Teaching Social Justice in an Information Literacy Course: An Action Research Case Study

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Abstract: This paper presents a brief action research case study of a graduate-level information literacy course. Approaches used to teach social justice concepts in this course and evidence of achieving both information literacy and social justice outcome goals are examined and described. Results suggest that social justice course orientations enhance and expand information literacy outcomes.

Introduction

Modern library and information science (LIS) is a field that includes researchers and practitioners who actively promote education, community building, inclusiveness, and concern for under-served populations (e.g., Durrance & Fisher, 2005; Landry & Kuglitsch, 2009; Pyati, 2009). The phrase "social justice" has become an important umbrella term for describing these humanitarian agendas, and observers of the field are calling for additional explorations of social justice in a variety of LIS contexts (e.g., Britz, 2008; Burns, 2011; Samek, 2008). One such context that is currently under-examined is the teaching of social justice concepts in LIS courses.

In this paper, I present a brief action research case study of an information literacy course that I teach entitled "Information Resources for Development Professionals". Given this course's explicit social justice outcome goals, I hope this case study of my experiences in teaching and assessing this course will be useful to other LIS educators, and will encourage additional dialogue in the field about the social justice aspects of information literacy instruction.

Background

Information Resources for Development Professionals (course code MGD120) is a foundational course of the Master of Arts degree in Global Development and Social Justice (MA-GDSJ) offered by the Center for Global Development at St. John's University (New York). The definitive social justice orientation of the degree is reflected in the mission of the Center: "...to invest in educational programs and activities that promote the common good and the advancement of the human community, where the dignity of the human person is at the foundation of every process of development" (St. John's University, 2012a).

This programmatic social justice orientation attracts graduate students from all over the world, many from United Nations-designated "developing countries". The Rielo Institute for Integral Development (RIID), an active co-sponsor of the MA-GDSJ, hosts the face-to-face courses of this mixed-mode program at its facilities in Rome, Italy, and awards twelve full scholarships to applicants from any country needing financial assistance (Rielo Institute for Integral Development, 2012).

The primary purpose of MGD120 is teach students information and research skills necessary for their current and future academic and professional work. It introduces information resources in a variety of subjects and formats appropriate for the curriculum, which includes courses in human migration and trafficking, poverty studies, NGO leadership, development economics, food security, peace building, public health, Catholic social thought, project management, and a final research-intensive capstone course. Most of these resources are available via the online collections of the St. John's University Libraries (St. John's University, 2012b).

There is genuine need for information literacy instruction in the MA-GDSJ degree program. Approximately half of the entering students have never had prior access to an extensive academic digital library, nor are they familiar with distance learning courseware, scholarly social media, or the graduate research conventions of a North American university. In an intense seven-week schedule, MGD120 strives to quickly bring students up to speed with the technology, information literacy, and research skills necessary to engage in an MA program that relies heavily on distance learning pedagogy.

Since MGD120 is a foundation course of the MA-GDSJ program, I actively and explicitly position the learning, use, creation, and sharing of authoritative information resources *as social justice activities that promote community and global development*. This is a somewhat unusual stance for an information literacy course, but one that is in synch with the mission of the program, and with the implicit social justice values of library and information science.

In the summer of 2012, the MA-GDSJ program is graduating its sixth cohort, and will be welcoming Cohort 7 students to Rome. After six years, MGD120 has reached a maturity level that invites reflection and assessment of its information literacy and social justice outcomes. In this study, I considered the following exploratory questions:

- What approaches and techniques are successful in teaching information literacy skills within a social justice framework?
- What course assignments are useful indicators that I and my students are achieving both information literacy and social justice outcomes goals?

Action Research as a Framework for Reflection and Assessment

At the outset of this project, I had to acknowledge that social justice in LIS is a diverse concept without a universally-accepted definition (Mehra, Rioux, & Albright, 2010). Because of this multidimensionality, social justice course goals do not lend themselves well to examination using positivist approaches; it was best to look to other means for reflection guidance and for assessing the pedagogical processes and social justice outcomes of MGD120. Indeed, Suskie (2009, p. 183) notes that examining the "ineffable" qualities of course outcomes poses methodological challenges to the researcher, who when tasked to look closely at such outcomes, must reach for flexible and robust methods that go beyond positivist approaches.

I also had to acknowledge that MGD120 as a phenomenon occurred and evolved in a natural way, and after six years, the MGD120 record is quite extensive and diverse. It includes physical and electronic artifacts such as syllabi, courseware posts, email exchanges, course notes, assignment submissions, files, grades, and rosters, as well as affective and experiential variables such as my own memories of chats with individual students, classroom discussions, student presentations, planning sessions, and the various challenges and rewards of teaching any course. As one would expect, each of the six classes was unique, with different students from different places with different interests and challenges.

For practical reasons, I ultimately chose to use an *action research* approach, which allows for reflective, iterative analysis of cases such as MGD120. Greenwood & Levin (2007) describe action research as pragmatic, naturalistic social analysis that is useful in small-scope research contexts where instrumentalist and empiricist approaches are inappropriate. Action research also has long been used by teachers who want to study, reflect, and report on their own teaching (Elliott, 1991). Suskie (2009, p. 13) adds that all course assessment is "a form of action research, a distinct type of research whose purpose is to inform and improve one's own practice rather than make broad generalizations."

Furthermore, action research is grounded in a philosophical posture that is in alignment with MGD120. Reason & Bradbury (2006, p. xxii) characterize the method as "strongly value oriented, seeking to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the wider ecology in which we participate."

Thus, I prepared the following case narrative by leveraging the advantages of action research methods to reflect upon and assess MGD120.

Case Narrative

◆ *What approaches and techniques are successful in teaching information literacy skills within a social justice framework?*

In the first few cohorts of MGD120, it was a challenge to position the learning, use, and sharing of authoritative information resources *as social justice activities*. Initially, it seemed awkward to talk about library resources in this way. Gradually I learned to begin the class by simply asking the students two key questions:

  o   What are the origins of "social justice"?
  o   What exactly does "social justice" mean to you?

A significant number of MGD120 students are employed as teachers, health professionals, program officers, lawyers, clergy, and social workers. As members of service professions who are typically motivated by the needs of others, they often say they regard social justice as being fairly self explantory. Typical comments:

- "It refers to a fair, peaceful, free society."
- "It means people are given what they need to live."
- "It's when everyone has equal rights."

After this initial discussion, my librarian colleague, Kathryn Shaughnessy, and I usually spend time showing the students some basic electronic databases available through the St. John's Library website (e.g., Ebscohost, ProQuest Direct, JSTOR, Project Muse, Political Science SAGE Fulltext, etc.). We also show them various Campus Guides, and highlight one that includes extensive lists of authoritative resources on social justice and global development (Shaughnessy, 2012). To encourage students to examine these resources, and to get them accustomed to working with distance learning courseware, I assign short homework exercises in which they are required to carefully read these sets of information resources and to post comments on the courseware discussion board responding to basic questions about their utility. I call these read-review-and-respond posts.

Once I've read the posts and I'm satisfied that the students have a basic grasp of this initial set of online resources, I again take up the social justice questions in class and online, asking probe questions such as: Where did the phrase "social justice" come from? Why do we deserve social justice? Who or what gives us the right to social justice?

I tell the students to do some research on these questions using the information resources that my colleague and I recently demonstrated for them. In most of the MGD120 cohorts, the discussions that emerge are extraordinarily rich. By being instructed in these resources and by being given the opportunity to offer opinions, students begin to engage in the complexity of the term "social justice" with the benefit of authoritative documents and backup material.

As the MA-GDSJ program is sponsored by a Catholic university, a significant number of students, regardless of their faith, reach for a Catholic framework in order to discuss the nature of social justice. Basing their arguments on such documents such as *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005) and *Rerum*

Novarum (Pope Leo XIII, 1891)*,* students often argue that social justice is linked to individuals' innate human dignity. Some illustrative comments:

- "Human beings are just that: human beings! We have value as individuals and we have the right to dignity and we have the right to social justice because we are humans and we are alive and we belong to a society. Leo's reasoning is quite clear."
- "Even though I'm not religious, the idea of human dignity certainly makes sense to me. It [social justice] starts with the dignity of the human person and grows from there..."
- "Valuing the individual no matter who he is—that's something to aspire to, certainly.   But we've got a lot to work to do, yes?"

In some cohorts, students addressed my questions about social justice with legal documents that they already were aware of, such as their home country's constitution. As part of a government sources exercise, together as a class we confirmed that many national legal documents are available online in official languages and in English.

It was particularly interesting for me to participate in student-led discussions of the ways social justice was conceptualized within various political documents and legal cultures.   Some of the more memorable conversations noted the following:

- Article 170 of Brazil's 1988 constitution uses the terms "dignity" and "social justice" in reference to the country's economic order (Political Database of the Americas, 2008).
- The 1947 Italian constitution affirms the value of the individual; Article 11 refutes aggressive war and Article 27 outlaws the death penalty (City of Florence, Italy, n. d.).
- The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union includes specific sections on dignity, freedom, equality, citizen's rights, and justice (European Parliament, 2000).
- India's constitution (Article 23, 24) expressly forbids human trafficking, exploitative labor, and child labor (Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, 2011).

Moving on from these and other initial discussions of social justice, I start a series of online modules in which students learn about information organization schemes and retrieval techniques (e.g., subject headings, keyword searches, OPACs, etc.). They also engage with various types of information resources (e.g., specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias, journal articles, maps, individual experts, bibliographies, etc.). I have found that Mann's (2005) *The Oxford Guide to Library Research* is an inexpensive, concise, and accessible reference for this course, although I supplement the book with modules and discussions of emergent organization tools (e.g., social tagging) and sources such as blogs, RSS feeds, video/audio/slide sharing services, etc.

As we explore information resources in MGD120, almost invariably some students will express enthusiasm about the breadth of academic and professionally relevant materials available via the digital holdings of the St. John's University Library. As mentioned previously, a signficant number of

students in the MA-GDSJ program have never had any formal information literacy instruction, nor have they had access to an extensive digital library. As these students become proficient with library materials through their work in MGD120, they are quick to make connections between their own development work and access to information. A few illustrative comments:

1. "I had no idea all of these things [resources] existed and were available! I wish I would have had access to ProQuest when I was working on my thesis, but I don't think many universities in Ghana have these services, as they are probably too expensive, and our libraries are mostly filled with books. There is a lot of information that I can use in my job as a case worker too."

2. "I'm so glad to learn about Medline/PUBMED! This is extremely useful...and free!"

3. "Using the OPAC, I see the National Library of the Philippines has some specialized encyclopedias that I could use. That's good to know, even though I will need to go to Manila to access them, which is a bit far for me."

These comments provide an opportunity for me to ask the students about the relationship between access to information and development, and whether or not access to information is a social justice issue. As a part of exploring this issue, I direct the class' attention to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948). As students read this document (particularly Article 19) and consider the information access challenges that some of their course colleagues experience, they are typically unanimous in affirming that access to information is indeed both a social justice and development issue.

◆   *What course assignments are useful indicators that I and my students are achieving both information literacy and social justice outcomes goals?*

Certainly quality class discussion is an indicator of achieving course goals. As indicated above, most students in MGD120 satisfactorily demonstrate information literacy skills and understanding of social justice concepts via their extensive in-class exchanges and courseware discussion posts.

Because I position the use, creation, and sharing of authoritative information resources as social justice activities in this course, I also assign hands-on projects in which students create information products (based on authoritative resources) using PowerPoint (or OpenOffice Impress), RefWorks (or Zotero) citation management software, blogs, and social media. These assignments give students practice in authoring information resources on topics of their choosing. Given the social justice orientation of MGD120 (and the MA-GDSJ program) selected topics usually are related to a social justice issue in one's home country, a UN Millenium Development Goal, a current service constituency, or some other relevant and/or emergent issue.

Many of these projects are impressive, demonstrating a keen sense of social justice combined with sophisticated information literacy skills. Some of

these projects are quite specialized, and are instrumental in raising awareness of social justice issues that may be overlooked. Among the more notable projects:

- An English/Spanish blog that documents efforts to stop a strip mining project in Panama that is displacing the native Ngäbe tribe. The student author is a leader in the advocacy movement;
- A shared PowerPoint presentation that calls attention to the discrimination and poverty faced by war-displaced Afro-Carribeans in Colombia. The student author is a social worker;
- A Picasa-based photo essay on children who live in Payatas, a waste dump outside of Manila, Philippines, where people earn a meager living picking through the trash for items to sell. The student author/photographer is a volunteer;
- A shared Zotero bibliography on articles (in multiple languages) about trafficked women from Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe who are forced into prostitution in Western Europe. The student author is a case worker;
- A shared PowerPoint presentation profiling the healthcare system of Timor-Leste. The student author is a Red Cross nurse;
- A blog on innovations in educating young girls in rural Cameroon. The student author is an elementary school teacher there.

Some of these projects are carried on into the student's professional work, where they are utilized by his/her colleagues and others. Occasionally, these assignments evolve into the student's final capstone projects. In both instances, they are a source of pride for both the students and me.

Conclusions

Although this first effort at reflecting on and assessing the information literacy and social justice outcomes of MGD120 is limited and exploratory, it was quite valuable for me to go through this action research exercise. The sophistication of student interactions, discussions, and projects suggests that a social justice orientation does enhance and expand information literacy outcomes in qualitative ways. This is very encouraging to me personally, and I hope this short case study is useful to other instructors of information-rich curricula who are looking for ideas on how to incorporate social justice elements into their teaching.

Acknowledgements

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