

Defining Social Justice According to Undergraduate Students

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Abstract: “Social justice” has been well-defined in TPC literature, but this definition may be in competition with other popular media influences. This study examines six definitions of social justice and shows that students perceived small, feasible actions and the importance of context in social justice after a semester of class readings and activities.

Keywords: definitions, electives, pedagogy, social justice, undergraduates

Introduction

When teaching a social justice TPC elective course, I was curious about how students perceived the term “social justice” and their own “positionality” in society (Walton, Moore & Jones 2019). I first wanted to know what they thought of the term “social justice” in the first two class periods. I then wanted to see how these definitions might change over the course of 15 weeks of TPC coursework aiming to teach both about social justice and how to enact social justice. Findings indicate that for most students, changes in their definitions were not radical, but incremental and nuanced. A second key finding is that students from all disciplines, not just TPC, could benefit from social justice-themed classes.

Social Justice in TPC Literature

Social justice has risen as a central theme in Technical Communication literature. Recently, the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) (2022) used this theme, and IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication (IEEE) published a special issue on social justice (March 2022), and Programmatic Perspectives (Spring 2021) addressed crises of 2020 including Covid-19 and systemic racism. Natasha N. Jones and Rebecca Walton (2018) provide a definition of social justice research as looking at how communication can “amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically and/or economically under-resourced” (242). Communication can be a tool of agency.

TPC definitions of social justice may compete for attention with other media coverage of social justice. Sometimes, the media can amplify and support these definitions. For example, movements like #BlackLivesMatter (referenced by

Kimberly Harper, 2021) or #MeToo are visible, and students may find these helpful for identifying systematic oppression.

Media also challenges TPC definitions of social justice. On June 12, 2022, in an interview with CBS Sunday Morning News, Ibram X. Kendi comments on how his book *How to Be an Antiracist* has been used as negative fuel by some politicians. Some claim social justice or antiracism is over-dramatized. Others may feel threatened. In the last few years, some vocal members of majority groups have been claiming that they, too, are oppressed and under-resourced and that a specific social justice focus impinges on their civil rights.

Positionality as a Theory and Definition

Exploring positionality can draw students' attention to themselves, and then they can look to patterns in the larger society that can help them in turn understand the complexities of social justice. Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) explain how aspects of social identity like gender, race, education, and culture can influence the opportunities available. Their discussion reads in part that "a person's position within the multidimensional social structure governs the opportunities, resources and capital available to them" (Walton, Moore & Jones, 2019, p. 66). Some resources and capital are more accessible to particular groups. Students' positionality highlights larger social issues of injustice and oppression.

Teaching Social Justice

TPC instructors have used games to teach students about inequity, like the gerrymandering game described by Fernando Sanchez, Isidore Dorpenyo, and Jennifer Sano-Franchini (2021). Still others engaged students in service learning to teach about social justice, like Nora K. Rivera and Laura Gonzales (2021), who adopt a "critical" service-learning component to their courses in order to take action.

Historicizing social justice is key part of creating activities that can help students understand these issues. Jones and Walton (2018) provide a detailed classroom heuristic for these concepts (pp. 260-261). Further, Haas and Eble (2018) identify that "inequitable rules and conditions informed by ideological assumptions" have always shaped the movement of people, resources and information (p. 4): society has been making value-laden, unequal judgments about the distribution of resources for a long time. Students discussed selections from these texts to understand social justice.

Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* also helped students understand social justice. The professor-activist defines equity: "Racial equity is when two or more racial groups are standing on relatively equal footing" (p.18). He gives the example of racial inequity: a 30% racial gap in home ownership nationally between White and Black and Latinx families (Kendi, 2019, p. 18). These tangible examples helped students understand the impacts of inequity.

Six Students' Evolving Definitions of Social Justice at a Small State School

I collected six students' texts and interviewed five of the students in my Social Justice TPC elective at our small, Hispanic-Serving Institution. My central research question was "How do students define social justice after a semester of a social justice class?"

My Social Justice Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) elective contained four units. First, I had students reflect on their positionality (Walton, Moore & Jones, 2019). The second unit I based on Harper's (2021) social media assignment. Students practiced critical analyses of websites and social media. The third unit was service learning where we: read/gave social-justice themed books to kids grades K-3, packed supply backpacks for Afghan refugees, taught thank-you note writing, wrote a grant for a university food pantry, which was funded, and started a website for the local community kitchen, which was used. In the fourth unit, I asked students to reflect on the course in a final definition of social justice.

I collected student definitions of social justice from August of 2021 and December 2021. This study was approved by New Mexico Tech's Institutional Review Board, but with the condition that I did not use student grades or my comments on classwork. My 30-minute interview protocol was in part text-based, and I mined student assignments before the interview to identify points of change or reflection to clarify. I transcribed and synthesized their responses to the interviews, and triangulated this data with their textual data from assignments.

Participants chose their own pseudonyms. Two White males, Ryan and Bart, participated in this study. Also, four Latina females (Cara, Jennifer, Rene and Mary) participated in this study, comprising 75% of the Social Justice class. This was a small class, but reflective of our small state university (less than 2,000 students). Demographics did reflect our university is a Hispanic-Serving Institution, but more women than men enrolled in the class, which was unusual for our male-majority campus but typical for our TPC program. Participants ranged in year from sophomores to seniors, and the majority were majors in technical communication.

Nuanced, Subtle Change in Social Justice Definitions

Four students from this study claimed little or no change in their definitions of social justice over the course of the semester. All students had some exposure to the concept before the class; Jennifer commented that she had "social justice leanings." Cara commented: "I can tell I was looking back at the stuff you pulled from my journals and it seems like a lot of it is shaped by my internship last summer." For these students, changes in their definitions of social justice were subtle.

One student, Jennifer, added action to her definition. In August, she defined social justice as "Giving minorities a platform to speak about their oppression." In her

final reflection, Jennifer adds to this: "I also think social justice can mean just bettering your community even in small ways." She stated at the beginning of her reflection that pivotal points in the class that influenced her definition were the hands-on service activities to engage with change at our local community level.

Another student highlighted the importance of context in enacting social justice. Mary wrote in August that social justice was "letting those of oppressed groups have a space where they can share their experiences and offer steps others can take to challenge the status quo." Her revised definition in December added action and contextual components in terms of tactics and strategies, and she notes, "Not all tactics and or strategies are going to work the same everywhere." Mary was focused on localized actions.

Gradual Student Change Over the Course

Bart demonstrated some gradual change in his definition of social justice. Bart initially commented on his being one of few males in the class: "And so I just wanted to make sure to not overstep, I guess, or just be very aware of this situation and not say something out of pocket." Bart was unused to being in the minority in a class. However, Bart became much more comfortable in class discussion over the course of the semester. Bart commented in his final reflection, "I've learned that social justice is about using your abilities in combination with the capabilities of a community to find solutions to issues they are experiencing." He emphasized both his role and the contextual needs of the community in addressing social justice issues.

Substantial Student Change in a Social Justice Definition

Ryan revealed dramatic change in his definition of social justice. He commented that he did not have much experience with diversity: "So just seeing other cultures, and people, sometimes is a bit of a shock to me." He mentioned in our interview "I always thought, you always hear the term "social justice warrior". And that was always my impression. I'm like, "Oh, it's the class of caring." He further discussed the meme with three people of different heights seeing over a fence into a baseball game. He mentioned that he initially worried about how "unfair" this was because in his words, "the tall guy works to get tall, and because the shorter guy didn't work for it, he was given everything he needed to get tall in the end." Ryan expressed in class and in his reading responses that he was worried about the redistribution of resources.

Ryan's final reflection articulates in one compact sentence the change in his perspective: "Ultimately, I believe that social justice is the action of doing what you can to help bring about a just distribution in wealth, opportunities and privileges." This "just distribution of wealth, opportunities and privileges" in Ryan's definition closely mirrors that of Haas and Eble (2018), Jones and Walton (2018) and Kendi (2019) and the emphasis on distributing goods and resources. Ryan internalized the concept of "doing what you can" to give everyone equity in terms of opportunities and was no longer worried about this equity taking away from him.

Ryan's change in perspective influenced his actions in the spring semester. He petitioned the Chemistry department to change their testing proctoring to be more equitable for all students, and he was interested in protecting student security. Ryan found a way to use his expertise as a Computer Science student to benefit other students and enact social justice.

Growing the Impact of a Social Justice Class

One semester of a social justice class is like one semester of writing: it is a start toward greater change. Jennifer Bay (2022) summarizes the hope for teaching social justice in the TPC classroom: "Moreover, just as we know about the teaching of writing, educating students to dismantle institutional and systemic injustices against marginalized individuals will not happen in one semester" (p. 218). Most of the changes experienced by students were subtle and nuanced.

There is the possibility to grow the impact of my elective course by addressing all students, not just TPC majors. Cara commented that she wished the class would be offered more often. When I asked her why, she replied, "I think it's [social justice] an important thing to touch on that is relevant to any degree because you're probably going to come across social justice issues in, I'd say in pretty much any field. So it's really relevant." The next time I offer this course, I will widely advertise this to all advisors and faculty for their students across the disciplines.

Limitations to this study are that it focused on one institution and 8 students. Future work could compare how social justice is taught in different states, drawing from qualitative research to provide rich description on how institutional and state context impact the teaching of social justice.

I believe that this course and others like it have the potential for lasting impact, even in subtle changes in student behavior. Just as social justice is not always flashy with people carrying signs, it is through local tactics and strategies (Peterson, 2018) and most importantly hands-on actions for change, that we can best prepare our students to enter this complex professional environment as conscious citizens.

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