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Encountering Difficult Knowledge: Service-Learning with Sociology and Political Science Undergraduates

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Introduction

Community based learning or service-learning is a dynamic pedagogical opportunity for students to engage with their discipline in light of social concerns (Goggins, 2012). NUI Galway undergraduate sociology and political science students in a third year optional seminar titled 'Volunteering: Theory, Policy and Practice' encounter what Pitt and Britzman (2003) call "difficult knowledge" in classroom discussions and readings on complicity to poverty and racism. This encounter is further explored through community based partnerships whereby students spend time in nonprofit organisations as participants in volunteer programmes in order to gain an insider researcher position. The community engagement experience with local charities allows students an opportunity to engage in dialogue with the scholarly literature grounded in practical experience. Service-learning students are challenged to see the institutional and wider structural inequalities as the roots of social causes while working in community with a direct service roles. This presentation will share the key challenges students and lecturer encounter when working with charities and nonprofits with social justice missions.

Method

Student feedback questionnaires and reflections have been documented over the five years of the service-learning module. Coupled with reflective practice as educator and researcher the following presents a snapshot of a wider EDD self-study. A self-study is "a study of self-in-relation to other" (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p.14). Self-study is undertaken often to understand the way we are as educators and to facilitate changes in the ways of being an educator (Feldman, 2003). Both Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) and Feldman (2003) describe self-study as moral work that is done not only to study work itself but also to improve it, so as to affect educational institutions. Leitch and Day (2000) agree, self-study is concerned with "self, society and moral purposes" rather than efficiency towards targets (p.181). Other types of qualitative research such as autoethnography which is concerned with culture and power, influences self-study (Goulding, 2005). There are fourteen criteria outlined by Bullough and Pinnegar, (2001) of a successful self-study, including: it must ring true, enable connection, promote insight, tackle a problem, engage an authentic voice, improve situations for others as well as self, present a genuine dramatic risk, ensure careful attention to the persons and context, and offer fresh perspectives. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argue there is legitimate knowledge and knowledge production within self-study research, as they outline the influences of

action research, phenomenology, and validity in qualitative research on self-study as a growing movement.

Findings

As students encounter academic literature that highlights discrimination, racism and the complicity of settled white western modernity in poverty and injustice, time in community highlights civil society and government action. Hall et al. (2004) argue that the classroom is best placed to navigate this new terrain whereas student volunteering alone might not be grounded in reflection. Taylor (2013) invites her students to describe the resistance to difficult knowledge. As Taylor (2013) articulates "…evidence of inequality and discrimination is most commonly resisted in social education through the citation of anecdotal evidence, a practice that defines discrimination in solely individual terms and presumes these individual cases' generalizability or fails to contextualize them within larger statistical trends and structural relations of power." Guided by this work undergraduate students acknowledge that it is challenging to come to terms with ones own implications in the status quo and that the structures we engage with maintain discrimination and inequality (Taylor, 2013). For sociology and political science students a safe environment to explore these confrontational concepts and examine privilege is key. Connecting with off campus community projects allows students to explore these concepts that are often linked to their own identity and framing of their environment. However students with a wide variety of needs, define and engage with communities in different ways and lecturers may need to adjust and demonstrate flexibility to facilitate all learning environments inside and outside the classroom. For example students with high anxiety and disabilities can take on their community projects with campus-based initiatives. This offers an out of classroom experience for their reflections and engagement but within the comfort zone of the familiar campus.

Conclusions

Community based modules are particularly powerful for sociological and political science students as encounters with inequality and social justice are explored inside and outside of the classroom. Nonprofit organisations offer supportive learning environments for students to reflect on scholarly literature. Course content and curriculum that confronts sociological issues means that significant flexibility is needed to respond to student needs and reactions of resistance. There is a rich opportunity to engage in further qualitative research on the impact of service-learning as a teaching methodology in Irish higher education.

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