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Personal Reflection: A Reflection on Encouraging Critical Thinking and Empathy: Using So-TL to Examine Teaching Effectiveness in a Social Justice in Graduate Education Class

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Keywords

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A Reflection on Encouraging Critical Thinking and Empathy: Using So-TL to Examine Teaching Effectiveness in a Social Justice in Graduate Education Class

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Abstract

This essay addresses the search for a more comprehensive and reflective method through which to analyze the efficacy of my teaching approach in a graduate level social justice in education class. I explored tenets of scholarship in teaching and learning as a basis for developing a more coherent and organic assessment approach, with the goal of assisting students to better address the intellectual challenges posed by the discussion and application of sensitive social justice topics. I was also interested in using scholarship of teaching and learning to analyze the effectiveness of the applied anthropological approach, now employed to assist culturally homogeneous graduate students and classroom teachers develop more empathic attitudes towards their international, multi-ethnic classroom population while examining their own approach to student learning outcomes.

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Introduction

Since 2005, I have had the honor to teach one of the first social justice graduate classes in the College of Education of a large mid-western university in the United States. Although I enjoy teaching the class, I am always concerned as to the efficacy of my teaching approach in assisting students address the intellectual challenges posed by difficult class discussions around sensitive social justice subjects. I am also interested in how an applied anthropological approach is assisting our culturally homogeneous graduate students and classroom teachers to develop more empathic attitudes towards their international, multi-ethnic classroom population.

After attending several faculty sessions on teaching assessment, I increased the number of individual student assessments in the form of weekly personal blogs through which the students and I had personal conversations on topics significant to them. I also incorporated anonymous pre- and post student assessments to see if there were attitudinal changes in relation to the six main topics covered in the class: race, sexual orientation, gender, social justice, religion and social class. I was concerned with determining the most effective ways of addressing student's learning outcomes and intellectual development. While these attempts yielded fruitful information, I still searched for an approach that was more comprehensive and would provide a more scholarly approach to assessment.

After an extensive internet search, I contacted colleagues on campus to see if they were familiar with scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and found that a small cadre of SoTL practitioners existed. The next day, I received a seminal readings bibliography, which launched me into a personal investigation of how I might use SoTL to examine what was developing in and through my social justice classes. I investigated the seminal reading by

Boyer (1990) and further explorations by Mckinney (2009) and Simmons (2009). In turn, Glassick's 2000 article on Boyer's expanded definitions of scholarship referenced Lee Shulman's pivotal work on the scholarship of teaching. He listed three criteria defined by Shulman that applied directly to my present research and teaching:

- The work must be made public.
- The work must be available for peer review and critique according to accepted standards.
- The work must be able to be reproduced and built on by other scholars. (Glassick 877:2000).

As director of the Center for Human Origin and Cultural Diversity, I am always concerned with these three points. Our work is to present the story of human origin through applied anthropology to both the university and regional communities. Our presentations are constantly open to peer review and critique and on occasion, we have to engage the university lawyers to protect our material. On a positive side, Schulman's criteria provides a SoTL framework for future research on the center's endeavors.

In regards to my present research and assessment project, I was pleased to discover that other authors had applied SoTL to the analysis of social justice in education (Closson and Nelson 2009, Gale 2009). As Richard Gale noted in his article "Asking Questions that Matter... Asking Questions of Value":

There is a place in teaching and learning scholarship for questions about how students learn empathy and tolerance. There is a need for investigation into how students learn to value equity and social justice. Already there are many faculty committed to civic and political engagement, not to mention public responsibilities of citizenship and social participation; this is a short step away from teaching and learning activism, empowerment, and cosmopolitanism (Gale 6:2009)

After my review of SoTL articles, I knew that this was the right approach to examining the teaching and learning process in my social justice classes. In this essay I will discuss SoTL's relevancy to the analysis of my pedagogical approach and, in turn, its effect upon my students' teaching in their multi-ethnic classrooms. It is important to me that students develop critical thinking, cultural understanding and empathy for those outside of their personal cultures and ethnicities. As mentioned previously, the majority of my students are classroom teachers and it is of utmost magnitude that they have the ability to apply their new social justice-related knowledge to their classroom interactions. Secondly, by investigating my teaching through SoTL, I am better able to assist my students in the evaluation of their own teaching and learning and their student learner outcomes.

In his article, Gale (2009) expounds on the role of SoTL in analyzing ones teaching, noting:

- Level One Scholarship asks questions about student learning focused on pedagogical observations, what we value and need to understand as teachers and as scholars.
- Level Two Scholarship asks questions about student learning that inform and support broader institutional agendas, speaking to shared questions of value and what we need to understand as members of an academic community.
- Level Three Scholarship asks questions about student learning that speak to and influence issues of significance to society, addressing our values writ

large, what we need to understand as members of a local, national, global community (Gale 7:2009).

This resonated with me and led me to devise a way through which I could examine my current approaches through these criteria.

Social Justice Class SoTL Assessment Plan

I plan to use the Level One Scholarship concept by applying it to my own teaching as I observe student presentations and group discussions. I also plan to discuss this concept with the students throughout the class, using it to frame the analysis of class presentations. Many of my students envision themselves as teachers but not scholars and by entering into this discussion early in the semester, it will assist them in developing a broader understanding of teacher as scholar. I will encourage them to literally list what they value in teaching from a social justice viewpoint, and encourage them to use their critical thinking skills to apply these values to their peer review of class presentations. The results from the student observations and analysis of their values list and its use during their discussions will provide invaluable information.

Level Two Scholarship is the basis of many social justice discussions within my class. I constantly encourage shared questions of value and encourage them to discuss what we need to understand as members of an academic community, as teacher scholars and role models. Many of my students do not understand the overall impact that they have upon their schools and university community when they begin to act upon their social justice values within an educational framework. By reminding them of their potential through the application of Level Two Scholarship, they will begin to reflect upon their learning, their students' learning and hopefully it will inform their classroom teaching and that of their peers. It is hoped that this experience will encourage them to focus on the pedagogical implications of understanding more fully what is happening in the classroom. I see this application as having a wide-ranging impact upon many levels of education within the community. To assess the effectiveness of this approach, I will compare their personal reflections from the beginning of the semester to those written toward the end of the semester as well as have them reflect upon their intellectual growth as teacher scholars in their final essays.

Level Three Scholarship encapsulates the core of my class. The course materials are designed to help teachers and education students understand, discuss and apply social justice issues which are of significance to society, "...addressing our values writ large, what we need to understand as members of a local, national, global community" (Gale 2009). By introducing SoTL approaches to the class discussion and reinforcing the student's role as critical scholar, I will add an important component to our class interaction and raise the level of intellectual discussion. This approach may also help students to be more objective and less self-conscious in regard to sensitive class topics, such as race. We discuss the concept of race the first five weeks of class, during which time they attend a presentation at the Center for Human Origin and Cultural Diversity. In this field trip, applied anthropology is used to teach students about human origin and the concept of race. They discover the science behind human differences and the fact that the concept of race is not supported by scientific research. I will use this experience to encourage students to observe how they learned and encourage pedagogical observations, which will be reflected upon in their blogs and in class discussion.

Conclusion

Implementation and reflection upon the use of the three levels of scholarship will provide ample material on which to reflect upon my teaching, student learning outcomes and in turn the transformation of our academic community. Although I will be adding components to my present teaching approach, this will enrich my pedagogy and provide me with examples by which to compare my earlier approaches. By modeling and discussing SoTL with my students, it is hoped that they, in turn will also use it to analyze their teaching and scholarly growth. In an attempt to encourage their continued use of the three levels and provide me with valuable feedback in regard to my teaching, I will include Gale's article in the class readings and discussion.

Looking at the broader implications of SoTL in transforming the academic community, I will share my project with my fellow instructors who also teach this class. Over the past years, I have implemented an end of the academic year review of all sections of the social justice class. During this meeting we share articles, class materials and guest speaker suggestions to enhance the class experience and refine the curriculum. It is hoped that the other instructors will adopt this SoTL approach in the assessment of their classes.

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