

The Development of Critical Thinking Skills: Undergraduate Sociology Students as Teaching Assistants for Prisoners

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OVERVIEW

This research is a follow-up to an article that I published in the April 2003 (Volume 23, Number 2) edition of *Analytic Teaching: The Community of Inquiry Journal* entitled “An Integrated Approach To Teaching Sociology: Merging Theory and Practice When Studying Women Offenders.” It addresses the need to provide experiential learning opportunities for undergraduate students that would result in the enhancement of their critical thinking skills and provide them with a stronger foundation to make informed decisions on complex issues.

Specifically, this article focuses on providing my undergraduate students at Pace University with the opportunity to gain formal experience as teaching assistants for college-level Sociology courses that I teach to women at a maximum-security facility in New York. It differs from the first article’s illustration of the experiences of students who worked as tutors and mentors and highlights instead the advanced critical thinking skills and analytic outcomes gained by both my undergraduate students and the inmates themselves at the correctional facility as a result of their ongoing interaction. The concepts of Mills, Dewey, and Kolb are applied to the learning experiences and changes in perceptions, particularly in my undergraduate students at Pace, as a result of their role as teaching assistants through weekly and a more than previously structured level of interaction. Specifically, I discuss the accounts of two undergraduate students, one of whom (Marcy) served as a teaching assistant for a Sociobiology course, and the other (Vanessa) for a Topics in Sociology course entitled *Women and Work* offered at the correctional institution. Finally, I provide a proven methodology for faculty who are interested in incorporating service learning internship opportunities into their liberal arts and/or social sciences courses at correctional institutions. This service learning experience in turn, serves to both provide positive role models for the inmates as well as invaluable insight for the students on the issues that exist within the prison environment.

APPLICATION OF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES TO STUDENT EXPERIENCES

While it is obvious that teaching at any level of education can serve a multitude of purposes, my philosophical beliefs on undergraduate teaching focus on the importance of three specific areas. The first is for faculty to deliver original information to students in a manner that is both exciting and challenging. The second is to engage students by providing them with alternatives that allow them to test this information via experiential learning. The last is to provide a foundation for graduate school and career preparation. Therefore, my core belief as a university professor is to offer courses with a service-learning component so that students may then apply the theoretical concepts to “real-world situations.” This is certainly a national trend at college and universities who now require students (as does Pace University) to complete a civic engagement component as part of the core curriculum requirement. This initiative is supported by *The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University* in its report entitled “Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities.” Of particular interest to me as an educator is the report’s specific reference to the important role that faculty mentorship, internships, and teaching apprenticeships play in the educational process. My experience, in particular, has been that students who have the opportunity to complete internships, serve as teaching assistants, and receive a strong level of mentorship from university professors are able to more effectively

apply their critical thinking and analytical skills to larger societal issues than those who have not. Further, their ability to make more informed decisions both during their academic training and as they progress in their professional careers is heightened as they transfer new knowledge to real world experiences.

I purport that the incorporation of these opportunities results in positive educational experiences not only for students but also for faculty and the educational institution at large. In fact, the ability of educators to provide students with the tools to make more informed decisions through these techniques allows them, in turn, to make connections between issues and concepts that they may at first be experientially removed from. As C. Wright Mills explains in the *The Sociological Imagination*:

“Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.” (p. 3-4).

Additionally, Mills states:

“The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions (p. 5)...” “The first fruit of this imagination – and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it – is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances.” (p. 5)

When applying Mills’ conceptual orientation to students who are directly involved in a community-setting, I almost always notice a major transformation in their ability to critically apply a pragmatic perspective to their experiences. However, it is my contention that it is crucial for faculty to also debrief with students on a regular basis throughout this process regarding their community interaction. As they relate their experiences, students’ knowledge base is broadened as a natural consequence of processing their feelings and reactions. For Marcy, her experience as a teaching assistant in the Sociobiology course allowed her the opportunity to challenge her own beliefs about offenders as well as understand the women with whom she interacted on a more human level. One of the most interesting experiences that I recall during the start of the semester occurred when I asked the offenders (students) to define the term “sociobiology.” One raised her hand and replied: “it means we are not responsible for our crimes.” Although her reply was received with laughter by the other students, it served as a wonderful ice-breaker upon which I began a discussion. What followed actually turned out to be one of the most enlightening during the semester. After class that evening, Marcy and I discussed what had transpired earlier. She mentioned that she was so taken back by how well-read, articulate, and focused the offenders (students) actually were. Additionally, she mentioned that she was delighted to be part of the experience since it was already helping her gain more insight into the female offender population. As part of her role as a teaching assistant for the course, Marcy was required to read the material for the class and present some of the lectures for class discussion. Her responsibility to learn new material, prepare for class lectures, and interact with a population that she was initially unfamiliar with created a great deal of anxiety for her. Because of this, I was very pleased to hear her feedback and bear witness to her transformation.

When applying Mills’ theoretical perspective to Vanessa’s experience as a teaching assistant in the Women and Work course, it was apparent that she began to develop a clearer understanding of the issues impacting female offenders. Vanessa’s responsibility included preparing class lectures, providing research support to the students, and participating in group activities. Because access to the internet was unavailable to the offenders by law,, my teaching assistants were required to research topics for over twenty-five students in each class. One of the most positive experiences for Vanessa that I recall was a realization that she made early on in the semester in reference to the research interests of the offenders (students). She concluded that their choices revolved around the need to understand their personal life circumstances better and, hence, they viewed the assignments as a positive outlet to channel their thoughts, beliefs, and opinions. Their research interests included but were not limited to legal and ethical issues in the workplace, gender and salary differences, educational and professional

training for employment, differences in socialization of women and men for employment preparation, racial and ethnic differences related to the world of work for women, and differences of work opportunities and training for men and women in prison. Throughout the semester, Vanessa met individually with each of the offenders (students) about their research and formed a very positive relationship with them. In fact, Vanessa mentioned to me on several occasions that after the initial shock of being in a prison facility environment had subsided, she became increasingly less aware that she was actually teaching inmates.

When transitioning from Mills' theory on sociological imagination to Dewey's philosophy of education, the need to reinforce learning outside of the classroom also becomes apparent. In fact, Dewey states in *Democracy and Education* that education should serve as:

“reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.” (p. 89-90).

Therefore, the role of experiential education, in this case with respect to teaching assistants, is to produce this effect. Marcy's experience in the Sociobiology course was also influenced a great deal by her individual meetings with the offenders (students) about their course assignments. Additionally, in my absence, she presented lectures which provided her with the chance to test her interest in teaching as well as re-evaluate her own pre-conceived notions about the offenders. When applying Dewey's concept to Marcy's experience, it is clear that she developed a deeper and more pragmatic view as to the plight of the life circumstances of the women and the reasons for their incarceration. I recall that after one class meeting, Marcy stated: “While I do not condone the crimes that these women have committed, I now realize that at some point they have crossed a fine line between right and wrong due to their life circumstances and in some instances did so only to provide for their families”. Similarly, Vanessa came to the realization that many of the women at the facility were in situations prior to their arrests that involved frequent victimization. She said: “I am overwhelmed by the victimizations that these women have endured including physical abuse, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and ongoing cycles of violence throughout their lives.” These two instances are examples of how students can apply and gain critical insight and knowledge into the material that is presented by professors. While I taught both Marcy and Vanessa in several courses at Pace during which these issues were discussed, their direct interaction with the inmates made these issues “real.” As Dewey states in “My Pedagogic Creed:”

“school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race [of man] and to use his own powers for social ends.” (p.78.)

I purport that the application of Dewey's concepts on education are of utmost importance for undergraduate university level students. I believe that it is especially key for faculty to provide a strong foundation for students to develop objective reactions on issues impacting their lives and those in the larger society. In order to create a more informed and civically-minded society, it is crucial that faculty engage students in activities outside of the classroom that provide them with the chance to test their assumptions and critically explore the reasons underlying those assumptions. Many of my colleagues in the liberal arts and sciences at Pace University support the notion that active learning by students often translates into greater personal empowerment and more solid decision making abilities. I strongly believe in the basic core of Dewey's philosophy based on the fact that I have seen students become transformed by their ability to learn theoretical concepts and simultaneously apply them as part of their collective educational experience. As a result of their work at the prison facility, both Marcy and Vanessa have become examples of students who have developed a more objective and pragmatic approach to issues in which they at first have had limited or no exposure to. The effects of service-learning teaching strategies are also such that faculty become re-energized and more strongly motivated with the teaching of a course that provides a higher level of interaction with students than would otherwise be possible. Kolb's model of experiential learning can be used to link Mills' sociological imagination to Dewey's social institution by providing a model for experiential learning which furthers critical thinking skills and changes in perceptions of both students and faculty.

In addition to applying the theoretical perspective of Mills and the educational philosophy of Dewey to service-learning, it is important to consider Kolb's model of experiential learning. Kolb's model includes four elements: concrete experience, reflection, abstract concepts, and experimentation. When considering the first two elements of Kolb's model, it was evident to me that the experiences of both Marcy and Vanessa would be life-changing events based on our debriefing discussions after each class session. Our discussions revolved

around their reactions to the offenders (students) and how each of the women in our courses was attempting to get their lives “back on track” so that if the option of release became a possibility, their chances of success in the outside would be improved. The experience and ultimately the processing of their experiences provided Marcy and Vanessa with a higher level of awareness of their own preconceived opinions about the inmates prior to their interaction with them. Before enrollment in this course, both Marcy and Vanessa had very little knowledge about the issues associated with the offender population and wanted to participate in order to develop a deeper understanding of these issues. For Marcy, after about four classes, she quickly began to anticipate some of the unusual reactions of the students to particular topics and now understood the underlying reasons why they may have responded in the manner in which they did. In Vanessa’s case, as a result of her interaction with the inmates, she was increasingly able to appreciate the underlying socio-economic hardship that existed prior to their arrests. In turn, the offenders in the two different classes also benefited from the interaction with my Pace students not only in terms of “course content” but also in terms of viewing them as role models.

When considering the last two elements of Kolb’s model, that is, abstract concepts and experimentation, it was clear to me that as a result of their experiences, both of my teaching assistants were able to separate their socially constructed beliefs and associated feelings regarding inmates. Some of these included a predisposition for anger-induced behavior and socio-pathic tendencies, as well as characterization into dangerous societal groups. Instead, they were now able to bring a sense of objectivity to this process. Further, both Marcy and Vanessa spoke so highly of their experiences as part of this course that it resulted in interest from other students. The following is an account of Marcy’s experience as a teaching assistant in her own words.

EXCERPTS FROM MARCY’S ACCOUNT OF HER EXPERIENCE

“When Dr. Franco first approached me about the idea of being a teaching assistant at the correctional institution, I was excited not only for the educational experience, but for the experience in its entirety. Feelings of apprehension set in as the beginning date came closer and I realized that I was actually frightened. When the necessary paperwork for clearance was being completed prior to the start of my experience, I was actually wondering if I had made the right decision.

The day finally arrived and I thought to myself that I must be crazy to agree to do something like this, but it was now too late to back out. I asked Dr. Franco not to go in without me because I certainly did not want to be alone; I didn’t know where I was going and I was fearful that I may wander into the wrong area. The feeling I had when I first walked into the facility was that there was a possibility I may never walk out. I was also aware about being extremely cautious so as to not offend the correctional officers, because they were the people who would protect us in the event of an incident. I remember walking through the gates with Dr. Franco on the first day of the semester during an extremely hot and humid summer and hearing the banging and closing of the gates behind me. Chills went up my spine!

When we entered the classroom, we were awaiting the arrival of the students from their cells and my curiosity now got the best of me; I actually was looking forward to meeting them! I recall gazing out the window and seeing them walk across the yard as they headed to the school building in their green uniforms. After they entered the classroom, I realized that Dr. Franco had previously taught many of the women in other courses and that there was already a strong level of comfort and respect between them. Once the class began, I was totally intimidated due to the fact that they were extremely bright. With each passing week, I became more comfortable with them and began to trust my own knowledge. My own personal views about the inmates themselves were also changing.

Because the class took place from June through August, it was extremely hot and I wondered what it must be like to be sequestered in a cell in these conditions. At some mid-point during the semester, when my comfort level was high, Dr. Franco and I waited for the students to arrive for almost three hours. Unfortunately, there was a “lock-down” on one of the units. I was not sure what this meant and Dr. Franco indicated to me that all inmates were locked in their cells and that all civilians on the property needed to remain in their locations until further notice due to an emergency at the facility. Typically, this meant that someone was injured due to a fight or was missing from the facility. I immediately thought that this was it for me! I also remember praying that the stamp on my hand (which needed to be scanned by an ultraviolet light in order to exit the prison) wouldn’t be

erased from my hand due to perspiration.

Fortunately, we continued to teach for the rest of the semester and there were no more lock-downs at the facility during our class time. The fact that I could teach a course on my own several times throughout the semester to inmates had made me feel empowered. When the semester was over I felt that I had never in my entire life had such a worthwhile learning experience. It's something that I would never be able to explain deeply, because it is so difficult to put into words and the feeling exists within me. My ability to see these offenders as mothers, daughters, sisters, students, and human beings was eye-opening. The effects of socially constructed mores limit our ability to be open-minded about issues we have limited exposure to. I have become so much more able to critically approach an issue and make a decision with a much more objective and pragmatic approach."

FINAL THOUGHTS

When considering the concepts of Boyer, Mills, Dewey, and Kolb and applying them to the learning outcomes of my students as participants in teaching assistantships, it is apparent that their critical thinking skills and analytical abilities have been reinforced and pre-existing notions on societal beliefs have been re-evaluated in hindsight. Both Marcy and Vanessa equally benefited from their interaction with the offenders with an exponential effect of drawing more students into the service learning aspect of academic life. Also, the offenders benefited from the mentorship that they received from the teaching assistants who served as role models representing the possibilities and opportunities offered in a life without incarceration.

My dual role as professor for the courses at the facility and supervising instructor for the teaching assistants required a strong commitment to both groups. For my Pace students, I met at least twice per week outside of the classroom to prepare and debrief for upcoming lectures. Similarly, for the offenders, I availed myself outside of class to discuss their progress with course material and to gain feedback on the teaching assistants. The offenders were extremely satisfied with their experiences. Arranging teaching assistantships for students at a correctional facility presents quite a challenge and requires a great deal of patience from all parties involved. The facility required an extensive amount of paperwork and processes to be completed on my part as well as on the part of my students, including security clearings, background checks, and fingerprinting. However, the positive results attained as a result of these experiences made the effort extremely worthwhile. I continue my work at the facility and look forward to continuing to offer this opportunity to more Pace students and to students at the facility.

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