

Teaching Social Justice in Skills-Oriented Courses

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“[The class] challenged me to write about issues that I may or may not have understood based on my own personal experiences, and I thought that was refreshing; and [it] also helped me grow as a writer and someone who is more aware of the world around them.”

“It taught me how to present things in a respectful, unrighteous way.”

These student testimonials, shared at the end of a course focused on storytelling and media representation, speak to the significance of encouraging learning about difference in a class typically dedicated to the learning of reporting and writing skills. My focus was to enhance student engagement and, at the same time, to challenge them to learn how to navigate, and tell stories about, meaningful contemporary social justice issues.

To begin with some context, much of the existing curriculum in journalism and writing programs has been organized around skills, with a nod to diversity relegated to, at most, one or two class periods (typically, the week on “ethics”). These classes range from briefly mentioning issues around covering race riots, to defining race for a newsroom, to cautioning against over-emphasizing the identification of race and ethnicity in news, to considering the cultural diversity of audiences. What I found to be at stake is perpetuating a culture of communicators who do not fully understand the diversity of their audiences. These writers are not prepared to address their

audiences' needs and risk overlooking key elements of our changing society. There is a chance of perpetuating stereotypes, and, most broadly, continuing to hurt, harm, and oppress – through words and ignorance. As an educator, I fell back on the awareness that “symbolic elites have a prominent role in the discursive reproduction of racism in society, because they control the public discourse through which many ethnic prejudices are spread and shared” (van Dijk, 2011).

About eight years ago, I began to pay attention to the possibility of teaching diversity-related issues *at the same time as* I introduced my students to skills such as news writing, photojournalism, and digital storytelling. Ensuring broad representation in images, names, and voices featured in lecture and readings was incomplete. The remarks of a newspaper editor reminded me of three things: First, editors look for good stories; second, our students need to write about issues they are passionate about; and finally, it is our job as educators to open the door to learning about diversity, in order to help younger generations realize the issues worth changing in society.

I committed myself then to making pedagogical changes to more directly engage students in the meaningful issues of today (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998). My goal was not to instruct into a specific way of thinking, but rather to nurture students' deeper interests in the world. This engagement in current issues was a way to guide them to explore significant questions, make connections to systemic issues, and bring to light people's experiences and stories that contribute to more complex and nuanced takes on contemporary life.

In my multimedia journalism class, I changed a group assignment that typically gave students free reign to create a multimedia package on a “newsworthy” topic to the “social justice beat.” Students began the semester brainstorming on issues they cared about, and, as they studied and practices various journalistic skills, they built towards complex stories on topics that included teen suicide, living with racial stereotypes, gender discrimination in the workplace, rape

culture, and weight and body image via social media. Their engagement with their topics was impressive to watch; after the end-of-term presentations, one student said, “I usually can’t wait for everyone’s presentations to be done, to go home and begin my break. This time, I couldn’t wait to see everyone else’s presentations. I felt so invested in everyone’s topics.” Another commented, “We all seemed to care so much more about these projects, our own and each other’s projects.”

In another class on storytelling and media representation, instead of open-ended choice on final projects, I asked students to choose to cover one of two anniversaries relevant to our local media market – the Detroit Riots/Rebellion or the housing segregation-related trial of Ossian Sweet, which both allowed them to learn relevant history, context, and contemporary socio-political dynamics. In yet another skills-oriented course on photojournalism, students now create visual documentaries on “the challenge of our times,” a broad umbrella-topic that orients them towards relevant and impactful storytelling that can be pitched for publishing. This is the course that I am currently actively revising, as I attempt to engage my students in more direct reflection over visual storytelling of intersectional and justice-oriented issues.

I have also incorporated assessment strategies that borrow from mastery learning (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Bloom, 1974; Guskey & Jung, 2011), gameful learning (Holman & Fishman, 2017), and ungrading (Stommel, 2023), to allow students a higher degree of ownership in their own process through the class. As I formally and informally assess students’ experience around such changes, I continue to be confirmed in their significance by statements such as, “Keep the system. It was great”; “Don’t change anything”; and “I wish we could do this in all classes.”

Drawing on the critical research I conduct and the practical experience of seeing my classes on fire with their justice-oriented projects, I am convinced that a broad change in

pedagogy is necessary. In journalism and in other skills-oriented classrooms, we need to increase an orientation towards equity and, at the very least, awareness. If tomorrow's communicators are to engage with a dynamic, increasingly diverse society, they need tools from the very beginning of their careers (in the classroom) and consistently (every day).

Selected References

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