

'If you learn about these issues, you're going to learn...more about yourself and things that you come in contact with every day': Engaging undergraduate students in meaningful literacy in a research writing course¹.

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in a required research writing class that focused on the topics of social (in)justice and diversity and which allowed students to conduct their own empirical research. In order to investigate their experiences with the topics and with the empirical research project, we employed the use of interviews and analyzed the data by organizing it by themes. Short narrative profiles of eight of the participants that we focus on for this study are provided. From the participants' experiences, we also explore two themes: students' engagement with social (in)justice in a required undergraduate writing course and incorporating empirical research in a required research writing course. Finally, we provide implications for teaching and teaching writing.

Keywords: Social (in)justice; diversity; empirical research; undergraduate students; research writing course

Introduction to the Literature Framing the Study

'If you learn about these issues, you're going to learn...more about yourself and things that you come in contact with every day.' This student's quote describes that diversity and social justice issues are important in an English class because those issues are a part of students' lived experiences. By incorporating such issues into the class, students are educated not only on how to be researchers and writers, but also on the implications of researching and writing on ideas that can make a positive difference in the world. To both of the authors, this is meaningful literacy: to engage students in reading or writing that involves real world issues.

Much research has been conducted on how diversity and social justice issues impact the experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers in K-16 teacher education programs across the United States (e.g., Ayers, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003; Nieto, 2004). In particular, there has been extensive discussion about the way teachers prepare to work with students from different backgrounds and inject issues of diversity and social justice into teaching and learning curricula (i.e., Gay, 2002; Nieto, 1999; Sheets & Chew, 2002). As awareness grows about embracing diversity, multiple identities, and cultures, so, too, does the conversation on issues of diversity and social justice (Amevuvor,

¹ The first phase of this project was published in the *JPD* in March 2015.

2014; Johnson, 2006; Park, 2015). However, there is a lack of research on how undergraduate students understand and experience these issues in the context of their mandatory university writing courses. Researching and writing about diversity and social (in)justices becomes critical as the US demographic shifts include individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, language, religious, class, and other social category backgrounds. Though critical, researching and writing about these issues can be challenging for undergraduate students for two reasons. One is that topics related to social (in)justice can be uncomfortable to tackle. The second is that a course in research writing can be overwhelming due to the nature of conducting research and the ways in which many undergraduate students think about research as being boring and dry.

As a way to overcome the perceived tensions that may be connected to conducting research, Park re-envisioned the nature of conducting empirical research to include topics that the students would want to explore. She thought specifically about topics that students would connect to personally while also preparing them to be responsible citizens. Hence, the research writing course was designed to teach academic research skills through topics regarding diversity and social (in)justices. Park drew inspiration in this class from her own experiences as a heterosexual, professional, Korean-American woman who claims a non-native English speaking (NNES) status. Therefore, research conducted in Park's undergraduate Research Writing course is rooted in the work of intersectional relationships that magnify our complex identities (e.g., race, gender, class, culture, language, sexuality, disability, age, etc.) (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Dill & Zambrana 2009; Goodman, 2001; Wijeyesinghe, 2001).

Intersectionality research explores how multiple layers of identities work together to unpack our lived experiences. According to scholars focusing on intersectionality, the 'intersectional' perspective was first used in legal analysis of violence against women, particularly women of color. Specifically, through 'intersectionality,' the experiences of social identities are examined within interlocking social structures of domination and inequality. Okazawa-Rey and Kirk (2010) discuss the ways our identities are meshed in with our individual self (micro level), our community and other contexts that further define our identities (meso level). They also provide insight into how the stratifying, stereotyping, and marginalizing of our identities has much to do with the classification of social categories and how those categories tend to promote structural inequality in macro and global levels. For instance, understanding Park's lived experiences as a heterosexual, professional, Korean-American woman who claims a non-native English speaking (NNES) status is not enough. Park seeks to explore how her race, gender, sexuality, class, and language within larger structures of privilege and marginalization are perceived. In other words, the intersectionality perspective allows us to understand how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived and treated by others. Our multiple identities interact and reinforce each other.

The point of learning about and questioning diversity and social (in)justice issues, is to raise consciousness about ourselves and the others around us as a way to understand, accept, and appreciate the diversity of cultural pluralism. However, according to Goodman (2001) and others who do social justice work, we cannot simply end with raising our consciousness about our differences and celebrate those differences. Goodman (2001) advocates for the following:

Social justice involves addressing issues of equity, power relations, and institutionalized oppression. It seeks to establish more equitable distribution of power and resources so that all people can live with dignity, self-determination, and physical and psychological safety. It creates opportunities for people to reach their full potential within a mutually responsible, interdependent society. Working toward social justice requires changing unjust institutional structures, policies, and practices and challenging the dominant ideology. Social justice

educators seek to create the conditions required for a true democracy, one that includes the full and equal participation of all groups in the society. (pp. 4-5)

Therefore, while one of Park's main purpose in designing the Research Writing course was to raise awareness of identities prevalent in our lives, it was not the ultimate goal (Park, 2013). Rather, the ultimate goal was to recognize the need to navigate our identities within this continuum to continuously promote equity and mutual interdependence in and out of the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in which we live.

With this as the main purpose, Park designed the course and Amevuvor assisted in conducting the research after the students received their grades for the course. Park designed this course to provide space for Research Writing students to conduct a social justice inquiry project that would heighten their awareness of what it means to delve deeper into issues that intersect our gendered, racial, ethnic, classed, linguistic, and other social identity categories. Each student designed and implemented a social justice inquiry project in the Research Writing course as a way to explore, understand, and appreciate the real-life situations visible and invisible in their disciplinary programs.

The Study Context and Positionality of Critical Inquirers

Western Pennsylvania University (WPU)² is one of the 14 universities in the PASSHE (the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education), and the only one awarding doctoral degrees in the State System. Due to the geographical location of WPU and its identity as one of the PASSHE institutions, many applicants come from towns all over the state of Pennsylvania. There were 11, 928 undergraduates enrolled during the 2008-2009 academic year, and 12, 291 undergraduates³ enrolled during the 2009-2010 academic year. These numbers illustrate WPU to have the highest undergraduate enrolling in the entire state system of higher education in the past two years. Though its tuition is competitive in the PASSHE, it is much lower than four state-affiliated universities in Pennsylvania (i.e., The Penn State University, University of Pittsburgh, Lincoln University, and Temple University). Inevitably, all these undergraduates come through the English Department housed in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences to take all two⁴ English composition courses⁵, which are required for graduation. Hence, the English department is responsible for providing seminal and foundational work in English composition for undergraduate students.

Park Shares

As a teacher-scholar in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) making steady teaching and scholarly contributions in the areas of linguistic and cultural diversity in second language teacher education, I have never imagined myself to step into a Department of English as a faculty member. My teacher education preparation in the College of Education housed in a Research I institution had positioned me as a scholar to teach about and conduct research around preparing TESOL professionals. As such, I have always claimed a teacher-educator identity committed to working with pre-/in-service teachers from diverse backgrounds, especially the ones claiming a non-native English speaking (NNES) status, working with English language learners (ELLs). My myopic view of my professional and research agenda was pleasantly challenged when I secured a specialist position as a TESOL

² All names and institutions other than the authors are pseudonyms.

³ The 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 undergraduate enrollment numbers were provided by this university's admissions office.

⁴ For undergraduates placed in 'Basic Writing' course would need to take a total of three English composition courses as a part of their undergraduate English requirement.

⁵ College writing and research writing.

education faculty in the English Department at a teaching university. In the English Department, I was once again reminded that I belonged to a field that has often been placed into a marginalizing academic discipline (Park, 2012), being in the midst of academic and professional disenfranchisement due to its wavering positionality within a variety of departments in academia: Education, English, Linguistics, or Foreign Languages and Literature. The diversity within TESOL programs' 'academic' home has been perceived as a way to further disenfranchise disciplines (Park, 2012). Added to this societal level discourse about TESOL, teaching English as a second/foreign language is often labeled as remedial service learning program for students and teachers whose first language is not English. With this type of marginalizing discourses pervasive in both academic and professional communities, I began my tenure track faculty position with some apprehension of being positioned in English.

As a graduate faculty hired to teach TESOL related courses, I was also required to successfully teach undergraduate writing courses. Even though I have designed and taught writing courses in a community college, I have never been given a chance to teach First/Second Year College (F/SYC) students coming from a variety of academic disciplines. My commitment as a teacher-scholar promoting issues of diversity and social justice meant that I wanted to be more creative about making the required Research Writing attractive to undergraduates, at least the ones who end up being in my sections. Promoting writing across the curriculum, I envisioned the course to connect to their undergraduate majors as one way to make the course contents more meaningful for them. Most of my undergraduates were racially homogeneous as well as First Generation college attendees so that not only diversity was almost non-existent but also they probably came into the university with very little understanding of how academic communities operate and socialize their students (Casanave, 2008). With this contextual knowledge, I was driven to provide a space for myself as a teacher-scholar and my undergraduates to (re)learn how our multiple identities as members of sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts impact the ways in which we construct our worldviews. An added layer of appropriate meaningfulness came with having my students connect their undergraduate major areas with issues of diversity and social justice.

Amevuvor Shares

My own journey as a critical inquirer of social (in)justice largely began during my undergraduate career after I entered into a biracial, multicultural marriage. At that point, I began to see how my privilege had blinded me to the inequality and discrimination that others experience based on their immigration status, socially determined race, and language. Thus, like many of the students in this study, my own experiences with racism and discrimination acted as a starting point from which I began to understand social (in)justices on more than just a surface level. My time in the master's in TESOL program provided me with an outlet to discuss my own feelings of frustration and pain related to social (in)justice while also providing me with the opportunity to conduct research based on those experiences and the social (in)justice issues, just as the participants in the study did. Choosing a thesis research topic that revealed the experiences of Ghanaian international students' experiences, including those related to social justice, spurred me on when the research process became difficult because I knew that my project had the potential to make a difference. Coming from this background, I felt a close connection to the participants of this study who also experienced the interconnectedness of their experiences, topics of social (in)justice, and empirical research.

The Research Questions

With the above brief journey into a critical inquiry, the purposes of this study are twofold: (1) analyze how undergraduates perceived the meaning of diversity and social justice within and beyond their academic institution; (2) share their understanding of what research skills were

gleaned from completing this course. Implications for teaching research writing and mentoring undergraduates to do research are discussed.

1. What were the **experiences of undergraduate students** who were engaged in conversations around issues of diversity and social justice in their required university writing courses?
2. What were the students' **perceptions of their learned research skills** upon the completion of this course?

The Course

According to this university's undergraduate catalog, the Research Writing course is designed to 'teach students to read, analyze, and evaluate nonfiction sources and to present the results of their analysis in clear, organized, carefully documented research papers. The focus of reading and research in each section is determined by the instructor...' (WPU, Undergraduate Catalog, p. 115). With this as the background for my course framework, I came up with the following course overview:

In this course, students will engage in a variety of activities designed to hone their research literacy skills using readings related to the diverse issues germane to the lives and experiences of university students from all walks of life. Researching and writing about these topics becomes crucial as we increasingly interact with individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, language, and class backgrounds. The course will equip you with the tools needed to question how ever-changing issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and language shape our experiences. Throughout the semester, students not only will gain a sense of cooperation and community as we work together in exploring the writing and research process, but also will come to understand the importance of promoting issues of diversity and social justice in our lives as agents of change. (Course Syllabus)

The Course Readings Through discussions around readings (both empirical studies and chapter readings focused on ISMs) integrated throughout the course, this class provided an open space to discuss issues around diversity and social (in)justices and hope to expand the students' worldviews. My hope in this course was to assist the students to not only grow as writers but also as researchers in various communities (i.e. disciplinary, family, work, friends) in which they might play a role. It was just as important for the students to raise awareness around what it means to be positioned in our increasingly diverse and multicultural world. With this, Park envisioned that the students would increase knowledge around various political, social, and cultural issues. With this in mind, the ultimate goal of the course was to prepare students to become effective writers and researchers on issues that are urgent and relevant to becoming a responsible world citizen in the 21st century. The chapter readings from the course text coupled with the research articles handpicked by the teacher-scholar served as models for the students' project since these research articles were empirical studies that explicated not only the literature review and other important components, but also a detailed method of inquiry. For many undergraduate students, these research articles and non-fiction books provided good models that help them see a new way of writing research papers and conducting their empirical studies. In other words, writing research became more than regurgitating other people's published work into a synthesis paper. Instead, students were encouraged to do textual analysis through these model texts and reflect on their own writing projects. The students actually went out into the field to collect data (i.e., interviews, observations, surveys, etc.) so that they could analyze the voices of different participants in their studies.

Data Sources & Data Collection Procedures

Although there were many mini-written assignments that led to the semester-long research paper, this article focuses on three major data sources⁶: (1) Diversity Autobiographic Narrative; (2) Final Social Justice Inquiry Project; and (3) an in-depth individual interview.

Diversity Autobiographic Narrative. This writing assignment was due during the second week of the course. The students were asked to respond to the following prompts in a narrative genre: (1) What is your understanding of diversity and social justice? How important is this topic in your life, and what does it mean to promote diversity in our lives? (2) How are different issues of diversity (i.e., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, language, etc.) a part of your lived experience? (3) What questions/issues (connect the questions to your area of major, if possible, or to any social situations that interest you) would you be interested in investigating/exploring in this area?

*Final Social Justice Inquiry Project*⁷. This semester-long project was segmented into components of empirical studies (i.e., Introduction, Literature Review, Method of Inquiry, Results and Discussion, and Conclusion and Reflections) aligned with readings (see Appendix for a list of readings). Each component was discussed in length in class and students also examined models of published materials to understand this research genre. Upon these class-based activities, students were asked to draft a component and bring two copies to class (one for the instructor and another for peer-feedback).

Individual Interviews. Upon completion of their course and receiving their grades, I emailed students (used the BCC to list the students' email addresses) and invited them to participate in this VOLUNTARY research project. A face-to-face interview was conducted with each volunteer participant, which lasted between 30 to 45 minutes per individual. Interview was recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes.

Data Analysis

To understand the perspectives and experiences of undergraduate research writing students, all aforementioned data initially were analyzed inductively in an effort to further comprehend experiences of the undergraduate participants in the current study (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Freire, 2003).

The Participants

About 18 undergraduates from 2009-2011 AY⁸ have been recruited on voluntary basis. Table 1 displays the participants in the larger study that have completed all the assignments for the course as well as participated in the individual interview for the study. In addition, their undergraduate major and their social justice inquiry project titles are included.

⁶ IRB approved and Informed Consent secured from each student participant.

⁷ The course text: M., Blumenfeld, W., Castaneda, C., Hackman, A., Peters, M., & Zuniga, X. (2012) (Third Edition). *Readings for diversity and social justice*. New York: Routledge. Additional empirical, refereed research articles were used (see appendix for the list).

⁸ Fall 2008, Spring 2009, and Fall 2009 sections were interviewed upon completion of their coursework and receipt of their course grade (Spring 2009, Fall 2009, Spring 2010, respectively). At that time, an email invitation was sent out, and I met with each volunteer in my office to discuss the study and sign the informed consent.

Table 1: Overview of the Participants (2009-2011)⁹

Pseudonyms Race / Disciplinary Program	Social Justice Inquiry Project Topics
Franchesca Bulgari African-American / Business & Finance	<i>'The criticisms of the working and stay at home mother? Who should receive more credit?'</i>
James Clark White / Computer Science	<i>'The Pursuit of Women in Computer Science'</i>
Kristen Davis White / Criminology	<i>'Reintegration, recidivism, Re-Entry: Three Rs that don't Pay'</i>
Brandi Golden White / History	<i>'How important is diversity?: A study on students' opinions of history in public education'</i>
Trevor Green White / Comm. Media	<i>'Sexually Violent: Media's First Impression'</i>
Jewel Hanson Bulgarian-American / Math Education	<i>'Mathematics: Only a man's world?'</i>
Harold Harrison White / English/Pre-Law	<i>'Racism in the Law: Fact or fiction?'</i>
Elliott Johnson Mexican American / Spanish & Business Hosp. Mgt	<i>'Perceptions of Mexican-Americans'</i>
Greg Johnson White / Spanish	<i>'I pledge allegiance to humanity'</i>
Kristi McComb White / Disability Services	<i>'Don't judge me!' Discrimination of special needs individuals</i>
Frank McDaniel White / Psychology	<i>'Body modifications vs. the World'</i>
Krystal Phoneix White / Psychology	<i>'How many teenagers does the media kill?'</i>
David Roarke White / Physics & Asian Studies	<i>'Leveling the Playing Field'</i>
Vanessa Timberland White / Interior Design	<i>'Woman's Strength in a New Society'</i>
Melanie Townsend White / Respiratory Care	<i>'Can tunes help improve grades?'</i>

⁹ This table is also presented in Park, G. (2015)'s first phase article published in *Journal of Pedagogic Development*.

Rose Marie Tulip White / Fashion Merchandising	<i>'The Use of Real Fur in the Fashion Industry'</i>
Marie Williams African-American/Communications Media	<i>Diversity in the Media</i>
Nicole Zdunek White / Criminology	<i>'How far are you willing to risk your body?'</i>

The Results: Overall Findings focusing on the Experiences of Undergraduate Students and Perceptions of their Learned Research Skills

Minimal encounters with diversity and social (in)justice issues (7 out of 18)

Of the 18 participants, seven had minimal encounters with diversity and social (in)justice issues prior to taking the English 202 course. For example, Krystal Pheonix noted that she knew some social (in)justice issues existed, but she was not familiar with them. Her main experiences with social (in)justice involved racism that she saw in the dorms. Similarly, she noted that she has heard racial comments made about others since coming to the university. Jewel Hanson, David Roarke and James Clark also noted that they had minimal encounters with racism. James Clark noted that most of his experiences with social justice occurred during the election. Melanie Townsend and Brandi Golden both noted that they had few experiences with social justice because they grew up in a small hometown. Marie Williams noted that this English 202 course provided her with her first experiences with social justice.

Want to enact change (10 out of 18)

As a result of the course, 10 of the 18 participants included in the larger study noted that they wanted to enact change in relation to social (in)justice issues. While some participants, like Harold Harrison and Kristi McComb, wanted to specifically enact change through their future careers, others discussed generally wanting to enact change through the ways that they treated others as well as through raising awareness. Jewel Hanson and Kristi McComb both noted that they would like to educate others about social (in)justice. Krystal Pheonix and Nicole Zdunek mentioned that they would be more careful about how they treat others. Greg Johnson said that he would be more proactive, rather than passive, when he noticed discriminatory behavior, and Marie Williams discussed that she would try to influence others by not giving into discrimination or stereotypes.

Some of the participants felt that their projects in the English 202 course were a major starting point for enacting positive change in relation to (in)justice issues. For instance, Kristen Davis planned to share copies of her research with the warden and with a prisoner where she conducted her research in hopes of helping them think of ways to enact change in the context of her study. Krystal Phoenix noted that the actual research method itself may have enacted some change through raising awareness in that 'almost 105 students from a high school in WMC now knows how the media influences them and how they should not let this happen.' Therefore, although the 10 students' methods of enacting social change may have differed, they were inspired by the class to bring about change as a result of the class topics and research projects.

Improved research skills (16 out of 18)

Many of the participants discussed how the class helped them improve their research skills. In the interviews, the theme 'improved research skills' came up 14 times among the participants. While not all of the participants were specific about how their research skills improved, several

were. Krystal Phoenix and Trevor Green both noted that they learned that they did not have to rely on the Internet. Elliot Johnson also felt that he gained knowledge related to what to look for and how to look up information. Melanie Townsend's experience in the class taught her that there is more to research than reading articles and summarizing them, and she learned that it is okay to include her own opinion. Harold Harrison learned how to better support his opinions and assertions in the papers. Greg Johnson learned how to write the methodology while Vanessa Timberland felt that her definition of research changed because she was able to conduct research on a topic that she was interested in. Krystal Phoenix and Nicole Zdunek also mentioned that the way the class was set up to conduct research was helpful because the project was broken up into smaller pieces. In this way, they learned how to manage their time in research projects and divide research projects into digestible chunks.

Gained knowledge (9 out of 18)

The theme 'gained knowledge' came up in the 18 participants' interviews nine times. Some of the knowledge gained was directly related to social justice issues. Melanie Townsend noted that she was shocked because she thought a lot of progress had been made and that there was more progress in equality than there really is. Kristi McComb also noted that, although her perception did not change extensively through this particular course, the course content did increase the knowledge she had. Krystal Phoenix noted that she gained more knowledge in a specific social justice area, feminism.

Some students noted that they gained more knowledge through their research projects. Melanie Townsend's findings surprised her because she did not realize how different people would be in their learning styles. Kristen Davis came to the realization that there are not enough resources available in prisons to offer real opportunities for inmates. Kristi McComb and Frank McDaniel also noted that the knowledge they gained from their research projects was helpful. Therefore, the students who participated in this study received valuable information through different components of the course, with some feeling that they learned more through their projects and others feeling that they became much more aware of social (in)justice through other class activities.

Research connected to their major and writing about their major (12 out of 18)

Twelve of the participants chose research topics that connected to their major. These participants were Jewel, Kristi, Krystal, Trevor, Harold, Elliot, Franchesca, James, Frank, Kristen, Brandi, and Rose Marie. Some of the students noted in their interviews how writing about a topic related to their major compelled them to enact change within their future fields. Harold Harrison noted that, as a prelaw student planning on being a lawyer, he hopes to be able to alleviate the problem of racism in the law. Kristi McComb was also inspired to take what she learned in her project and apply it to her future career, as she mentioned that the project made her want to work with those with disabilities after college.

Due to the limited space we have for this paper, in what follows, we introduce the eight undergraduate participants in the first author's course study by briefly giving their demographic backgrounds. In the rest of this section, we share bits and pieces from their interview data as well as from their social diversity research project's reflection section as a way to illustrate how they perceived their experiences throughout the research writing course.

Franchesca Bulgari (a pseudonym) was a sophomore, Business and Finance major at the time of this study. As an African-American woman from Philadelphia, she came into Park's class with a lot of understanding about how racial diversity works in the mainstream society. Some of her personal experiences with social (in)justice related to race. She explained how she

experienced ‘standoffish’ behavior at work because she is an African-American. She also experienced social (in)justice related to gender as she watched many women in her family forced to settle as being homemakers and stay-at-home mothers. These women’s experiences made such a strong impression on Franchesca that they served as a motivation for her, not only in the class through her research topic choice, but also in her larger academic life, as she was determined to finish college and be something other than a homemaker. Due to her understanding about how African-American women can be relegated to the back burner in both educational and professional contexts, her diversity research project was entitled, ‘The criticisms of the working and stay at home mothers: Who should receive more credit?’ The following was the extent of her abstract:

In this paper, I took the initiative to research the responsibilities of the working and stay at home mothers. In my introduction, I reflected on the roles of the two mothers from the past to the present. The method of inquiry section analyzed statistics of the women with children in the work force, and what the worth of a stay at home mother would be if she was to get paid. In addition to the numerous interviews with women of children who worked full time jobs as well as women who stayed at home, I found multiple themes from each mother in terms of the criticisms they shared during the interviews. (abstract)

In her reflections, she discusses her experience of having completed an empirical research paper, more importantly, she shares the knowledge and insights she has gleaned from having completed such a study. In what follows, I share some excerpts from her reflections. ‘Before I took this class I have written a lot of papers, however, none have ever been this in-depth with relevant information. Most importantly, it felt good for once to write a paper that I was interested in’ (a reflection excerpt from Franchesca Bulgari). For us, as teachers and researchers, one of our important goals for shaping this research writing course to examine the student selected topics for their final paper was to do just that: It is important for our students to take ownership of their research topic, thus their research paper so that the students could ultimately be more invested in their work as one of many ways to improve their research and writing skills. Moreover, this is what Franchesca states as the knowledge and insights gleaned from researching her topic:

Talking to women that have been faced with a lot of criticism about their choices of how they decided to raise their children, I have grown to respect both the stay at home mothers as well as the working mothers and the roles they play in society. Considering the things I have learned, I think that there are a lot of ignorant people left in this world. Women still face double standards whether they have children or not. Personally I think it’s unfair for the man to have the choice of working or staying at home. And it is usually the norm for the man to work. Women are still to this day held at a different standard than men. In my [research], I found that each mother loves what they do and that each was a single parent. ...Men don’t sacrifice nearly as much [when it comes to bringing children into this world]. To me I think this is social injustice. (an excerpt from Franchesca’s Reflection)

Harold Harrison was a sophomore majoring in history at the time of this course and study initiation. Harold came into the research writing class with a lot of understanding about conducting research and doing literature reviews as well as library research. However, he never had an opportunity to choose his own topic, and that was the most exhilarating part about this course and his diversity research project. He stated, ‘although I had previous experience with original research, this [Research Writing course] offered more guidance through methodology’ (An interview excerpt). He selected a diversity research topic that has impacted people close to him growing up, and he felt that because he was given a choice of

topic, his project was entitled, '*Racism in the Law: Fact or Fiction?*' and shares the abstract below:

In my social justice project, I look at the interaction between law and racism. My introduction poses the question of why there is racism in law and how it affects people. Then in the literature review, I examine sources found on the topic and try to answer the question using historical and present data to show that racism helps to form our law system. After this, I conducted an interview with a civil lawyer and then a connected survey. ... In my results and discussion, I show the three major themes: unfair law and adjudication, geographic impact, and racism's mask. I also tie my interview and my survey to validate the themes. As a social action plan, I plan on creating a workshop with several other students and presenting it to a large university setting in order to spread awareness of this problem. (abstract)

For Harold, his choices of being a history major and planning to attend Law school were fueled by his early childhood experiences with being involved in a custody battle. Therefore, understanding the historical ramifications of how legal issues are positioned in this society, and being able to advocate for children who may get pushed around due to divorce and custody issues are at the center of his professional and academic goals. He stated the following in his research project reflection section:

...It is however the first time I have done any on its [racism] connection to law. As a pre-law student planning on being a lawyer in the future, this project was extremely insightful. I feel it has better prepared me for the occupation and will make me more sensitive to the issue Also, I have learned that ... just educating oneself about an issue is not enough. This is only the first step and then actions must be taken. (an excerpt from Harold's reflection)

Elliott Johnson was a Sophomore double majoring in Spanish and Business Hospitality Management when he was in my Research Writing course and at the time of this study. Due to his experience in the middle school, he was awakened to racial bias and discrimination of Mexican-Americans. His social inquiry project was entitled, 'Hispanics the largest minority in the US and the last in Higher Education: Perceptions of Mexican-Americans.' In his introduction, Elliot explains the dilemma explored in his research:

This research will discuss and explain some issues and factors concerning the education that the Hispanic students are getting at their schools and how these institutions can help this minority group to raise their low level of education. The main goal is to understand the reasons and factors concerning Mexican-Americans students have to pass through in order to succeed in getting a good education. For those few of them who made it to the higher institutions, this research would explain what problems they have to face and how they handle them.

Some possible solutions are presented, as well as an explanation on what the schools in middle and high school level can do to help, and how can college institution can contribute to recruit more Hispanics into their programs. (an excerpt from the introduction of Elliot's research paper)

This research was not Elliot's first step of activism for Hispanic students in education; rather, it was a continuation of activism he had begun in his own family trying to encourage his brother to enter into higher education as well as encouraging high school and middle school students at his school on behalf of his university.

Along with extending his activism for getting Hispanic students into higher education, being in the English 202 class changed his perception of himself as a writer, transforming him from someone who just wanted to get through English classes to someone who was considering becoming an English major. He described his transformation when he said:

I know I can do it and I feel more confident and I even help some of my friends when they're like I need 2 more pages, I don't know what to do for a research paper and I ask them to tell me where they're at and if they tell me I have this and this and this and I've explained that and that and maybe what's the tone of your research and what do you want to say in your conclusion what you want to do, but I'm beginning to sound like my English teacher. (an interview excerpt)

Krystal Phoneix was a sophomore majoring in Psychology at the time of this study. When she came to the English 202 class, she had not experienced and was not aware of many social justice issues. In her interview, she expounded, 'I knew they existed, but I wasn't aware that there was so many social justice issues and now to just walk on campus or go into grocery stores and to just see it, it was brought to my attention.' Perhaps even more importantly, the knowledge Krystal gained related to social justice moved her to want to act the next time she saw social injustice. She expressed, 'if I would ever hear someone say a racist comment I would make them stop and talk about it-you shouldn't say that, just that and I really learned a lot about social justice that I had no idea even existed' (an interview excerpt).

Although her experiences with some social justice issues may have been limited, she still drew inspiration from personal experience for her social justice research paper, entitled '*How Many Teenagers Does the Media Kill?*' It was her cousin's death as a result of suicide that inspired this topic. Her abstract explained her paper further:

Throughout this research paper I will be discussing the relationship between young teen suicide and the media. I am going to be examining how the media plays a major reason as to why teens commit suicide. I have found many articles that give evidence that the media does play a key part in the rise of teen suicide. Research was conducted by distributing 105 surveys to 105 students at a local high school in Westmoreland County. Then 20 surveys were randomly picked out of the 105 to support that the media is a major reason as to why teen suicide is on the rise. (abstract)

Thus, Krystal used her personal experience with teenage suicide in order to investigate how the media's portrayal of celebrities makes teenagers feel inadequate.

As a writer, Krystal grew from believing she was a horrible writer to feeling confident in her writing. She expressed, 'As a writer I grew because I always thought that I was a horrible writer, I never thought of me as a good writer and when I actually did my paper and I read what I wrote, and I thought yeah, pretty good' (an interview excerpt). Therefore, not only was Krystal able to take ownership of what she wrote in the Research Writing class, but she was also able to take pride in what she wrote.

Kristen Davis was a Criminology major intending to become a criminal defense attorney. Her experiences with social justice prior to the class included having a gay friend whose family was unaccepting, watching a biracial friend struggle with others' perception of her identity, and experiencing gender discrimination, including having friends tell her that she was a woman, so she could not be an effective lawyer. It was her interest in criminology that inspired her

research topic on the reintegration and recidivism of ex-convicts. The extent of her abstract explained:

Literature on reintegration and recidivism is reviewed for the purpose of discovering whether more can be done to better the system. There was then a limited study conducted consisting of four participants: an employer, a Sergeant from a county jail, a current inmate, and a released prisoner. The data is collected in the form of interviews, and then analyzed to find some sort of resemblance in response. Being that reintegration is so individualized; each interview is laid out as its own case. Proposed is a method of collaborative measures to better the system. (abstract)

Kristen expressed how powerful it was to conduct her own research in her interview when she said 'it was nice to do a little-like my own thing to be able to say I did this when I interview them when I saw in their faces and that was like something that was extremely power to me like different than anything I've ever done before (interview excerpt).' Kristen's statement emphasizes the power of making learning, researching, and writing meaningful to students. Such meaningful learning made Kristen feel like she was a part of something bigger. She expressed:

As a writer I feel like I finally got to do something like what I did and that was really important like I said before that was something that I probably won't ever forget and the thing was about community of as far as that goes the one guy that I interview he was like real emotional about it and he was second day in prison and he was like I am doing this for me so that maybe when you write this paper I will find something out about myself seeing it in writing and so to hear him say that to me was really important because I'm sending him and the warden a copy of my paper because they wanted to read it. (an interview excerpt)

Thus, participating in this research also actively engaged Kristen in social justice issues in that she recognized the importance of her research not only to herself, but also to her participant and other ex-convicts.

Trevor Green was a Communications Media major at the time of this study. Prior to entering the English 202 course, Trevor's understanding of social justice was largely influenced by discussions he had with friends who were gay, feminist, or interested in censorship. He also expressed that he would have discussions with family and friends related to gay rights and women. Although he had participated in social justice discussions with friends and family, Trevor noted that he did expand his knowledge of social justice, particularly regarding feminism. Although he was a feminist before the class, he explained that he now sees that his view is different than a female would have. He also noted that he did not notice other people's opinions before the Research Writing class. Thus, it was during the course that he realized that there are 'a lot of old-fashioned youth going on about sex and violence in the media, gay and women's rights-I didn't realize-I'm like pro all of that, but there are other people who aren't' (An interview excerpt). Perhaps one way he learned this, particularly regarding sex and violence in the media, was through his research project, which focused on this topic. Trevor explained his topic further in his abstract:

This study used surveys and observations to see if sex and violence should be restricted in the media. By using participants from middle school to parents, they were surveyed about the media's influence on them and the amount of sex and violence in the media. The observations were of television shows that are supposed to be aimed at my participant's

age groups. Everyone experiences media differently and this research is showing just a sample of how people portray its meaning. Also, it is to show that relationship between media and parents. (abstract)

In his reflection, Trevor explained how his research supported some of the assumptions he held regarding sex and violence in the media.

My assumptions that I had at the beginning of the project was that middle school kids would have no idea what's in the media, college kids would understand and not care, and parents would be more controlling about what their children watch. Based off of those assumptions, the middle school students knew a lot about sex and violence, the college kids knew and didn't care, and half of the parents censored what their children were exposed to. Being a no vice researcher, I gained the knowledge about parents and knowing if media is creating violent children, the parents are not doing anything about the issue. (an excerpt from Trevor's Reflection)

Vanessa Timberland was an Interior Design major in her sophomore year at the time of this study. Many of the experiences that she used to relate to social justice topics in this class related to her own experiences as a new student in a small town, where she was excluded because of her 'non-townie' status; experiences related to her mother's health condition; and experiences with racial tensions in her high school. She also experienced stereotypes related to being a woman athlete and firefighter. For example, she was asked on more than one occasion if she was a lesbian, and she was accused of not being girly. These experiences inspired her research topic, how women are athletes are viewed in today's society. Her introduction explains her topic further:

Women have been trying to make an even balance between the sexes for centuries, but, women have faced challenges with this. When a woman does step to the plate in a manly sport, like weight lifting, people assume that she may be a lesbian. My question is why? Why are females judged on being strong mentally or physically? I ask these questions because I was judged, I'm a fire fighter, a weight lifter, and lastly an ice hockey player, but I'm a straight woman. This judgment has not just happened to me but to others I know, like my team-mates on the ice hockey team, who are also called manly by people who don't know them personally. To be honest, from personal experiences I have only had guys ask if I was a lesbian. Why is that? Do men have more to do with this problem of judging athletic women more than women do? In this paper I want to investigate how athletic and physically fit women who are capable of doing 'masculine' sports are viewed in today's society. I hope to raise awareness about the diversity of women. (introduction).

Writing about a topic that related to Vanessa enabled her to enjoy the research and writing process more. She expressed this when discussing what advice she would give other novice researchers:

Enjoy the paper and do a topic that means something to you...and it will just grow, you won't say oh I have to write three pages....because when I was writing, I stopped looking at pages, I would just look at the discussion questions just wrote...and I ended up having, I think, five pages which was not me.' (an interview excerpt)

Vanessa's ability to contextualize the social justice issues discussed in the class within her own life and experiences enabled her to take more from the class than research writing abilities. She expressed this when she said, 'It was more based around learning about, I think learning

about yourself. If you learn about these issues, you're going to learn about, you know, more about yourself and things that and things that you come in contact with everyday' (excerpt from interview). Vanessa's words express what should be the core component of any English research class in that it should be as much about students making meaning about the world around them as much as learning new writing skills and gaining knowledge about whatever topic they are researching.

Nicole Zdunek was a Sophomore in Criminology whenever she took English 202. Before the class, Nicole did not have a lot of previous experiences with social justice. Therefore, she expressed that being a part of the Research Writing class broadened the scope of social (in)justice in her life. She expressed, 'when you think social justice issues you don't really think, you just think of one thing, but there are actually all kinds of things, so I'm sure we do it everyday-it's just something that we don't realize' (interview excerpt). She also grew in her understanding of social justice issues through group presentations. For instance, she expressed how a group presentation brought the issue of stereotypes to her attention. When it came to her own personal research project, though, she drew inspiration from her aunt's battle with and death from melanoma. She explained her research topic through her abstract:

My social justice project is about the relationship between melanoma cancer and tanning, whether it is in the natural sunlight or in tanning beds/booths. Throughout this paper I looked at other researchers articles and compared what they said with the original research I did. I interviewed two women: a high school student and a college student. Both women I interviewed had very different views on tanning, which helped in the conclusion of my paper. The ultimate conclusion I came to was that no matter what information you give someone about the consequences of tanning, they will tan or not tan based on what they believe. (abstract)

Nicole explained that this was her first time learning about and conducting original research, which at first intimidated her. However, having the research paper broken into parts prevented her from getting too overwhelmed. She also felt that conducting interviews was easier than she expected. Overall, Nicole described the research experience as positive when she said, 'The feeling that I have after doing my own original research is a good feeling. I feel like that I have gotten the point across that tanning in the sun and using tanning beds/booths is a bad idea and is not healthy' (an excerpt from Nicole's Reflections). Therefore, conducting research that was personally significant was meaningful to Nicole because she could make a difference in a topic that was very relevant to her.

Discussion of Themes

In order to organize some of the findings in this study, we present them through themes. The first theme that is discussed is students' engagement with social (in)justice in a required undergraduate writing course. This theme highlights students' experiences with and increased understanding of knowledge related to social (in)justice. Then, since this particular class used empirical research as a way to engage students in social justice activism, we present our findings related to incorporating empirical research in a required research writing course.

Students' Engagement with Social (In)justice in a Required Undergraduate Writing Course

There is no doubt that creating a research writing class's curriculum around social (in)justice can be risky because of the sensitive nature of the topics as well as because the topic of social (in)justice may seem irrelevant to students who expect only to learn how to write a research paper. Considering that seven of the eighteen participants expressed that they had minimal encounters with diversity, it is not surprising that some of the experiences and reactions were

strong, such as with Melanie Townsend, who said she was shocked by how little progress there was in social (in)justice topics.

Despite some students' unawareness about social (in)justice, they were able to draw on their previous experiences with the intersectionality of identities related to social (in)justice. For instance, Franchesca Bugari chose to write about the experiences of women because of her previous experiences seeing women relegated to the backburner. Likewise, Nicole Zdunek Krystal Phoneix, and Elliot Johnson all indicated that their previous experiences influenced their topic choices and experiences in the class. Thus, this course's topics on social (in)justice became meaningful to the students in that it utilized Dewey's (1938/1968) belief that 'education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience-which is always the actual life-experience of some individual' (p. 89).

In this particular course, students' experiences were incorporated through discussions, group projects, and empirical research. Specifically, their research projects allowed the students to apply what they learned in the classroom to the world outside the classroom. This form of writing project allowed students to, as McComiskey (2000) expressed, look at the world socially, which benefits students by showing them how their writing can make an impact beyond academic boundaries. In conducting their empirical research about social (in)justice, the students were able to enact change rather than just talk about social (in)justice and hypothetical ways to enact social change. The research took the students' understandings of social (in)justice topics to another level as they began to engage in becoming responsible citizens who enacted social change through their research projects. Therefore, including an empirical research project in a research writing class that focused on the topic of social (in)justice allowed the students to not only conduct research that was meaningful to them, but to also become actively involved in enacting social change, as was seen with the experiences of Krystal Phoenix, Kristin Davis, and Harold Harrison. Each of them felt that their projects could make a difference, whether by raising others' awareness during the actual research process or through sharing the findings of their research with relevant communities who could make changes based on those findings.

Incorporating Empirical Research in a Required Research Writing Course

Since this course was a research writing course, it was important to gauge that the students did gain and improve on their research skills. Considering that improving research skills was brought up 14 times among the participants of this study, it could be implied that the students did in fact gain important research skills through this class. This finding supports Portillo, Rudes, Sloas, Hutzell, and Salamoun (2013) who also found that conducting independent research enforced the overall goals of the class.

Conducting their own empirical research also provided students with important research skills. The experiences of Krystal Phoenix, Trevor Green, Melanie Townsend, Greg Johnson, and Vanessa Timberland indicate that the students had positive experiences directly related to conducting empirical research. For instance, Greg Johnson learned to write a methodology, which was one of the key components of the empirical research that students had to include in their research papers. By creating and executing a methodology, students became more than just research paper writers as they became real researchers, conducting research that enabled them to choose a topic important to them and answer the 'So what' question, which makes the research meaningful (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Furthermore, as the students engaged in their own research projects, they became experts in the realm of their own topics, moving them from acting as students to being teachers and students simultaneously, which makes

their educational and writing experiences more significant than if they had only engaged in a banking activity (Freire, 2005).

Considering all of the above benefits of having students conduct their own social (in)justice empirical research in an undergraduate research writing class, if there is one thing the experiences of students in this undergraduate research writing class indicated, it is that the days of leaving social (in)justice discussions and projects to sociology classes needs to be put behind us. This class has clearly shown that students can successfully learn important research writing skills while simultaneously learning about social (in)justice. With that said, it is important to remember that students may be unfamiliar with conducting empirical research., McComiskey (2000) alluded to the idea that incorporating writing projects that use writing as a social act can be disadvantageous in that it is more difficult than traditional ways of writing, such as prewriting, writing, and revising. This is particularly true when introducing undergraduate students to empirical research, which involves developing research questions, methodologies, analyzing data, and discussing findings concisely. Because getting undergraduate students to conduct their own research and write about it in a required writing class is a great undertaking for both the teacher and the novice-researchers, it is helpful to break the project down into smaller components so that the novice-researchers do not feel overwhelmed. Krystal Phoenix and Nicole Zdunek supported this idea when they indicated that breaking the project into components was helpful. In spite of the challenges, incorporating social (in)justice as well as empirical research projects into the classroom is well worthwhile, as it provides students an opportunity to gain knowledge about social (in)justice topics while also applying what they learn through meaningful research, all while learning important research skills. Therefore, we make a call to teachers teaching required undergraduate English courses to be bold in incorporating social (in)justice topics into their classrooms in ways that extend the impact of students' education beyond the classroom.

Implications for Teaching, Research, and Writing Teacher Education

Considering that incorporating social (in)justice topics into a required undergraduate writing course can present teachers with some challenges, we provide the following implications for teachers willing to take on those challenges in order to introduce students to topics that will impact their lives outside of the classroom. Likewise, because this course used an empirical research process as a way to develop students as critical inquirers and researchers, we provide implication for incorporating empirical research in an undergraduate research writing class.

Incorporating Social (In)justice into Required Undergraduate Courses

Considering that many of the research writing students in this study had few experiences with social (in)justice, it is possible that there is a need to incorporate these topics more into required undergraduate courses, even outside of the realm of writing courses, at least in the context where this study was conducted. By incorporating these topics, students are not only learning about the world around them, but they are engaging in an analysis process that forces them to consider how identities are impacted at the micro and meso levels (Okazawa-Rey & Kirk, 2010). Such analysis is not only positive for the students as they develop their analytical skills, but it is also important on a social level in that the students are analyzing something about themselves and the world around them that they will come into contact with every day.

Expanding the Definition of Research for Students in Required Research Writing Courses

Another important implication of this study for research and writing education is that research does not need to be limited to theoretical research. Undergraduate students are more than capable of completing an empirical research project and doing so can enrich and support the goals of an undergraduate course (Portillo, Rudes, Sloas, Hutzell, & Salamoun, 2013). In such a

project, students are able to experience the broader spectrum of the term research in that they not only conduct theoretical research, but they also create and execute their own methodologies. They learn first hand the difference between quantitative and qualitative research. Likewise, they are able to work with raw data and analyze the data that they themselves gathered. All of these experiences allow the students to gain different types of research skills while also providing them with a closer connection to their topic and paper. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to incorporate empirical projects, in which students have control over the topics they investigate, into required research writing classes.

Balancing the workload

There is a valid question of how teachers can balance all of the different components of a writing class like the one in this study, which included empirical research projects along with social (in)justice readings, discussions, and presentations. To that end, it is obvious that having a clear plan and breaking down the different components of the course can help both the teacher and students successfully incorporate and complete each of the different components of the syllabus. Several students in this study noted that breaking up the project was helpful to them, and none of the students noted that the coursework was too much for them, which indicates that, at least in the context of this study, breaking the coursework into manageable chunks helped students manage their time in the project.

Some may still argue that it is unethical to require students to conduct so much work for a required course typically outside of students' majors. However, we would argue that including both social (in)justice and empirical research components in a research writing class is imperative because students will encounter research writing as well as social (in)justice often, no matter what their major is. Therefore, it is important that students be exposed to these topics and research skills.

Furthermore, there is always room for negotiation with students. If they feel the workload is too much for the class, the teacher can negotiate with them about what project could be taken out or modified in order to ease students' workload. Such discussions empower students and allow them to experience social justice first hand by allowing them to see that their position as students does not marginalize them from making decisions in the class. Such negotiation would expose students to social (in)justice as Goodman (2001) writes about it in that they would see how 'social justice educators seek to create the conditions required for a true democracy' (pp. 4-5).

In the end, it is only important that students gain experiences related to these issues and skills; it does not matter in what ways that exposure occurs. There are many ways to begin discussions on social (in)justice or to get students engaged in their own research in an undergraduate writing classroom. The point is that opportunities for both expanded research and social (in)justice discussions are needed in order to raise students' awareness about the social (in)justice issues of the world they live in and how they can combat social injustice through research.

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