

1-1-2011

Developing a Personal Leadership Theory: Exploring Feminist Pedagogical Theory and Social Justice Issues

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Recommended Citation

Surplus, Betsy (2011) "Developing a Personal Leadership Theory: Exploring Feminist Pedagogical Theory and Social Justice Issues," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol9/iss1/18>

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

Thirty years of my life had been devoted to teaching and administration in a suburban public school district. I retired and made plans to move on to a related career in higher education and complete my doctoral studies in educational leadership. When I began my career as a community college developmental reading instructor, I was prepared to experience change in my leadership actions and understandings as I followed the spiraling path of learning that typifies reflective practice, which was key to this study. However, I did not anticipate encountering so many forks in the road. My learning path was guided by my curiosities about unfamiliar theories and beliefs that I encountered during my studies. There were so many new fields of interest to explore. I had to be selective because I could not investigate, even in a lifetime, all the areas of inquiry that beckoned me. My choice of concepts for further study was guided by answering the question, “What concepts will help me to understand the needs of my students better and make me a more effective teacher?” Beyond the initial issues and topics that directly related to my teaching practice, I chose two other areas for more in-depth study: feminist theory and social justice.

Feminist theory was my first field of exploration. As I gained more experience as a teacher of developmental readers, I became more purposeful about the instructional practices I selected. My efforts were directed towards developing a community of learners in the classroom. I struggled persistently with student resistance to interact with classmates, accept leadership responsibilities, and work together cooperatively. A sense of community eventually developed to varying degrees in my classrooms. I reflected on my behaviors at the end of the each semester and realized that my attempts to engage students in learning were closely aligned with feminist pedagogical practices. These practices were rooted in my relational capacity which guided instructional choices for my students (Gilligan, 1982). Additionally, my efforts to empower students to be active participants in their education represented a second area of alignment with feminist teaching: the quest for human equality, or social justice (Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999; Freire, 1970). The study of feminist theory and social justice issues inspired me to subscribe to a personal leadership theory that reflects my goal of building a sense of community by developing relationships and empowerment among students.

Achieving social justice in our society is intimately related to issues of empowerment. Giroux (1992) defines empowerment as “the ability to think and act critically” (p. 11). In my classroom, this concept manifested itself through student participation in empowering activities such as voicing opinions, sharing in decision-making, constructing knowledge by connecting with text, and taking leadership roles (Wakai, 1994; Routman, 1991; Maher, 1987; Tisdell, 1998; Hughes, 2000; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Freire, 1970). My growing understanding of social justice concepts was accomplished partly through intentional study and partly due to fortuitous circumstances. My new learnings helped me to recognize the connection between social justice endeavors and the needs of my developmental reading students. In the following section, I discuss the events that broadened my knowledge about social justice issues and explain how I connected my students with these issues.

Exploring the Concept of Social Justice

When social justice became an exploratory area for me during this study, I incorporated the term into my leadership model by identifying it as one of my core values. Although I did not specifically examine this study's leadership problem from a social justice perspective, my newly-acquired insights in this area affected me so powerfully that I chose to include my growth process in this paper.

I viewed the concept of social justice with increasing interest and concern due to several consecutively-occurring events in my academic life. The experiences that initially sparked my curiosity in this area were related to assigned readings in my doctoral program courses. I was exposed to the writings of Michael Apple and Henry Giroux. In his book *Educating the "Right" Way*, Apple (2001) takes a critical look at the American education system. When measured with a yardstick of democratic values, he finds that the system falls short. He identifies a shift in power to conservative beliefs such as school voucher plans and mandatory standardized testing, which he believes are undermining democratic practice in our public schools. One notable impact of conservative educational policies is failure to address the needs of marginalized students. In fact efforts to standardize curriculum by controlling what is official knowledge serve to sanction society's existing inequalities with regard to gender, class, and race divisions.

Reading and attempting to deeply comprehend Henry Giroux was perhaps the greatest intellectual challenge of my doctoral studies. I labored my way through Giroux's (1992) jungle of jargon in *Border Crossings – Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*. I could not understand his message and resorted to translations of his perspectives via online readings provided by theorists who take similar stances. My apologies to you, Henry, but your writing exasperated me! Giroux addresses my concerns of his language usage when he states, "I make no apology for the language used. I believe that creating a new language is both an urgent and central task today in order to reconstitute the grounds on which cultural and educational debates are to be waged" (p. 3). So, he's aware of his linguistically dense and complex rhetoric, believing new language is necessary to convey new meanings and messages.

Luckily, author and teacher bell hooks was mentioned in Giroux's book. Her writing is much user friendly to the uninitiated reader who is cautiously sticking her toe into the theoretical waters of critical pedagogy. With hooks's help, I tried to become comfortable with the insider language: *Other, agency, border pedagogy, voice, silencing*, to name a few politically-charged words. Dictionary by my side, I waded into Giroux's sea of social justice perspectives and washed ashore dripping with several basic understandings. One is that students should be educated for "critical citizenship, that is, as political subjects capable of exercising leadership in a democracy" (Giroux, 1992, p. 1). Giroux also questions, "Can learning take place if in fact it silences the voices of people it is supposed to teach?" His answer is that yes, it can. "People learn that they don't count" (p. 15). Ouch! That was painful to my white-privileged ears.

I was intrigued by the concepts presented by Apple and Giroux. They stirred my social consciousness, and to borrow a 70s expression, "raised my level of awareness." However, at that time I failed to make a connection between social justice concepts and my community college workplace.

The next significant building block that added to my mental structure of social justice was a doctoral class on diversity. Our class read extensively about diversity issues and shared our understandings with colleagues. We discussed the powerful effects of class, gender, and race on educational

opportunities and the creation of marginalized members of our society. One project required class members to assume new personas by selecting two diversity-related variables that were unfamiliar to us. I chose to be an Hispanic, wheelchair-bound woman. We engaged in conversations, attempting to express our views from the perspectives of our imaginary selves. When I prepared to write my first entry in the online chat room, I realized that it would be very presumptuous of me to make any comments as if I had lived experiences as an Hispanic or a person who used a wheelchair. It felt arrogant and superficial to try to share a worldview I knew nothing about. That understanding actually became the critical lesson for me: I knew nothing about the feelings or struggles of people who had positionalities different from mine. I knew my white, female, middle class world and that was it. My contributions to the online discussions consisted of the physical challenges I might have to endure as a college student trying to get around campus in a wheelchair and responses to thoughts expressed by my equally frustrated classmates. This experience created more space in my mind to reflect on perspectives of others.

The next impactful learning experience occurred at a conference sponsored by The New Jersey Project, a state-funded project directed at curriculum and faculty development related to issues such as gender, race, class, culture, and sexuality. The theme of the conference was "In Search of the Other America: Poverty in the 21st Century." The presenters discussed the effects of poverty on Americans in terms of educational and career opportunities. That topic certainly got my attention. I grew up in a working class neighborhood and was well aware of the obstacles that might have blocked my success in higher education opportunities. For example, my immediate family had no college graduates and was not familiar with college application procedures or the means for receiving financial aid. My family had no connections that would provide social capital needed to make contacts and inquiries that would simplify the application process. In addition, family finances were tight, thereby limiting my college choices (Apple, 2001). As a lower, middle class student I faced hurdles, so I could only imagine how difficult it might be for poverty-level students. I had stumbling blocks in my path. Those living in poverty had steep, treacherous mountains in the way of their upward mobility.

One presenter provided a map that identified the areas of the United States with various degrees of poverty. I was surprised to learn that among the pockets of poverty scattered around our country, the poorest areas were inhabited by rural groups of color. I had assumed that urban areas would have the highest rates of poverty. Specific incomes of poverty-level families were presented along with their inherent disadvantages. I began to think about all the advantages I had that I took for granted. My working class family, though limited in social capital, was able to allocate funds for higher education, thereby giving me the opportunity to place myself in better economic circumstances. Most of those living in poverty would never have that chance and it was not by choice. Our educational system seemed to perpetuate the economic status quo (Apple, 2001). These were not startling revelations, but ideas I had never considered in any depth. I began to connect class privilege with my community college setting, and with my developmental reading students in particular.

My next learning experience took place when my community college presented a colloquium on the role of education in civic responsibility. Sheldon Hack, a United States history professor at the University of Pennsylvania, asserted that the conservative right in our country was well organized and the liberals were not. Rather than allowing one set of beliefs to guide the country's choices, he concluded that students must be educated to think for themselves in order to make informed decisions. He further believed that our country was becoming complacent and was not paying attention to what was

happening around us, and this needed to be changed. I saw a connection between his ideas and those of Apple (2001), regarding the influential power of the conservative right, and wondered how our country lost its focus on democratic ideals. Who was standing up for society's marginalized beings? Were we actually erasing any progress that may have been made in recognizing and respecting differences related to class, race, and gender?

In the books and articles I was reading about diversity issues and needs of developmental readers, I kept coming across references to Paulo Freire (1970) and conditions of the oppressed. As my concerns about social justice deepened, I became curious about Freire's ideas on education as expressed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I found the book to be disturbing and revealing as I began to think about social and cultural inequities and their ramifications on groups of people in different cultures. The book caused me to think about marginalized beings and empathize with the condition of being viewed as the "other," or people without subjectivity. Then I connected the ideas with my own workplace setting. I drew the conclusion that my developmental reading students could be considered the oppressed beings of the educational system. They came to college underprepared due to a variety of circumstances, some caused by the educational system itself. I began to view students' behaviors and attitudes from a different perspective. The apathy and passivity that were so prevalent may have been their response to an educational system that did not meet their needs. Perhaps these were defensive behaviors rather than the cause of their academic deficiencies.

In the succeeding semester, Michael Apple presented a lecture at my university. I attended and listened as Apple (2001) expounded upon the ideas in his writings, making specific reference to his book *Educating the "Right" Way*. He was passionate about his beliefs and concerned for students in our schools who were being marginalized by educational policymakers. As I listened I found myself agreeing with Apple's opposition to a standardized curriculum that ignores the diversity in our society and fails to address conditions that create social inequities. I connected the idea of social inequities with my students and wondered what I might do as an instructor to validate my students and help them develop a sense of empowerment.

During that same semester I again attended a New Jersey Project conference. The theme was "Who Knows? Marginal Experience Narratives and the Politics of Knowledge." Two presenters talked about using stories and testimony to support a multicultural classroom. They suggested providing students with a variety of perspectives and worldviews that encouraged critical analysis and personal connections to the readings. I thought about the curriculum I was using and how I might supplement it to bring in readings that honored a diverse population and created a basis for dialogue.

In addition to my exposure to social justice concepts through course work, conferences, and elected readings, I repeatedly found references to social justice during my literature reading. Literature by reading theorists, reading instruction practitioners, and theorists of critical pedagogy all recognize social justice issues as an integral part of effective reading instruction. For example, when referring to intermediate-level classrooms, which are grades 6-8, Fountas and Pinnell (2001) believe that teachers who require respect for all others are creating the basis for a just society. Apple (1999) asserts that a just society is one of the goals in all educational proposals in our country, which would include higher education.

Social justice beliefs are particularly applicable in a community college setting. With its appeal to nontraditional students, such as working class, minority, and older students, the community college is

able to increase the access to higher education opportunities for diverse, typically underserved populations in our society (Dougherty, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 1982; Brint & Karabel, 1989). This quality of inclusiveness, provided by open access, depends on a student's desire to learn rather than his/her social status, making the community college a model of democratic practices (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). Establishing a classroom based on democratic ideals, which are necessary to achieve social justice, can serve to create a more active and effective learning environment.

Democratic ideals such as respecting the dignity and equality of all individuals and acting for the common good (New Jersey State Department of Education, 1996) are closely linked with a feminist perspective, as well as the aims of social justice. During the last century many teachers, particularly women, have been influenced by John Dewey's ideas of education based on democracy (Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989). Dewey (1916) believed that democratic schools created free interaction among social groups, thereby increasing their points of shared concerns. He valued the importance of communication and active participation in facilitating intellectual and emotional growth among the student population. Beane and Apple (1995) assert that shared decision-making is a right of all those involved in the democratic school, including the students. They further believe that the school must encourage cooperation and provide equal opportunity for all. For instructors, establishing a democratic classroom means relinquishing some control, allowing students to have more choices, and encouraging free expression of opinions (Routman, 1991). Additionally, a democratic classroom is based on a relationship of potential equality between teacher and learner (Hughes, 2000).

In my classrooms, I did not seek to establish equality, but I was interested in sharing power with my students to help them take responsibility for their learning. Participating actively in learning experiences, taking part in decision-making, and contributing to the creation of a student-centered program are representative examples of democratic practices students and teachers must willingly embrace to address issues of social justice.

Limitations of Democratic Practices in the Classroom

Implementing democratic practices was hindered in my community college setting for several reasons. First, these practices were more likely to be successful when they were familiar to students. However, student-centered approaches have not typically been part of students' educational experiences (Routman, 1991), so democratic practices must be more narrowly selected and employed. Elements of choice, decision-making, and free expression of ideas were practiced to some degree. Second, time availability was another factor affecting practices. Students and instructors must build trusting relationships when engaging in active learning and sharing. People who have developed a sense of mutual trust exist in an environment that is a safe place to experiment with new and unfamiliar processes (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Trust-building takes time and sufficient time is usually not available in traditionally-structured college courses. Third, mandated departmental exams controlled the curriculum rather than student interests and curiosities. Kohn (1999) contends that all members of the community of learners function most effectively when they have input into the daily operation of the class. I believe that full implementation of democratic practices is a noble and idealistic goal, but impossible to accomplish within the time constraints of a single college semester. However, any movement in the direction of establishing these practices is a worthwhile endeavor because students' ideas and knowledge are validated in the process.

Conclusion

The true significance of these shared experiences and new concepts provided by the literature became my own intellectual property. I began to view my students differently as well as the role I played as instructor. I stopped wishing for students who wanted to participate actively and started concentrating on the steps I could take to inspire participation. I accepted my leadership role, influenced by both Feminist Pedagogical Theory and Social Justice concepts and beliefs, that required me to attempt to foster the development of a “community of learners” environment. I focused on developing relationships with my students and encouraging them to form relationships among themselves. Additionally, I made an effort to provide numerous opportunities for students to develop a sense of empowerment as learners. Taking on the responsibility of one’s own knowledge acquisition while developing it in a supportive social setting is a positive means of preparing oneself for success in the world of academe.

My students were excellent teachers. I learned about their needs as well as my own. Their responses and feedback helped me to develop increasingly effective means of accomplishing three priority goals based on Feminist Pedagogical Theory: increasing students’ sense of empowerment, encouraging the building of relationships, and building community in the classroom. I came to realize that underlying these goals was my need to serve the higher moral purpose of social justice. I wanted my students to have equal access to learning the skills they needed to support themselves through life financially, emotionally, and psychologically, and to learn what they needed to create fulfilling personal and professional lives. What could I accomplish in a single semester as an individual teacher? I look to Henry Adams, a noted statesman, for the answer. “A teacher affects eternity; [she] can never tell where [her] influence stops.” I will never know if I had a positive effect on even one student. But that does not stop me from continuing to try.

The words of one student allow me to end with a voice of hope. Leslie was a 40+-year-old African American student in one of my classes who had me as her first instructor. She shared her educational goals, which I could wisely adopt as my life goals.

I know it will be a challenge. I’m looking to better myself as a person, find ways to help me see the critical areas in my life as well as the positive areas [and be] able to distinguish the difference. I think that is a key thing. I’m [in college to prepare] for a career and also [learn] about me: about myself and things that will help me become a better person. [I want to learn] how I fit into society as a human being, so that’s definitely something I’m looking forward to.

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VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]