RESEARCH PAPER

Engaging enabling students by integrating themes of social equity and justice into humanities courses

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This paper investigates the potential of increasing engagement of enabling education students by integrating themes of social equity and justice into course material. As enrolments in enabling education programs have a much higher rate of; low socio-economic backgrounds, disabilities and language backgrounds other than English, it is more likely that they have experienced disadvantage, discrimination or injustice. It is posited the by referencing these types of experiences in a humanities course, student engagement with course materials is heightened.

An examination of the efficacy of incorporating themes of social equity and justice occurs by looking at students enrolled in The University of Newcastle's Newstep program. The program draws a higher percentage of students with low socio-economic backgrounds, disabilities and language backgrounds other than English than the University's undergraduate cohort, which is already above the national average in these areas.

Course material from three humanities elective courses (Film Studies, Australian Society & Culture and Media & Communication) is examined, noting social equity themes including; poverty (both national and international), class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religion. While much of this material draws on diverse examples and contexts, these underlying themes continue to engage students, even where they do not relate directly to their own experiences.

Keywords: Opportunity; achievement; enabling education; engagement; equity

Introduction

Engaging and motivating students in enabling education program continues to be a challenge for educators. Enabling students tend to have had negative experiences with education and lack social support for their learning. Finding course material that has intrinsic interest for enabling students is one possible means of increasing engagement. Course content that directly or indirectly relates to the students' experiences of social inequality can perhaps elicit that intrinsic interest. By incorporating themes such as; socio-economic, gender and ethnic inequality, into humanities courses, it may be possible, not only to better engage enabling students, but also motivate and empower them. This has been the approach taken in the University of Newcastle's Newstep Program.

Overview of the Newstep Program

The University of Newcastle's Newstep Program is a one-year foundation studies program designed for 18-20 year olds who have completed the HSC but did not qualify for university entrance, have experienced adverse circumstances during their senior secondary schooling or did not complete the HSC. Adverse circumstances relevant to Newstep entry include; disability or chronic illness, interstate transfer, family or personal crisis, excessive family responsibilities, low income background or socio-economic disadvantage, Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, arrival in Australia as a refugee, schooling in a rural or isolated region, or attendance at a high school which is designated by the NSW Department of Education and Communities as a Priority Funded School. Newstep is offered across two campuses and is accepted as an entry qualification to most universities in Australia. Newstep courses follow a typical weekly lecture and tutorial format, across a twelve-week semester.

Comparison of demographics

The enrolment criteria for the Newstep Program, intentionally attracts a disproportionate number of students who have experienced disadvantage. Enrolment data for the years 2011 – 2014 (see Figure 1.) demonstrates that the Newstep cohort consists of a higher percentage of students who are; first in family, have a disability, come from a low-SES background or are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, than the general student population of the University of Newcastle. In addition, the University itself is well above national averages for tertiary institutions in all those criteria. This suggests that social equity and justice is likely to be of particular relevance to this particular cohort.

Table 1. Comparison of UoN and Newstep Demographics

	UoN Enrolments (%)			Newstep Enrolments (%)		
	2012	**2013**	**2014**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
First in Family	44.1	46.7	47.9	59.3	63.2	59.3
Disability	5.4	5.4	5.4	7.3	7.4	8.1
Low SES	23.1	23.4	23.7	32.2	35	36.4
ATSI	2.6	2.8	2.9	1.7	3.4	3.1

Rationale

Given the rationale for the Newstep program and the typical demographics of its cohort, many students come to the program having experienced disadvantage and negative experiences with their prior education. As a result, many enabling students possess low levels of self-concept (Whannell, Whannell & Allen, 2012) and motivation to succeed. Consequently, as an enabling educator, it is relevant to seek strategies for engagement that draw upon students' experiences that motivate their desire to learn, where learning goes beyond simply acquiring knowledge, to understanding the significance of that knowledge to their own world (Candy, 1991). Much of the relevant literature suggests that teachers can boost students' engagement by choosing issues of relevance and drawing on their prior knowledge in order to foster engagement. Through carefully selected lecture and tutorial content, it is possible to guide students to work collaboratively to discuss social concepts so that students enter Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development (1978), both challenging and assisting students. In this ZPD, students can feel comfortable to explore more critical aspects of their social world through "joint collaboration" (Shute & Slee, 2015, p.130), thus progressing from knowledge of their own experiences to appreciating and understanding new ones.

Drawing on the world of the student as a tool for engagement is certainly not a new concept. Freire (1968) states that students who are presented with problems "relating to themselves in the world…will feel increasingly challenged" (p.57) which can evoke new challenges, new understandings and a pattern for a more lifelong approach to learning. Decades later, Tinto (cited in Ross, 2014) examined factors that might determine retention and success in

institutions of higher learning such as prior experience; factors beyond the control of the institution. However, Tinto also examined the crucial role that universities play regarding factors that they can have a greater control over, such as ensuring student engagement. He advocates that, "student engagement be facilitated by lecturers, primarily in the classroom, to promote academic and social interaction that in turn lead to the development of communities of learning" (p.121). Thus, this paper proposes that by exploring issues of social equity relevant to the lives of the students, students can use prior knowledge to develop confidence and a surface understanding of issues within their world. Then, through guidance, students can feel confident to explore additional critical concepts, deepening their understanding and motivation. This may lead to increased engagement, awareness, motivation, empowerment and compassion.

Potential benefits

The potential benefits of including themes of social equity and justice into enabling programs can be thought of in five categories; engagement, awareness, motivation, empowerment and compassion.

a) Engagement

Students enrolled in enabling programs, who have likely experienced educational disadvantage or been absent from education for a length of time, often find it difficult to engage with unfamiliar subject matter. Similarly, students from low-SES backgrounds, or those lacking support for their studies, for example, first in family students, tend to focus more on content that has an obvious connection to a future vocation. This can make engaging enabling in students in humanities courses, where the vocational relevance can often be more esoteric, much more difficult. Dack

& Tomlinson (2014) acknowledge that students are more likely to engage with content when they can easily relate to it or recognise its relevance to their own experience. While finding content that is directly relatable to the students personal experience can be difficult or limiting, finding content that is thematically relatable allows for much greater scope. The content in Newstep humanities courses tends to take this approach, by highlighting social injustices across a range of contexts, while still allowing students to recognise the similarities to their own lives.

b) Awareness

As well as engaging students, including themes of social equity in enabling programs can help to raise awareness of inequity. Christofides, Hoy, Milla, & Stengos (2015) discuss the importance of raising aspirations of enabling students by helping to expand their awareness of potential opportunities for work or further study, which they may have never otherwise considered. This is particularly relevant to cohorts with a high percentage of first-in-family students. This concept is also applicable to raising awareness of social injustice. Enabling students may have experienced social injustice first hand, without necessarily realising or understanding the socio-political structures that cause such injustices. By highlighting the larger issues of social injustice in humanities courses, enabling courses may be able to help students better understand, and perhaps better navigate, the social injustices they have faced or may still be facing in their own lives.

c) Motivation

Increasing engagement with course material, as well as increasing awareness of social injustice may also lead to an increase in enabling student's motivation. Again, enabling students often lack motivation due to previous negative educational experiences or lack of effective study strategies. Focusing on issues of social justice

can highlight the broader implications for enabling students if they are not successful in their studies, and demonstrate the ongoing benefits, not only for themselves, but also for their families and communities, of overcoming social inequities. Further, a focus on social justice may provide a common link between students in an enabling cohort, encouraging peer support. Sawyer (2006) notes that "the motivation to become a more central participant in a community of practice can provide a powerful incentive for learning". Fostering such communities by creating an environment where students can share and bond over similar experiences is one potential strategy for encouraging peer support.

d) Empowerment

Beyond the classroom, and even beyond the University experience, greater awareness and understanding of social inequality can be a highly empowering tool. Saunders & Wong (2014) demonstrate that people who suffer from social disadvantage are typically the most reliant on government and community services, while also being the least able to effectively self-advocate. This only serves to heighten the level and experience of disadvantage. Developing a broader understanding of social inequality, particularly the structures that underpin such inequality, may help enabling students better navigate social services, and better understand their rights and entitlements. Again, this may even extend to benefiting the families of enabling students, who may have previously lacked an effective, informed advocate.

e) Compassion

Finally, incorporating themes of social equity and justice into enabling courses can also be beneficial for students who have not experienced social disadvantage.

While such students may not find the material as relatable and engaging, increasing their level of awareness can only serve to increase their level of empathy. In a learning environment where the majority of the students have experienced social disadvantage, Rashedi, Plante & Callister (2015) acknowledge that those that have not will quickly see the impact it can have, and appreciate the importance of addressing such problems. This may in turn, increase their motivation to succeed in the course and help support their peers.

Which issues?

While there are many social issues worthy of investigation, there are certain key areas that provide the most suitable focus. In the Newstep Program, the humanities courses tend to include a strong focus on three areas of social inequality: social class, gender, and ethnicity. This does not represent the full range of issues covered, as each of these issues raises further areas of inequality that are also addressed such as; sexuality, religion and disabilities. Stimson (2001) acknowledges that people effected by social inequality tend to fall into more than one category of disadvantage and thus are likely to identify with more than one topic area. As discussed earlier, the Newstep cohort has a particularly high percentage of low-SES students and students who are first-in-family. On this basis, social class becomes an obvious choice as a thematic focus. By extension, gender and ethnicity are valuable topics to address, as both are issues effected by economic inequality.

In Practice

Three elective humanities courses in the Newstep Program have been examined here as examples of how themes of social equity and justice can be incorporated into course material;

Australian Society & Culture, Film Studies and Media & Communication. The specific examples used in each course are diverse and only occasionally relate directly to students personal experience of social disadvantage, but the overriding themes have proven very relatable for students.

1. *Australian Culture & Society*

Australian Culture and Society aims to introduce students to a range of basic dimensions within Australian culture, encourages students to think critically about the causes and effects of discriminatory practices, and draw connections between wider social issues and the student's own world. Consequently, exploration of issues that directly and indirectly relate to students' own experiences can consolidate engagement and understanding of concepts in this course. This course explores social class through examining the cause and effect of poverty on a national scale. Students are encouraged to use their sociological imagination to determine whether poverty is attributed to an individual's own life choices, or whether major inequalities are built into the structure of Australian society, such as access to work and income, education, housing, health and community services. Concepts of deviance and deviant behaviour as aspects of social class is also explored, and students are encouraged to look at whether situational factors such as poverty, structural issues such as lower levels of education and lack of employment, and cultural factors such as discrimination and lack of identity, can lead to higher instances of criminal activity. This relates to the power of labels and the impact of successfully labelling a group of people as deviant. Students explore the theory that the activities of the lower classes are much more likely to be defined as criminal than the activities of those from higher classes, as their crimes tend to be more visible than corporate, 'white collar' felonies. Whilst all

of these issues of social class may not directly reflect the experiences of students, certainly identification of these as contemporary Australian concerns creates both awareness and understanding of some of the personal problems experienced by those around them.

Australian culture and society also explores issues of gender equity in the workforce, the media and even in leisure pursuits, such as the sporting realm. The course explores the changing roles of both males and females due to economic issues and the feminist movement, but illustrates the current inequalities surrounding distribution of work in the domestic environment, the differences in the concentration of men and women in particular occupations, the divide in full-time and part-time employment status and the implications for the gender wage gap. Treatment of females in the media is also explored to account for some of these inequalities. Certainly, an analysis of advertising campaigns divides females as objects either of sexual attraction or as domestics, and the course explores the impact that such rigid and celebrated female roles can have on the aspirations for children and young women. Finally, the differences in leisure pursuits between the sexes is examined, with females tending to prefer passive pastimes compared to males, which can account for women's massive underrepresentation in sport. The theory is explored that women's participation in sport can be seen to mirror some of the issues women face in wider society such as inequalities in pay, absence of woman in positions of management, gender prejudice, and the celebration of the male as the dominant sex. With more females completing a Bachelor degree than males (ABS, 2012) and the Australian Culture and Society course reflecting these gender ratios, the majority of students to find this content both compelling and motivating.

The Australian Culture and Society course also explores social issues pertaining to ethnicity, including treatment of Australia's immigrants and refugees, as well as their Indigenous citizens. The course encourages critical thinking about Australia's stereotypical white Anglo-Saxon identity, outlines Australia's historical immigration policies, and addresses both the positive impact of diversity, as well as some of the shameful racist practices carried out in the past few decades. The course touches on the causes of racism, the impacts on the individual and minority groups and hypothesises how to address racist attitudes to create a more inclusive future for the nation. As well as looking at Australia's immigrants, the course also examines past and present treatment of Australia's indigenous citizens including legacies of inequality and contemporary figures of health, education, poverty, housing and employment. It introduces students to the concept of Eurocentrism; of privileging European customs over the ways of others and the dilemma in both celebrating Aboriginal customs and learning strengths, while still ensuring that the Indigenous inhabitants are equipped with a written and verbal proficiency to enhance their opportunities in the dominant Anglo Australian society. While students from backgrounds other than English, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are in the minority in this program, the former draws a higher percentage in Newstep than the University's undergraduate cohort. This content is also relevant to students who are no doubt witnessing a change in cultural make-up in their own immediate region (ABS, 2012). Education and awareness is also a vital element in ensuring that Australia does not propagate its past racist practices in the future.

2. Film Studies

In the Newstep Film Studies course, deals with the theme of social class in two ways. The first looks at class on a global scale, with a lecture and tutorial dealing with films set in Africa and a further lecture and tutorial focused on films from third world countries. These lessons consider issues for poverty, exploitation and oppression in contexts including; war zones (Sierra Leone, *Blood Diamond*), famine (Somalia, *Black Hawk Down*) and religious extremism (Afghanistan, *Osama*). In each instance, these films, and the accompanying lessons, highlight the power disparity between the controlling minority and the oppressed majority, and the extremely negative outcomes for those societies. Regardless of direct or indirect experience with such social equity issues, students nonetheless are able to recognise the injustice of such disparity and, by extension, how their own society structures those injustices.

Secondly, films studies looks at class from an economic perspective, with lessons focused around films (e.g. *Fast Food Nation*) about corporate greed and exploitation. Again, the issues raised may not be immediately relatable to the students, but they soon develop a broader understanding of their inherent lack of power in the relationship they have with corporate entities and the difficulty of rallying against them.

The Film Studies course presents the issue of gender inequality much more directly. A lecture and tutorial dedicated to Disney films focuses particularly on gender representation, noting the extremely stereotypical and disempowering portrayals of female characters. This is especially relatable for students who remember these films from childhood, and can now recognise the gender biases they have subjected to throughout their lives. Film Studies also looks at films depicting the experiences of

females in other, typically patriarchal, cultures (e.g. Maori, *Whale Rider*). Again, these films raise issues about the powerlessness of women in society that resonates with female students.

Finally, Film Studies extensively covers issues of ethnicity, with a range of sample films that address ethnic conflict and inequality. Specifically, discussion of ethnocentrism and paternalism occurs, through diverse films such as *Bride & Prejudice*, *Hotel Rwanda* and *Pocahontas*. In each instance, class discussion focuses on the attitudes expressed by the dominant, typically white-Anglo characters, or indeed even the filmmaker's attitude, towards the portrayed minority culture. These attitudes are overwhelmingly negative or condescending, allowing students to recognise such attitudes they may have faced in their own lives, or that they may have unwittingly presented towards others.

3. *Media & Communications*

The Newstep Media & Communications course also addresses social class in two ways. Firstly, the course looks extensively at the techniques used by traditional news media outlets to target particular demographics, especially those based on socio-economic status. In this way, students gain an insight into how the divisions in the media, with some media outlets catering to the educated, business class, while others cater to the working class. The differences between these outlets, in terms of the stories they cover and the quality of the journalism, highlights the role that media plays in perpetuating the class divide.

Secondly, the course looks at the structure of media ownership, which further demonstrates to students the power and control afforded to those higher up the socio-

economic ladder. This aspect of the cause encourages students to analyse the media sources they engage with, and consider the motivations of the wealthy media owners providing this information.

Media & Communications deals with the issue of gender inequality through the aforementioned consideration of targeted demographics, but also through the study of advertising. This occurs through an examination and discussion of the depiction of women in advertising, using examples from across all media types, focusing on the perpetuation of overwhelmingly negative stereotypes. Once again, this is content that students find very relatable because it draws on examples they are familiar with and have been engaging with regularly, without consciously considering the broader message they transmit. This raises awareness, particularly for female students, about how the constant bombardment of media content shapes their self-image and aspirations.

Finally, Media & Communications addresses the issue of ethnic inequality, by looking at the biased, typically negative, media portrayals of people from diverse backgrounds. Lessons on media ethics discuss this issue extensively, with examples drawn from notable racist talkback radio broadcasts, censured by the Australian Communications and Media Authority. This content, often quite shocking to students, despite popular commercial media outlets publicly broadcasting it, serves to highlight the challenges still faced by people from ethnic minorities in Australian society. Again, this resonates strongly with students who have experienced these challenges firsthand, but also demonstrates the importance of understanding and compassion in those who do not identify as part of an ethnic minority.

Student Response

The response from students enrolled in these three courses, via student feedback surveys and online discussion boards, has been highly encouraging. Students have identified their own increased levels of engagement and success, due to their interest in the subject matter:

"Because I enjoyed the course so well I made a conscious effort to get involved in the assessments to try and succeed"

They also noted that the subject matter related directly, or indirectly, to their own lives:

"Some things in the 3rd world settings we can broadly relate to because they can be relevant to everyday life in some ways."

"I think we can relate to the characters in these third world settings in the films as we feel sorry for them and feel like they are real people just like us with everyday problems. I think majority of people will have a sense of connection with these characters living in the conditions portrayed on screen."

Most critically, students were able to identify the value that knowledge and understanding of social inequality might have for their future:

"This course has given me a better understanding of the world, it has challenged my views and provided information which I can reflect upon on a daily basis as well as it contributes to other subjects."

"I believe that the course provided me with much useful information for my future and believed the information presented to be insightful and educational."

These responses suggest that the application of both Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development (1978) and Freire's view of students relating themselves in the world to create a pattern for lifelong learning (1968) is proving successful in these courses.

Conclusion

While student engagement and motivation are difficult to measure, and there is a need for further study on the efficacy of incorporating themes of social equity and justice into enabling courses, the response demonstrated here is encouraging and the potential benefits are vast. The nature of the enabling cohort, typically low-SES and first-in-family, suggests an intrinsic interest in such material. The flow on benefits of enabling students gaining better self-awareness and understanding of their own experiences of social inequality are similarly difficult to measure, but again are potentially transformative.

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