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## **Raising Awareness of Diversity and Social (In)justice Issues in Undergraduate Research Writing: Understanding Students and their Lives via Connecting Teaching and Research**

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### **Abstract**

Inspired by my own experiences as an undergraduate writing student who did not see a connection between my life and the topics of the courses, this article details my first ventures into designing and teaching sections of a research writing class, entitled *Researching Writing: Raising Awareness of Diversity and Social Justice Issues within and Beyond our Lives*. The purpose of this course was to promote issues of diversity and social (in)justice in a required liberal studies course. Interview data from undergraduate women students who participated in this research writing course from 2009-2011 were explored in order to uncover their experiences in the class and understand what they found effective or ineffective. The findings indicated that most of the students appreciated being able to choose their own research topic, and also found chunking parts of the research project more effective for understanding the research process. Although engaging students in research and course activities related to controversial issues is difficult, there is a need for more liberal studies courses to incorporate topics related to diversity and social (in)justice.

**Key Words:** Social (in)justice, diversity, research writing, liberal studies, curriculum

### **How it All Began**

Beginning in fall 2008, my first semester as an assistant professor in the English Department housed in a university located in Western Pennsylvania, I was assigned three sections of Undergraduate Research Writing. Although I did not know everything I needed to know about how Undergraduate Liberal Studies Program courses (such as writing, literature, and other English department courses) were positioned in the department and the university, I was excited to teach my first undergraduate writing course.

As a way to put my *Self* into *Pedagogy*, I reflected on how writing, specifically research writing, in different points of my educational journey, has influenced me as a learner, teacher, and teacher educator. I went back as far as my undergraduate years at a university in Boston. As a pre-med student, my focus was to get through writing requirements in different disciplines. I never really focused on how a writing course in my undergraduate years would impact the

ways in which I saw the world around me. In other words, I did not understand or reflect on how writing could be connected to sciences as a biology major. That was in 1985. Much has changed since then, and as I sat in front of my computer contemplating about how I would conceptualize my first undergraduate writing course as a teacher/teacher educator, I began to think broadly about how issues of diversity and social (in)justice have influenced my worldview and how I understood the generation of knowledge in research, writing, and disciplinary departments. I focused on ways to construct knowledge around how writing could assist my undergraduate students to think about diversity and social (in)justice issues in their disciplinary programs. I was overwhelmed with the desire to share this reflective understanding with my future undergraduate writing students. In April 2008, a month before I was to give birth to my first child, I began designing my first undergraduate research writing course.

### **Overview of the Course**

With this brief introduction of my journey into preparing to teach the undergraduate research writing course, I designed an undergraduate research writing course entitled, *Researching Writing: Raising Awareness of Diversity and Social Justice Issues within and Beyond our Lives*. My main goal was to provide space for the students to engage in a variety of activities designed to hone their research literacy skills using readings related to the issues of diversity and social (in)justice. I focused on making the reading about diversity and social (in)justices and writing about those issues in the context of their disciplinary programs. Researching and writing about these topics became crucial as the students increasingly interact with individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, language, and class backgrounds, to name a few differences among individuals. My overarching goals were to equip the students with the tools needed to question how ever-changing issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and language shape their/our experiences in the context of conducting research, collecting data, analyzing data results, and writing up the final research project. With diversity and social (in)justice issues as major themes across the readings in this research writing course, my students participated in class discussions and practical research writing/library workshop activities designed to critique each other's written drafts. Throughout the semester, I hoped to create an academic community in exploring the writing and research process, but also to come to understand the importance of promoting issues of diversity and social (in)justice in their lives as agents of change.

#### *Course Goals and Objectives*

As a way to help students understand the goals/objectives of the course, I divided this section into the content and research skills stated below and used a main reader, called *Reading for Diversity and Social Justice*, published by Routledge. In addition, I used handouts/reproducible pages from handbooks focused on improving writing and conducting research.

#### *Goals for Content Skills*

Examine issues of social (in)justice and diversity as they relate to your major field of study and/or everyday social situations;  
Understand, analyze, and question the claims, assumptions, and motives of other writers;  
Explore how writers (authors) disagree or have different perspectives and explain why they disagree or how perspectives differ;  
Work in small groups to develop responses to course readings and self-selected readings; and  
Design and present on topics with a group.

#### *Goals for Research Skills*

Develop and refine research questions related to your topic;

Locate and evaluate materials (i.e., reliable and credible sources; virtual and textual) that pertain to the topic you are researching;  
Identify and reference (give credit to) those who have preceded you in the 'conversation' you've undertaken (MLA and APA citation and documentation practices);  
Develop brief summaries, analyses, critiques, and essays you write;  
Organize extended writing projects (i.e., a culminating social justice research project) so that the following are clearly written: Introduction, Background Literature, Method of Inquiry, Results and Discussion, and Conclusion; Work in peer-editorial groups to identify, for one another, ways to improve and sharpen your written response to research.

### **Raising our Awareness and Constructing Knowledge through Multiple Venues**

With the aforementioned goals and objectives, I designed the following required assignments:

**First**, I asked students to reflect on how they positioned themselves within/experienced the issues of diversity and social (in)justices. So, the students constructed their own Diversity Autobiographical Narratives, which consisted of responding to the following prompts:

- (a) What is your understanding of diversity and social justice issues?
- (b) How important is this topic in your life, and what does it mean to promote diversity and justice in your life?
- (c) How are different issues of diversity (i.e., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, language, etc.) a part of your lived experience?
- (d) What questions/issues would you be interested in investigating/exploring in this area?

**Second**, the students kept weekly journal entries (we used course blogs as well) to reflect freely on the topics discussed in the class, course readings, etc.

**Third**, the students formed groups to facilitate presentation/discussion around selected ISM topics.

**Finally**, the students worked on different components of their social justice inquiry project by devoting time to doing research, drafting, receiving feedback, and revising different sections of the research project:

- (a) Introduction:
  - a. In this segment of the project, you will introduce your topic and write the rationale for having selected this topic. You will revise this introduction section upon the completion of your project;
- (b) Literature Review:
  - a. In this segment of the project, please review 6-7 peer-reviewed refereed journal articles that would add to a better understanding your topic;
- (c) Method of Inquiry:
  - a. Research Questions: What is it that you want to investigate?
  - b. What data will you use to investigate your question? (i.e., interviews, observations, surveys, etc.);
- (d) Results/Discussion:
  - a. What themes (findings) emerged from the data you have collected?
- (e) Conclusion:
  - a. What are your next steps in this social justice inquiry project?
  - b. How can you and your classmates become agents of change?
  - c. So, in this section, you might make some suggestions to your current institutions.
- (f) Reflections:
  - a. This is an opportunity for you to 'reflect' on the social justice research process using 'free-writing' approach. Please respond to the following:
    1. Has the content of the course changed your perspectives on any of the issues discussed?
    2. What have you gained from conducting your 'original' research?
    3. What areas of research skills have you gained the most from on this course?

#### 4. What would you have liked to do more of in this course to improve your research skills?

##### **Bridging Teaching and Research**

With teaching multiple sections of Undergraduate Research Writing course since fall 2008, I began a research initiative exploring how undergraduate students engage in conversations around issues of diversity and social (in)justice in their university required courses. In order to situate my conceptualization of this course design as well as understanding how the current literature fits into the issues of diversity and social (in)justice, I began with the work that has been done on how diversity and social justice issues (i.e., issues related to gender, race, language, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability) impacts the experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers in K-16 teacher education programs across the United States (e.g., Ayers, 2004; Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005; Darder et al., 2003; Nieto, 2004). Specifically, how these teachers prepare themselves to work with students from various backgrounds and promote teaching and learning curricula injected with issues of diversity and social justice abound in the literature on teacher education (i.e., Gay, 2002; Nieto, 1999; Sheets and Chew, 2002). This topic is rampant in educational contexts due to raising awareness about how democratic society can begin to embrace diversity and multiple identities and cultures that merge as various communities interact (Johnson, 2006). However, when I look at the undergraduate curriculum in the US, there is a lack of knowledge on how undergraduate students understand and experience these issues in the context of their disciplinary programs. Hence, I set out to explore the following research questions in the larger study that was conducted between 2009 and 2011:

- (1) What were the experiences of undergraduate students who were engaged in conversations around issues of diversity and social justice in their required university writing courses?
- (2) What were the students' perceptions of their learned research skills upon the completion of this course?

For the current article, I quest for *a pedagogical knowledge on how university writing instructors can bring awareness of diversity and social (in)justice issues into their undergraduate mandatory research writing courses*. As such, this article introduces the course design and the student participants who volunteered in the larger study. Due to the limited space in this article, I focus on the following: (1) a brief description of the participants; (2) their disciplinary programs; and (3) their social justice inquiry project topics. I focus only on women students because almost all the participant volunteers were women students. In addition, I wanted to highlight their lived experiences and how those lived experiences were part of selecting their undergraduate disciplinary focus, thus their social justice inquiry project topic.

##### **The Participants and their Experiences**

**Francesca Bulgari** (a pseudonym)<sup>1</sup> is a Business and Finance major. As an African-American woman, she came into my class with a lot of understanding about how racial diversity works in the mainstream society. For example, she stated that she was the victim of 'standoffish' behavior at work because of her African American identity. She also came from a so-called broken home where many women in her extended family never made it to college level education and ended up being homemakers with multiple children. Due to her lived experiences of having witnessed how women lived, she was determined to complete her college education and advocate for other women in similar situations.

**Jewel Hanson** was a math education major. She had minimal experience with issues of social justice and diversity although she is originally from Bulgaria and was adopted by an American family as a child. Hanson believes that 'it's good to be diverse, if we all looked the same and talked the same it would be a boring world.' Hanson studied women in mathematics for her

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<sup>1</sup> All names and institutions used in this paper are pseudonyms.

project and found the experience improved her research skills. The completion of her project and participation in group projects helped her to understand why it is important to be aware of social justice and diversity issues. She commented that she is 'glad to know what is going on so I can help other people realize what is going on.'

**Kristi McComb** was a disability services major. Growing up, Kristi was taught to be open-minded concerning issues of diversity, but upon observing the experiences of her classmates who were disabled, Kristi decided to pursue a profession that would allow her to help targeted individuals. The completion of her research project, she admits, improved her writing skills, 'heightened her knowledge' of social justice and diversity issues, and most importantly, made her feel more confident and passionate about her major.

**Krystal Phoenix** was a psychology major. Krystal was aware of social justice and diversity issues when she entered the course not as a target, but as a witness of racism in the university dormitories. Krystal admits that her perspective of social justice and diversity issues changed as a result of participating in the course and hearing stories from other students. As a result of the course and completion of a project exploring suicide in high school, Krystal stated that her research skills, analytical skills, and writing skills all improved in addition to becoming aware of more issues and her own understanding and reactions to others.

**Nicole Zdunek** was a criminology major. She worked and lived with individuals who exposed her to issues of diversity and social justice. As a result of the course, Nicole has become more open and understanding of diversity and social justice issues and as a result of her course project, discussing melanoma and tanning, she gained original research skills that will be very helpful in her future career. After taking the course, she states that she will pay closer attention to how she treats others.

**Marie Williams** was a communications media major. Marie is an African American woman who worked as a waitress and, as a result, interacted with a diverse group of people in an urban context. As a result of the course, Marie states that she will try to influence others by not giving into stereotypes or discrimination and has learned to analyze and censor her opinions rather than just blurt them out.

**Kristen Davis** was a criminology major. Kristen believes that she has been ridiculed for having lofty goals as a woman from people who think women should simply be housewives. Also, Kristen's best friend is gay and her parents are not accepting of him, and her friend from middle school is bi-racial and has trouble dealing with ridicule. Kristen's project was investigating preparing prisoners for re-entry into society.

**Brandi Golden** was a history major. She is originally from a rural context and admitted that there was no diversity unless you were within the university community. Her previous understanding of diversity was 'just dealing with people who you didn't see as being like yourself.' Brandi has friends who are gay and she is a Christian who had to interact and negotiate with atheists. Brandi also wonders about adults who return to college and how they cope.

**Melanie Townsend** was a respiratory care major. Melanie stated that she came from a small town with very little diversity where most people were white, middle class. As a result of her participation in the course, Melanie stated, 'I mean it helps to show that there's really more that we can do, we really don't think about it, we just kind of go on with our daily lives and really don't see that we can do things to make a difference.'

**Vanessa Timberland** was an interior design major. Vanessa faced ridicule from her peers because she was a high school athlete and is a trained firefighter. She observed many instances of prejudice in her home town in central Pennsylvania and would actually pretend to be ill in school just so the nurse would allow her to leave school early. To end the discrimination she faced, Vanessa was actually involved in a physical fight. As a result of participating in the class, Vanessa feels that she has become a more responsible citizen, has changed her definition of research by becoming more driven in completing her project, and

finally, she became more comfortable with writing because of the positive feedback she received.

**Rose Marie Tulip** was a fashion merchandising major. Rose Marie comes from a family with bi-racial members (African American and Caucasian) and an older aunt is not accepting and openly racist, but Rose's parents taught her to be open and accepting and to not judge others. Rose also has friends who are gay.

### **The Lessons Learned: Making Learning Authentic**

While what is presented in this article is a small portion of the larger study exploring how undergraduate research writing students experienced issues of diversity and social (in)justices, this article is a beginning of discussion on how students are affected by the everyday discourses that continue to privilege and marginalize us. Given a brief description of the participants, I came to understand that the ones who participated in this study had one or more of the following experiences: (1) personally experienced injustices such as discrimination due to their racial, gendered, and/or working class status (Franchesca, Krystal, Marie, Kristen, and Vanessa); (2) originally come from a (non)diverse context such as adopted from a foreign country or lived in a rural context with very little or no diversity (Brandi, Melanie, Jewel); (3) indirectly experienced or witnessed injustices such as saw friends and co-workers being bullied (Kristi, Rose Marie); and (4) critically conscious of the societal issues due to open discussion of social (in)justice topics with family, friends, etc. (Nicole). Unless the curriculum and faculty alike make direct connections for the students and allow them to select research writing topics that are connected to their lived experiences, higher education institutions and their constituents are not making learning authentic and are likely not giving them tools to be lifelong learners.

As a newly hired tenure-track faculty member in 2008, the design of this course, to focus on diversity and social justice, was my first project to be initiated at my institution, and I knew that as a multilingual, non-American teacher-scholar I was taking risks by bringing in controversial topics and giving students the flexibility of conducting their own qualitative social justice inquiry projects. However, my conviction in critical pedagogy and student empowerment through individualized pedagogies that discourages the well-known banking education and promotes active and dialogic teaching, kept my faith in creating participatory classroom discourse. Grounded in the vision for promoting a teacher-scholar model, a cornerstone for initiating this classroom-based and student-centered research agenda, this course make-up and the data gathered from the participants engaged in this course-research, will enable me to make a significant contribution to the fields of writing and social justice education for undergraduate students. In my subsequent research steps, as a result of continuing to teach this undergraduate research writing course, I hope to re-examine the students' data for more in-depth research dissemination exploring how undergraduate writing students navigate academic literacies and how they are ultimately socialized into the world of academic writing. I am hopeful that this endeavour of bridging teaching and research will have wider applications across multiple educational contexts in the years to come.

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**Appendix A: Overview of the Participants (2009-2011)**

Pseudonyms Race / Disciplinary Program	Social Justice Inquiry Project Topics
Franchesca Bulgari African-American / Business & Finance	<i>'The criticisms of the working and stay at home mother? Who should receive more credit?'</i>
Kristen Davis White / Criminology	<i>'Reintegration, recidivism, Re-Entry: Three Rs that don't Pay'</i>
Brandi Golden White / History	<i>'How important is diversity?: A study on students' opinions of history in public education'</i>
Jewel Hanson Bulgarian-American / Math Education	<i>'Mathematics: Only a man's world?'</i>
Kristi McComb White / Disability Services	<i>'Don't judge me!' Discrimination of special needs individuals</i>
Krystal Phoneix White / Psychology	<i>'How many teenagers does the media kill?'</i>
Vanessa Timberland White / Interior Design	<i>'Woman's Strength in a New Society'</i>
Melanie Townsend White / Respiratory Care	<i>'Can tunes help improve grades?'</i>
Marie Williams African-American/Comm Media	<i>Diversity in the Media</i>
Rose Marie Tulip White / Fashion Merchandising	<i>'The Use of Real Fur in the Fashion Industry'</i>
Nicole Zdunek White / Criminology	<i>'How far are you willing to risk your body?'</i>