

SLICES: Critical Theory as Praxis and Research-Based Service Learning

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In an era of increasing racial and ethnic diversity, both in the larger U.S. society and in institutions of higher education, using teaching strategies that explicitly address racial justice can be a meaningful way to engage a diverse student. Service Learning Initiative for Community Engagement in Sociology (SLICES) is a research-based program in the Department of Sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas that uses critical theories as praxis to foster academic and professional development, and civic engagement while paying particular attention racial justice. This paper describes the use of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Information Has Value as theoretical tools for course curriculum development, larger program design, and community involvement.

Keywords: Feminist Standpoint Theory, service learning, participatory action research, racial justice

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas is home to the second most racially and ethnically diverse undergraduate student body in the U.S. and as such, addressing issues of equity in higher education can be both a necessary and meaningful way for faculty members to engage students in the classroom. In today's socio-political climate, racial justice focused service learning can be a compelling way to engage students in research activities that not only increase understanding about the experiences of different racial and ethnic groups, but also engage them in the work of social change. Though there is a large body of literature that highlights strategies for serving diverse student

bodies, and a smaller, though valuable body of literature on service learning in higher education, no scholarship currently speaks to the particular intersection of research-based service learning, driven by critical theory, that focuses on academic and professional development and social justice-based civic engagement. This paper describes the use of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Information Has Value as theoretical tools for course curriculum development, larger program design, and community involvement in a collaborative service learning program in the Department of Sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV): the Service Learning Initiative for Community Engagement in Sociology (SLICES).

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Community-based Learning and Research

Service learning is the practice of aligning civic engagement to course learning objectives while including a reflection component (Jacoby 1996) and has a modest, yet persistent tradition in the academy. Its roots can be found in community-based learning (CBL) traced back to the early 1900s work of educational theorist John Dewey (1938). Dewey suggested that education should meet real life settings and advocated for experiential learning and an applied cumulative approach that moved beyond the classroom setting. Though introduced by Dewey in the 1930s, CBL was not immediately embraced by the academy until its increased popularity in the 1960s with the introduction of service programs like VISTA and the Peace Corps. Following a decline in CBL in the 1970s connected to a decrease in student activism, CBL reemerged in the 1980s and 1990s with national commitment to community experiential learning both among institutions of higher education and the U.S. government that remained strong into the 2000s as institutions of higher education sought strategies for meeting the increasing demands of a global economy (Mooney and Edwards 2001).

Contemporary examples of CBL can be found frequently in disciplines like social work and community health sciences, though, as a teaching strategy, less often discussed in sociological scholarship. For example, while reviewing the sociological teaching and learning literature during the program and course design process using the keyword search “service learning,” the program designer found a mere seven articles published in the last decade by *Teaching Sociology*, the discipline’s national peer reviewed teaching journal. In addition to being less than robust, the current sociological literature on service learning suggests that student and community outcomes are mixed. For example, Huisman (2010) found that when using service learning in her Women and Migration class, student understanding of both the content area and the sociological lens increased.

Similarly, Smith Budhai (2013) found that for community partners, service learning did benefit their organizations, had inherent though amendable difficulties, and strengthened the relationship between the university and the community. In contrast, Becker and Paul (2015) found that after completing service learning, over half of the students they assessed employed color-blind racism rhetoric practices.

Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) subscribes to a methodology that situates community members as experts of their own experiences and needs, and as contributors to the creation of knowledge. CBPR works to include community stakeholders in all stages of the research and is often used as a strategy for identifying or designing culturally sensitive interventions and subscribes to the following eight key principles (Israel et al. 1998):

- Recognizes community as a unit of identity
- Builds on strengths and resources within the community
- Facilitates collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research
- Integrates knowledge and action for mutual benefit of all partners
- Promotes co-learning and an empowering process that attends to social inequalities
- Involves a cyclical and iterative process
- Addresses health from both a positive and ecological perspective
- Disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all partners

Similar to service learning, CBPR is most frequently found in community-focused disciplines such as social work and community health sciences. The literature on community-based participatory research as service learning in sociology is even more limited than the literature on traditional service learning. However, the limited research has found positive benefits of CBPR as service learning. For example, Lewis (2004) found that applying a

CBPR model rendered positive outcomes for student learning, though the author also cautions that it is difficult for social change to occur over the course of just one semester. Limitations in the CBPR as service learning literature are not surprising, given the difficulty of doing course-based research with a community partner within the context of one semester.

This paper contributes to the small body of literature on course-based research as service learning in the following ways. First, this paper serves as an example of a unique program that uses course-based research projects as service learning. Second, the paper discusses course and program design that is explicitly theoretically grounded. Third, it offers examples of a community partner project, the various learning activities that the students engage in, and the benefits for the community partner and the student researchers. And fourth, the paper highlights the SLICES partnership with UNLV University Libraries as part of the course curriculum and support for the service learning projects.

The following discussion details the SLICES program, introduces the work of the community partner, Immigrant Justice Initiative (IJI), offers an overview of the student project for IJI, and discusses the library research literacy portion of the curriculum.

Serving Learning Initiative for Community Engagement in Sociology (SLICES)

SLICES is a community-based research initiative that partners UNLV undergraduate students with Las Vegas organizations and initiatives in support of racial/ethnic/immigration education and equity. SLICES students work closely with our local partners to complete CBPR projects that align directly with their course learning objectives. While completing their CBPR projects, students gain professional skills, increase their understanding of culturally competent research, and learn the importance of working with the community. The SLICES

model of service learning exposes students to a research methodology that focuses on engaging community members in all stages of the research project, CBPAR. SLICES includes the “A” for “Action” in the model as a way to encourage students to also engage in the work of social change, rather than just studying social change. In this regard, the SLICES model falls under the umbrella of ‘critical service learning’ because of its explicit focus on social justice (Mitchell 2008).

The mission of SLICES is to use sociology to foster academic development, career and professional development, and civic engagement. The program’s vision is to increase UNLV student engagement in critical, research-focused education by connecting sociological inquiry to the Las Vegas Community. SLICES focuses on four goals: to connect classroom learning to the larger social environment, to increase critical thinking, to increase research skills, and to foster life-long community engagement to foster a social change model of leadership. Accordingly, SLICES relies on three key assumptions: that education can and should be intimately tied to social justice and the work of social change, that ALL students can make important contributions to the learning space and to learning activities, and that the engaged student is a successful student.

SLICES developed as an outgrowth of service learning projects for an Ethnic Groups course for the Department of Sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. As the CBPAR projects began to draw long-term commitment from the students in the course, several infrastructural components emerged. First, alumni of the course received leadership training and returned as peer facilitators to be project managers for the incoming CBPAR projects. Second, a leadership team developed that now consists of peer facilitators and other alumni who advise the instructor/SLICES program coordinator on possible community partnerships, how to better support student engagement and development, and how SLICES can grow to

better serve UNLV's diverse student body. Third, SLICES students and alumni have developed a registered student organization for the program so that UNLV students who are not enrolled in the Ethnic Groups course can engage in the work of service learning and social justice.

Theoretically Driven Curriculum and Program Design

SLICES' work relies heavily on critical theory. In contrast to traditional social theory, which focuses solely on explaining the social world, critical theory focuses on both the critique of and the change of society. In other words, for a theory to be critical, it must identify the social



inequality and the responsible actors, it must articulate feasible solutions for addressing social disparities, and it must adhere to the norms of criticism established by the field (Horkheimer 1993). What may make critical theory so appealing to social justice scholars, activists, and educators, is its departure from the notion of a neutral social world, and therefore neutral social science theory. Instead, critical theory relies heavily on the assumption that not only do social inequalities indeed exist because of social actors

and social forces, but that these same inequalities can also be changed by social actors and social forces.

Theoretical Foundations

Feminist Standpoint Theory is central to SLICES programming. Feminist Standpoint Theory relies on the assumptions that social inequalities are salient factors in the lives of marginalized groups, and the marginalized are best equipped to describe their lived experiences (Smith 1974; Hill Collins 2004; Hartsock 2004). In her critique of the male-centered nature of sociology, Feminist Standpoint Theorist Dorothy Smith (1974) argued "...it is not enough to

supplement an established sociology by addressing ourselves to what has been left out, overlooked, or by making sociological issues of the relevances of the world of women. That merely extends the authority of the existing sociological procedures and makes of a women's sociology an addendum" (P. 8). In other words, we cannot just add the study of women to a sociology designed for and by men. Rather, Feminist

Standpoint Theory suggests that women do indeed have a unique perspective on their lives, and a feminist sociology must begin with those perspectives. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), notes that ideas produced by black women are necessary to understanding the unique social position held by black women. And that indeed sociology should consider black women the knowers of their own lives, and research must treat them as such.

SLICES and Critical Theories

Drawing on Feminist Standpoint Theory in the SLICES course curriculum focuses on centering the voices of the communities that the class is learning about in several ways. First, it relies heavily on the work of critical scholars of color and immigrant scholars for course readings. While readings do include sociological texts from native-born white scholars, the course readings primarily come from academic and non-academic people of color in the form of peer-reviewed articles, blogs, poetry, and essays. For example, the class reads “Acculturation, Income and Vegetable Consumption Behaviors Among Latino Adults in the U.S.: A Mediation Analysis with the Bootstrapping Technique” by Erick B López, M.A., and Takashi Yamashita, Ph.D. (2015), both scholars of color, one first generation immigrant and one second generation immigrant. This reading facilitates learning three topics: various methods for the study of race and ethnicity; the intersection of race/ethnicity, income, and health disparities; and a discussion of assimilation. Examples of informal works read are: “What it Means to Become ‘BiRachel’” from the Huffington Post by Aaron B. Wilkinson (2015), who is a biracial scholar whose work focuses on mixed race issues. And when discussing assimilation, the class reads “Latina 2016” by Ana Maria Menda, Ph.D., a piece of poetry about the effects of assimilation on Latina body image.

A second way that SLICES applies critical theory as praxis is by engaging the class in a semester long CBPAR service learning project. The CBPAR projects serve several key purposes. It works to center the voices of the communities that the class is learning about by immersing the students in collaborative community-driven research projects. The course offers critique of how and why scholars study communities of color by evaluating the methodologies behind different race and ethnicity focused studies. The course increases research literacy skills in meaningful ways by tying learning outcomes to

research projects that have the potential for real life effects on Las Vegas community groups, of which many of the students are members. An intentional outcome of the CBPAR projects is that students include community members as both owners and creators of knowledge and learn about the value of sharing the intellectual product of research with communities.

A third way that SLICES employs critical theory as praxis is in its peer mentorship model of leadership. Students who previously enrolled in the Ethnic Groups course and completed the CBPAR project have an opportunity to return as peer facilitators and project managers to the next group of student researchers. Similar to the multi-level team approach used in the Department of Sociology at Brandeis University that includes graduate students as mentors in an undergraduate methods course described by Shostak et al. (2010), SLICES incorporates student mentors who are familiar with the research and with the focus of the different projects. However, what makes SLICES different is its application of Feminist Standpoint Theory in identifying and cultivating peer facilitators. By default, the course draws a very diverse student group each semester because of the nature of the course content and the racially and ethnically diverse undergraduate student body. But SLICES is also intentionally inclusive in its design and outreach. For example, UNLV is home to a large immigrant population, including undocumented and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students. As immigrant justice is an on-going focus of SLICES’ collaboration with community partners, SLICES includes in its outreach regular participation in campus events and initiatives pertaining to immigration. And because SLICES is not federally funded, it can provide a research experience and potential leadership opportunities to undocumented students who are excluded from the many Department of Education supported programs. In addition to building leadership skills, increasing research literacy, and fostering professional development, the

SLICES peer mentorship model intentionally situates SLICES' racially and ethnically diverse student leaders as knowers of the learning content and activities about racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.

SLICES relies on a heavily collaborative service learning model, working closely with several community partners each year to design and complete the CBPAR projects. However, this type of high impact learning experience also requires the support of several key campus partners. To maximize student success, SLICES also works closely with the Office of Student Engagement and Diversity's service learning staff, the Office of Undergraduate Research, the Writing Center, Career Services, and University Libraries' Social Sciences Librarian. The following discussion highlights the partnership with the community partner, Immigrant Justice Initiative, and the library research literacy support provided by University Libraries.

Community Partnerships: Immigrant Justice Initiative

The IJI is a 501(c)(3) public charity formed in Las Vegas to help guide immigrants and their families through the complexities of the immigration system. There are approximately 210,000 undocumented immigrants living in Nevada, representing 7.2 percent of all Nevadans (Chen 2016). This means that Nevada has the largest per capita share of undocumented immigrants in the country, and while almost seven percent of children in public schools nationwide have at least one undocumented parent, that number is almost 18 percent in Nevada (Pew Research Center 2014). Despite these numbers, there is a shocking lack of services for Nevada's undocumented population. The shortage of low-cost, quality legal services has led to disastrous consequences as many immigrants are forced to consult unscrupulous and incompetent Notarios or document preparers (Lapan 2012).

Nowhere is the need greater, however, than in the realm of asylum. Beginning in 2014, the United States experienced a surge in the number of Central Americans who fled unspeakable violence and entered the U.S. in search of protection (Brodzinsky and Pilkington 2015), yet, at the same time, the Obama Administration prioritized the removal of all immigrants who entered the United States without documentation after January 1, 2014 (Johnson 2016). This means that rather than finding sanctuary, asylum-seekers find themselves immersed in a complex foreign legal system. Prioritizing the removal of those who entered after 2014 means that those asylum-seekers must prepare and present their cases much sooner than those who entered prior to 2014.

For many asylum-seekers, the ability to prove their case can be a matter of life and death (Brodzinsky and Pilkington 2015) and those unable to retain an attorney are less likely to win their claim.^[3] But even with an attorney, the likelihood of success in Nevada is dismal. For instance, in the Las Vegas Immigration Court, only 3 percent of asylum cases were granted during the 2015 Fiscal Year (EOIR 2016), down from 7 percent the year prior.

Asylum-seekers are expected to present evidence that if they are forced to return to their countries of origin they would be harmed because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or "membership in a particular social group" (8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(42)(A) C.F.R.). That is to say that not only must they prove a harm, but also prove that it would occur *because of* one of the recognized reasons. This means that a critical part of preparing a case is helping the adjudicator see the connection between the harm and the reason the harm was inflicted. This harm must somehow be unique to a group of people in the country left behind. Therefore, to properly draw the connections, the adjudicator must also be provided with societal context, commonly referred to as country conditions evidence. This is where the sociology students have been instrumental in gathering

evidence on behalf of asylum-seekers. The most common ground for protection being invoked by Central American asylum-seekers is membership in a particular social group. This category requires self-awareness such that a legally-recognized grouping can be articulated. For the students, it is critical that they understand what constitutes membership in a particular social group before they begin to gather evidence to support any claims.

There are three necessary components for recognition of a particular social group: 1) the group must share a common immutable characteristic, 2) the group must be defined with particularity, and 3) the group must be socially distinct within the society in question. *In re M-E-V-G-*, 26 I&N Dec. 227 (BIA. 2014). We will only briefly examine each of these requirements here. The common immutable characteristic is set out in *Matter of Acosta*, where the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) stated that a particular social group is comprised of

a group of persons all of whom share a common, immutable characteristic. The shared characteristic might be an innate one such as sex, color, or kinship ties, or in some circumstances it might be a shared past experience... must be one that the members of the group either cannot change, or should not be required to change because it is fundamental to their individual identities or consciences. *In re Acosta*, 19 IN Dec. 211, 233 (BIA 1985).

To illustrate how this is interpreted, let us look at how the BIA dealt with the issue of sexuality. In *Matter of Toboso-Alfonso*, the BIA decided that sexual orientation is the kind of characteristic that one cannot change. While the attorney representing the government in that case didn't argue that the immigration judge erred in finding that homosexuality was an "immutable" characteristic, they did object to categorizing "socially deviant behavior" as a particular social group. They seemed to be arguing that sexuality

was a behavior and not an innate characteristic. But the judge in that case, and later the BIA, held that sexuality is immutable, and therefore allowed for the creation of a particular social group on the basis of sexuality. The Ninth Circuit has defended this position, stating that "sexual orientation and sexual identity are immutable; they are so fundamental to one's identity that a person should not be required to abandon them." *Hernandez-Montiel v. INS*, 225 F.3d 1084,1093 (9th Cir. 2000).

Next, we turn to the second component of particularity, which requires that the group "be recognized, in the society in question, as a discrete class of persons." *In re S-E-G-*, 24 I&N Dec. 579, 584 (BIA 2008). Consider the language of the applicant's proposed particular social group in that case: "Salvadoran youth who have been subjected to recruitment efforts by MS-13 and who have rejected or resisted membership in the gang based on their own personal, moral, and religious opposition to the gang's values and activities." *Id* at 581. This careful wording was rejected as a particular social group because the proposed members could "make up a potentially large and diffuse segment of society," and there was no indication purported members were targeted as a result of their membership in this group. *Id* at 585. Significantly, the purpose of the particularity requirement is delineation, or to draw the "outer limits," of the proposed group. *In re W-G-R-*, 26 I&N Dec. 208 (BIA 2014). In drawing out the parameters of a proposed group, it is not enough that we can marshal people into proposed groups, for clearly, someone will be able to identify as a Salvadoran youth who resisted gang membership because of their own personal, moral, or religious opposition to the gang. But the significance of the particular social group is that it is grounded in its own societal framework, such that "[t]he boundaries of a group are not sufficiently definable unless the members of society generally agree on who is included in the group." *Id* at 221. Particularity, as such, was introduced in *Matter of A-M-E- & J-G-U-* where the BIA

rejected “wealthy Guatemalans” as a recognized group because wealth was considered “too amorphous to provide an adequate benchmark for determining group membership.” *In re Matter of A-M-E- & J-G-U-*, I&N Dec. 69, 74 (BIA 2007). Members of a society may disagree about who is wealthy and who is not as well as about who has resisted gang membership and why. What we learn from these cases is that the benchmark for membership must be clear and it must be based in the context of the society in question. An individual’s family, for instance, “remains the quintessential particular social group.” *Rios v. Lynch*, 807 F.3d 1123, 1128 (9th Cir. 2015).

Finally, the requirement of social distinction proposes that “to be socially distinct, a group need not be seen by society; rather, it must be perceived as a group by society.” *Matter of C-A-*, 23 I&N Dec. at 956-57. Similar to the requirement of particularity, social distinction requires an examination of the societal context which would support the finding that a group is distinct by virtue of being perceived as a group by their society. The Ninth Circuit has found that the particular social group of “young men in El Salvador resisting gang violence” was not socially visible because they questioned whether a person could be perceived as being a gang resistor. *Santos-Lemus v. Mukasey*, 542 F.3d 738, 745–46 (9th Cir.2008). The logic is that if society cannot readily identify those who resist gangs then they are not part of a group as perceived by society. On the other hand, consider the visibility of the particular social group “former members of the national police of El Salvador”, which was successful (Parish 1992:936).

A recent case from a Central American asylum-seeker provides all of the required elements for a particular social group. In *Matter of A-R-C-G-*, a Guatemalan woman who had been the victim of domestic violence proposed the particular social group of “married women in Guatemala who are unable to leave their relationship.” *Matter of A-R-C-G-*, 26 I&N Dec.

388 (BIA 2014). The board determined that gender, nationality, and inability to leave a marriage were all immutable characteristics because the characteristics could not be changed. The group became particular because it created a clear benchmark for membership including women who were married and unable to leave their relationships and it became distinct because country conditions evidence demonstrated that Guatemala has a culture of “machismo and family violence” which recognized the existence of women so situated.

A full analysis of the intricacies of designating particular social groups cannot be addressed here. Further, it is important to note that these examples are specific to the Ninth Circuit. For our purposes, we should recognize that we have established a standard for protection that requires self-awareness, social awareness, and awareness of legal precedent in the United States. Refugees must situate themselves in the conflict they are fleeing from to make sense of their identity as well as how their individual plight relates to the society from which they are fleeing. Never mind grappling with the legal intricacies of an unfamiliar nation, the level of awareness required to effectively demonstrate membership in a particular social group, and therefore worthy of relief under our asylum laws, is astounding.

Self-awareness as a requirement for a favorable finding is not limited to membership in a particular social group, but extends also to claims based on political opinion. Articulating a political opinion in the context of gang violence may not naturally occur to Central American refugees (Anker and Lawrence 2014). In this context, a refugee must first conceptualize that the gangs are operating as de facto governments and then conclude that their opposition to the gangs is therefore political (Anker and Lawrence 2014). Novel formulations of particular social groups and political opinions are being challenged and proposed around the country in hopes that the categorizations will be validated as worthy of protection (Zedginidze 2016), but it is

unreasonable to expect refugees to have this perspective.

A successful immigration case requires extensive supporting documentation that most refugees either do not have access to or do not know about. For instance, it is suggested that

Evidence such as country conditions reports, expert witness testimony, and press accounts of discriminatory laws and policies, historical animosities, and the like may establish that a group exists and is perceived as “distinct” or “other” in a particular society. *In re M-E-V-G-*, 26 I&N Dec. 227, 244 (BIA 2014).

If asylum-seekers focus on their personal tragedies and ignore mention of the societal context which allowed those tragedies to take form, their cases have already been defeated. Even assuming that the relevant country conditions evidence can be found in an asylum-seeker’s native tongue, the court will only accept documents submitted in English. This is where we should begin to question what kinds of information asylum-seekers have access to by virtue of their own limitations (language, access to the internet or a library, education levels, etc.) or by virtue of systemic limitations, such as pay walls. Each of these limitations should be addressed if we are to better situate asylum-seekers to succeed in their claims.

To help asylum-seekers overcome their personal limitations, the Immigrant Justice Initiative has been employing the help of carefully trained sociology students who have an understanding of what it means to belong to a particular social group. With their assistance, each asylum-seeker is provided with country conditions evidence that pertains to their claim so they can more clearly situate themselves within the context of their societies. Asylum-seekers must understand how the court will analyze their individual claims if they are to understand what information will be relevant in the adjudication of their claims. The students have put together a collection of country conditions evidence for

asylum-seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The evidence mostly corroborates particular social groups pertaining to gang violence and domestic violence.

Because asylum grant-rates in Las Vegas are so low, even with representation, our current strategy is to prepare applicants for a possible loss while identifying the most viable cases to represent. Each case will nevertheless contain appropriate documentation to not only establish the existence of a particular social group but also to demonstrate how that group is targeted for persecution in their society. In this way, the students are learning to situate themselves in the sociopolitical context of some of the most vulnerable members of our society and also learning to formulate legal means by which to offer them protection. Naturally, each case is different, and only a few will ultimately be successful, but allowing the students a space to question the merits of different claims by examining their respective country conditions and our country’s laws is a very real way of learning through service to understand the unique positioning of refugees under our asylum laws.

Projects that Matter: Community Based Research

IJI is one of SLICES’ original community partners. IJI’s work is especially compelling and meaningful to SLICES students for two reasons. First, UNLV is home to a large immigrant population. SLICES students, as a whole, tend to place a high importance on learning about immigration, and the effects of U.S. immigration policy and practice on their community members. Second, the low rates of asylum verdicts in the local immigration court signals to students an institutional failure that is both egregious and requires immediate attention. The IJI project garners much excitement from SLICES students semester after semester, and they become very engaged in supporting IJI’s advocacy work.

SLICES' work for IJI has focused on three key areas. As an entry point to the project, the students complete a systematic literature review that highlights various explanations for disparities in asylum verdicts across immigration court systems. The literature review serves two purposes. As a learning tool, the literature review engages SLICES students in growing their library research skills and better understanding what previous researchers have found on the topic of asylum. The literature review is delivered to IJI in narrative and annotated bibliography format that identifies which sources are open sources and which sources are subscription based. As a resource for IJI, the literature review serves as summary of scholarly evidence that supports their ongoing representation of asylum clients. Next, the students gather textual data as evidence of country conditions for Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The data consists of peer-reviewed scholarship, research reports, and mainstream news stories. As a learning activity, the data collection process helps familiarize SLICES students with sampling strategies and data collection methods. SLICES students learn about the difference between probability sampling and non-probability sampling strategies, when each may be appropriate, and the strengths and limitations of the different strategies. For example, while completing the IJI project, the students identify and make arguments why non-probability was a relevant and realistic sampling strategy for their project. Once they identify their sampling strategy, students then develop a data collection plan that begins with an initial wave of textual data collection using a key word search strategy. Following wave one, the students then collect a second and third wave of textual data by applying a snowball sampling strategy and allowing each article to serve as a reference point for other relevant articles. Once completed, the textual data is used as a resource for IJI in support of their individual client cases, and in their ongoing education workshops. The textual data on

country conditions are also summarized for IJI and delivered indicating which sources are open sources and which sources are subscription based. In addition to the literature review and data collection activities, as a third and equally important piece of the CBPAR project, students provide programming support for the IJI client workshops, allowing them to engage with the community they were learning about while doing immigrant justice work.

Campus Partnerships that Matter

Ethnic Groups in Contemporary Societies is a 200-level multicultural elective that draws students with an interest in race and ethnicity, but that come with varying levels of research literacy. SLICES uses the course as an opportunity to increase research skills by partnering with various research related campus resources. University Libraries Social Science Librarian is one of those important resources. Once the students have been assigned to their community partner of choice, they begin the first stage of the research process, the literature review. While in this phase of their research, SLICES students participate in two library workshops, one on critical reading - to help them prepare for their course reading summaries and the CBPAR annotated bibliography - and one on information underprivilege and Open Access. Working closely with the Social Sciences Librarian during the workshops and throughout the projects is important for SLICES students because they gain valuable library research and critical reading skills and begin to develop an understanding of the importance of information privilege.

Highlighted in the library workshops and the literature review process is how easily accessible information, especially empirical evidence, is to the student researchers and in contrast, the barriers that many community members may face in gaining access to similar information. The information gap can be especially problematic for IJI clients, as they are relying on textual

evidence to support their case for asylum in the U.S. rather than being deported back to their country of origin, where they often face life threatening violence. While IJI clients technically can access the same peer reviewed sources that SLICES summarizes for them by using the community computers in the library on the UNLV campus, for many there are obstacles that may include: language barriers, a need for childcare, transportation limitations, and limited knowledge of how to read and use research articles.

Theory-Driven Library Instruction and CBPAR

There are several theoretical foundations and concepts that serve as the basis of the library workshops, and all of these theoretical foundations contribute to student success and retention for this diverse group of students. Library instruction in general has become more focused on social justice issues in recent years, and this is reflected in the types of critical theoretical foundations and concepts that have become more popular as well as the recent adoption of the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (the *Framework*), a guiding document recently adopted by the Association of College and Research Libraries, the premiere professional organization for academic librarianship. The foundation of this document is the idea of “threshold concepts,” that is, concepts that meet the following five criteria, quoted from Hofer, Townsend, and Brunetti (2012):

- Transformative—cause the learner to experience a shift in perspective;
- Integrative—bring together separate concepts (often identified as learning objectives or competencies) into a unified whole;
- Irreversible—once grasped, cannot be un-grasped;

- Bounded—may help define the boundaries of a particular discipline, are perhaps unique to the discipline;
- Troublesome—usually difficult or counterintuitive ideas that can cause students to hit a roadblock in their learning. (P. 387-388)

Two of the theoretical concepts that served as the basis of SLICES library instruction were Information Has Value and Authority is Constructed and Contextual. The other theories important in the library instruction literature include the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and critical information literacy. These concepts and theories are explained below, along with their applications in the classroom for SLICES students.

Critical pedagogy is an important approach in library instruction, as it empowers students to think for themselves and encourages collaborative spaces and dialogue among students. Thus librarians attempt to create spaces in the classroom for self-directed learning, even in so-called “one-shots” (one time library workshops), as opposed to the “point-and-click” demos that have historically been the norm for library instruction. Critical pedagogy, at least according to Freire, is opposed to the “banking” model of education, where knowledge is “deposited” in students’ minds, and instead proposes a problem-based approach where teachers learn along with the students (Freire 1970). Critical pedagogy also shaped and informed the Social Sciences Librarians’ lesson plans in the case of the SLICES workshops, as they employed think-pair-share methods and small group discussions as the format for learning, engaging students on a deeper level and allowing for self-directed learning.

Authority is Constructed and Contextual formed the basis for the critical reading workshop. Students read a text by Indo-Pakistani theorist Jenny Sharpe: “Is the United States Postcolonial?: Transnationalism, Immigration, and Race” about the United States’

heterogeneous history of slavery, racism, and the conquest of land from Mexico. The text was chosen for a number of reasons, including its relevance to the ethnic groups that the students work with as well as the fact of its authorship by a theorist belonging to a group about which she writes. Students had the opportunity to consider Sharpe's arguments about the heterogeneous nature of the history and population of the United States as compared to Great Britain. Students also had the opportunity to engage in discussion about how the reading applies to them. The reading was self-directed with opportunities for critical reflection, and this points to critical pedagogical practices as well as the Feminist Standpoint Theory that serves as the foundation for the entire course. Students had the opportunity to consider how a member of a marginalized (immigrant) community could also occupy a place of privilege in academia and traditional scholarly publishing. The full frame of Authority is Constructed and Contextual reads:

Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required (Association of College and Research Libraries 2015:4).

The critical reading workshop incorporated this frame as students were asked why it is important that they read authors who belong to the groups about which they write. This led us to a conversation about credibility and authority when it comes to scholarship about ethnic groups, as a way to integrate Feminist Standpoint Theory into the library workshop discussion.

The second frame used was Information Has Value, the full frame is as follows:

Information possesses several dimensions of value, including as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world. Legal and socioeconomic interests influence information production and dissemination (Association of College and Research Libraries 2015:6).

For this frame, the Social Sciences Librarian created a lesson about information privilege and Open Access, asking students to consider their information privilege, which is precarious in nature since their status as students affiliated with the University is most often temporary. Through the case studies, students considered the perspectives of a chair of a department, an editor of a major journal, a tenure-track professor, a student, and a community partner who could benefit from access to information behind paywalls for their own health, safety, and wellbeing, as in the case of the clients of IJI. Through this exercise, students came to an understanding of what information privilege is, and the injustice that it causes, as well as ways that they can become involved in the Open Access movement. They came to see information as a commodity but also as a tool that has the potential to change lives. They came to understand the reasons for paywalls, namely how the traditional publishing system operates, apart from considerations about the injustices cause by this traditional publishing model.

Students were asked to represent the different perspectives by arguing for them in front of their peers. Thus students could empathize with a number of perspectives and understand the issue from all sides, in a complex, nuanced manner. Both lessons reflected the goals and aims of critical pedagogy; the lesson on Information Has Value was centered around the problem of information privilege and paywalls, and students were asked to problem solve through dialogue with one another, a form of problem-based learning. Similarly, during the critical reading workshop, students were asked to interrogate

their community partners' situations from the perspective that Jenny Sharpe represents, and were asked how the text applies today, if it is more or less true today, since it was written 21 years ago. This again was a model of critical pedagogy in that students were empowered to ask questions and solve problems for themselves, using their unique perspectives as group members working with particular community partner organizations that represent particular ethnic groups.

Library instruction was important to the students for a number of reasons, in empowering them to speak up in the classroom and develop a critical consciousness. Critical pedagogy, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and critical information literacy were all applied in the library workshops, and as a result, students learned in ways that will contribute to their retention and progression, and they were empowered to take charge of their own learning.

Limitations and Future Research

In spite of SLICES' success, the program is not without limitations. As mentioned earlier, completing community based research projects in the course of one semester is difficult. The program serves students with entry-level research skills and must provide basic training so that they can complete the CBPAR project in a very compressed period of time. Because of this, SLICES has, to date, contributed in smaller ways to the missions of the community partners. In the same vein, SLICES serves as an introduction to research skills and cannot offer intensive research training to each new cohort. There is one exception to this limitation, however. SLICES has roughly a fifty percent retention rate. Meaning, about half of a given cohort remains in the program as peer facilitator, RSO members, or advisory committee members. Of those students, many remain in close contact with the SLICES program coordinator and receive on-going research mentorship. Another limitation of the program is its time intensity, especially given

that the program is in its early years. While the program has received both institutional funding and outside funding, the time required to do programming and student mentorship leaves little time for grant writing as well as scholarship. And finally, as much as the community partners rely on SLICES to produce the literature review, to engage in data collection, and to support their events and overall initiatives, SLICES students rely on community partners to also remain engaged. On occasion, organizational changes and personal lives leave community partners distant from the student groups.

Because of its comprehensive nature, the SLICES program is ripe for research. In addition to course learning activity assessments, SLICES students could be assessed for their increased knowledge of and comfort with research. Similarly, program assessment could include increased knowledge of critical theory and application of the sociological lens. As the program serves a very diverse group of students, exploring how they evolve and experience their own empowerment while serving others would also make for valuable research. And finally, as SLICES is in its third year, it would benefit from a comprehensive program evaluation. These recommendations for research related to the SLICES program may also serve as suggested research for programs similar in nature.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the use of critical theories as praxis across three disciplines in collaborative work for a critical research-based service-learning program, SLICES. The application of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Information Has Value allows SLICES to address issues of racial justice with a diverse undergraduate student group in ways that are meaningful not only to the students' lived experiences, but also relevant to today's socio-political climate. This paper provides examples of how critical theories are applied to curriculum design, program design, and community

involvement. SLICES has used critical research-based service learning to build a program that focuses on academic development, professional development, and civic engagement while attending to important issues of racial justice. There is no better time than the present to do explicit racial justice work in the classrooms of higher education, to augment research literacy in increasingly diverse undergraduate student bodies, and to use the skills of the academy to help meet the needs of the community.

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