What Does Social Justice Understanding Look Like?

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The SoTL Commons
A Conference for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning

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Goals for Session

Our goals are to

- Illustrate the use of Emergent Theme Analysis
- Illustrate the usefulness of this project for outcomes assessment of the qualitative aspect of educational objectives (for example Social Justice)
- Discuss applications of this research technique in your disciplines or campus settings
Research Question

- What does evidence of student understanding of SJ look like, and how do we recognize different levels of student understanding of Social Justice?
How is This Useful?

- Outcomes assessment of hard-to-measure learning objectives
- Bridge the gap between institutional understanding and student understanding of Social Justice
- Rethink our Social Justice course guidelines
- Inform our Core Curriculum
Prompt #1:
How would you define Social Justice?

Prompt #2:
In what specific ways have your experiences or your education shaped this definition? Illustrate with at least two personally significant moments or experiences that influenced your understanding of Social Justice in action.
Methodology

- 61 essays over three courses
- Qualitative analysis of emergent themes
- Eleven preliminary themes
- Subsequent reading: definition + five themes
- Collated excerpts for each theme
- Analyzed individual themes to investigate levels of understanding
Results: Definition (61 total)

18--Limited grasp of the concept of Social Justice

Social justice is the justified means of treatment or actions of a person in society in response to a situation.

Maintaining a positive community that intends to eliminate deviance whenever present is the underlying meaning of social justice.
Results: Definition (61 total)

36--able to define in a limited way; vague

Social justice is . . . doing our best to treat all of our peers with the same respect and ensure that the same opportunities are presented to each and every person in a particular social setting.
My personal definition of social justice is the act of striving for equality of all, including breaking the boundaries of race, economic status, disability, gender, or any other fabricated limits our society still honors. There are steps that have been taken to rectify the situation, but I still feel that we have a long way to go.
Results: Emergent Themes

- Ethical framework (39)
- Equality (33)
- Action/change (23)
- Service (21)
- Individual responsibility (9)
In the winter of my senior year, a massive flood destroyed virtually all of the small city of Vernonia. . . and a group of fifty students decided to help out the people in need. My classmates and I traveled to the house of an elderly woman who was wheel chair-ridden. During the flood, the insulation under her house was severely damaged, and the helpless woman was without warmth in the winter in the aftermath of a disaster. Subsequently, my classmates and I spent the larger portion of the day in the crawl space under her house, pulling sopping wet . . . insulation out to prepare for replacement insulation.
This last summer I went with 12 other people, mostly GU students, to Alpuyeca, Mexico. We went to work with the local habitat for humanity affiliate. In Mexico I saw a lot of concrete block structures, small in size, with dirt floors, and no running water. This is a place where there is no fair start for the children, they can only go to school for half the day and cannot even think of college. This is a place that needs help, and sadly they are still doing better than many.
Emergent Theme: Service (21)
Service Learning (6)

Through my church I went on a retreat to San Francisco’s “Tenderloin” district, which has become a refuge for the forgotten and abused. I had always been told that the homeless on the streets of San Francisco were there because, “they were lazy bums.” However on this particular trip I learned otherwise. Not only did I help serve food to these people who had no food but I also had the opportunity to sit and eat with them. The majority of them never had a chance to succeed; trapped and abused by the system they have become the down-trodden. I myself sat next to a man who went to Boston College and could not afford food because of his student loans and the lack of work. So through this trip I finally was able become truly aware of what social injustice was about by having the problem personified in front of me. Without fair treatment and equal opportunity we’re all vulnerable to the pit falls of society, and that’s what social injustice means to me; making sure everyone always has a chance and has help.
Research Implications

- According to this analysis, some of the categories suggested a variance in responses that look like the beginnings of a range of levels of student understanding of Social Justice.
The distinguishing traits of these students’ understanding of Social Justice do relate to the proposed Social Justice outcomes, which suggests that learning in these Social Justice outcomes can be measured.
Proposed Social Justice Learning Outcomes

Students should be able to

- **Demonstrate self-reflective awareness of themselves and their relationships with others**
- **Demonstrate consciousness to others’ distress and a desire to alleviate it**
- **Demonstrate a sense of right and wrong rooted in justifiable ethical principles**
- **Analyze factors contributing to human suffering and social injustice**
- **Apply collaborative problem-solving skills to social injustice situations**
- **Apply disciplinary skills and interdisciplinary knowledge to social justice issues**
- **Demonstrate commitment to non-violent solutions**
- **Demonstrate a growth in maturity of understanding and actions over the course of their education**
Example: Ethical Principles

Students should be able to demonstrate a sense of right and wrong rooted in justifiable ethical principles.

One of the mantras of Jesuit schools everywhere is “being men and women for others” and that mantra has become quite impactful on my own life. It has spurred me and motivated me to stand up on certain issues and most importantly involve myself in activities that have been extremely impactful on me and others.
Discussion

- Is this methodology useful for outcomes assessment of the qualitative aspect of your educational objectives (for example civic engagement)?
- Are there applications of this research technique in your disciplines or campus settings (for example campus climate)?