to a series of prompts asking them to reflect on the identities they think about most and least often, and which identities they would like to learn more about or which contribute most to their sense of self. Prompts could include

1. Which identities do you think about most often?
2. Which identities do you think about least often?
3. Which of your own identities would you like to learn more about?
4. Which identities have the strongest effect on how you see yourself as a person?

Through this exercise, students learn to think about several identities over which they have no control. The instructor could use this opportunity to discuss the limits of self-identification for social interaction. Simultaneously, the instructor may want to engage students in a discussion of the ways that “master status” (or the characteristic that primarily defines an individual) contributes to self-identity are appropriate with this exercise, especially in light of the fact that it is constructed by others.

“Personal billboards” are also tools for helping students think critically about identity and recognize the voices of marginal groups. Grauerholz and Smith (2008) suggest that “personal billboards communicate messages cheaply and are available to any group or individual with a vehicle or wardrobe” and represent some of “the most powerful ‘voices’ for underprivileged groups” (p. 72). In this activity, students create a t-shirt, bumper sticker, pin, hat, piece of jewelry, or other item that can be worn or displayed. After students create this artifact of material culture, they are required to wear or display it for a short period of time (usually around three days), and write a reflection about their experience. Challenging students to communicate personal messages through their own bodies requires them to assess how race, class, gender, sexuality, religiosity, age, and (dis)ability intersect

within their immediate environment. The personal billboards work well in classes that study social movements, for example, because students can choose to adorn themselves with social change statements and act as moral entrepreneurs.

Goal 2: stepping outside the “comfort zone”

Students must step outside of their everyday comfort zone in order to uncover the sometimes hidden, everyday dimensions of social justice (Noddings, 2005). This often requires them to critically assess previously-accepted norms and habitual behavior. For instance, Americans throw away nearly half of their food at a cost of \$165 billion annually despite global food shortages (Reuters, 2012). Lesson plans related to food insecurity and the human right to food should include a dimension that asks students to analyze their own eating and waste habits, thereby including them as actors in an issue they may otherwise overlook. Ultimately, students must link their everyday lives to broad social problems in order to better understand how they might be part of the problem and, hopefully, part of the solution.

Activities that provide students with opportunities to experience (at least temporarily) the living conditions of those in vastly different circumstances can help build empathy and strengthen norms of social responsibility. Living on a “poverty diet” is an activity that encourages students to connect global food issues with everyday life at home. To begin, students conduct a literature review to better understand issues related to food security. (Try searching Web sites and academic articles with key words and phrases such as “food security,” “nutrition AND poverty,” and “the right to food.”) Following the completion of the review, students spend three full days living on a “poverty diet,” which is a budget that reflects the national U.S. food stamp allotment of approximately \$4 per day, per person. The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) offers additional online resources for a “Food Stamp Challenge” at the community level (Food Research and Action Center), while Oxfam provides materials for planning a “hunger banquet” to raise awareness of global hunger (Oxfam America). Students should keep a food journal during the exercise that tracks what they eat and how much they spend per meal each day. Lastly, a final 4- to 5-page reflection paper should include the food journal and ask students to address the following aspects:

- Were you successful in sticking to the poverty diet? Why or why not? Fully explain.
- If you went shopping for food, how did this change your buying habits? If you used previously purchased food, how might participation in this project change future grocery shopping?
- Overall, how did this diet change the way you ate? Consider types of food, quality of food, quantity of food, etc. How did what you ate compare to the recommendations of the USDA in the Choose My Plate program (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov>)?
- Did this shift in diet change how you felt physically? Explain.
- How was your day-to-day routine changed? Explain.
- What would your life be like if you were always restricted to this budget? What other changes might you need to make in order to survive?
- Discuss research findings about food/nutrition and poverty. How did your experience fit within the literature?

Additionally, teaching models that include community partnership and student involvement are often useful for taking students outside of their comfort zones and becoming more aware of rights issues. For instance, undergraduate students at the College of Wooster were paired with youth incarcerated at a juvenile prison. The project aimed not only to examine human rights issues inherent to the US prison system and juvenile detention policies, but also to re-humanize detainees. Through extensive personal contact between the project partners, both groups were able to recognize similarities between those they viewed as criminally deviant or privileged. The project also illustrated the role of dehumanization in affecting human rights of those on the fringe of society (Krain & Nurse, 2004). Another example comes from Webster University, where undergraduates participate in an interdisciplinary “Real World Survivor” that culminates with a stay at Heifer Ranch Global Village during Fall Break. Students learn about contributing factors and ethical implications of global poverty, as well as research the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, before experiencing poverty-like conditions during a four-day field study. Developed in partnership with a diverse range of faculty members and the non-governmental organization Heifer International, which emphasizes human rights issues related to global poverty and hunger, the course examines global inequality and social responsibility for protecting human rights (Webster University Library).

Goal 3: building awareness and promoting solutions

The study of human rights and social injustice is often overwhelming and even depressing to students; an awareness of human suffering must be coupled with an emphasis on solutions and positive change. First, students should be encouraged to become aware of current events at home and abroad. Start each class period with a five- to ten-minute discussion of the news, and feel free to limit discussion to news items related to course topics and/or human rights in general. A tutorial session at the beginning of the semester may help students identify reputable news sources, as well as media in other countries that offer different perspectives than national news sources. For example, in human rights classes at Webster University, students often start with little current events knowledge but gain interest and confidence as the semester progresses. In course evaluations, many students note that one of the most important things they gained from the class was an interest in and awareness of current events around the world. Although mainstream news tends to highlight human rights and social justice problems rather than solutions, regular visits to NGO Web sites such as Amnesty International and Oxfam provide students with updates on work-in-progress and opportunities to make a difference.

Classroom and campus activities help students to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical awareness. For example, students built a replica Guantanamo Bay cell on Webster University’s Saint Louis campus using cell specifications provided by Amnesty International. Students had already read *Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantanamo* (Kurnaz, 2009) and studied the Geneva Conventions in their course on social movements. To share the knowledge they had gained, the students decided to build the cell in a place where other students could walk past, go inside, and experience the space in order to better understand human rights issues associated with the US “War on Terror.” In a different semester, a wheelchair user casually discussed her frustration with accessibility on campus and provoked a classroom conversation about disability rights. The

class decided to design a social movement tactic that would be visible for other students to see. Working in small teams, the students used rented wheelchairs to maneuver campus spaces and classroom buildings; the activity showed them the impacts of accessibility while raising awareness of disability rights throughout the Webster community. Other student-organized campus activities have included a Columbus Day “teach-in” about indigenous rights, speaker panels focused on rights issues such as human trafficking, and student potluck dinners where attendees discuss current human rights problems and/or common readings. In all cases, we have found (perhaps not surprisingly) that activities organized by students tend to be well attended and successful; when students have “buy-in,” they are often enthusiastic about supporting the co-curricular events and learning more about the issues.

Second, providing students with tools to effectively act on the social issues can also facilitate greater social responsibility and engagement. In particular, it is vital to offer concrete recommendations for action; local organizations looking for volunteers, letter writing campaigns, and other action steps to promote a cause of their choice. For example, would-be student activists could benefit from information about how to write an effective letter to their political representative or how to write an effective op-ed piece. In many cases, students are intimidated contacting elected officials or submitting their work to a local newspaper; structured guidelines can encourage them and give them confidence in their writing. If students are writing papers and giving classroom presentation on human rights issues, encourage them to discuss what action is currently being undertaken, as well as provide recommendations for learning more and getting involved. Again, it is important to be specific; ask students to provide direct Web links, contact information, information about local events, and whatever other details will make it easier for potential supporters to get involved with a rights issue. To identify local organizations (as well as internship, job, and volunteer opportunities around the world), students can begin by searching the Idealist database at www.idealists.org.

These recommendations provide resources for promoting social responsibility among undergraduate students, yet more research is necessary for understanding the connections between responsibility and LC participation. Educators have little data on what inspires undergraduate students to engage in activism or what propels them toward socially responsible career paths; these questions provide starting points for necessary future research. The findings from this initial study indicate that students enter college with little awareness of human rights or the world outside their communities. Introducing them to topics in human rights, requiring or encouraging them to keep abreast of current global events and providing assignments that help them apply their knowledge to contemporary social problems may help students develop an orientation towards global citizenship.

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NOTES

1. Many Webster students take this course to fulfill a general education requirement, so these courses are composed of a diverse sampling of undergraduate students.
2. All names reported here are pseudonyms.
3. Multiple variations of this activity can be found online, including useful handouts. Search “Social Identity Wheel.”

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