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Critical Pedagogic Strategies for Teaching Social Justice in Nonprofit Management Education

Student organizing and activism is on the rise. From coast-to-coast, students are organizing campus protests and holding social demonstrations with demands of not only a more just and fair campus, but also a more just and fair society. Alongside this rise in organizing and activism, educators across fields and disciplines have begun acknowledging the need to directly confront and remedy (whether knowingly or unknowingly) histories of systemic omission in what is taught.

Despite such acknowledgment, some educators have expressed uncertainty about how to proceed in integrating and/or facilitating classroom activities and discussions on, what they likely consider to be, “controversial” and/or “sensitive” topics. For many of these educators, they have felt that they lacked the training, the expertise, and/or the experience to adequately address specific issues—particularly if they are not a member of a group that they deemed qualified to address them.

Therefore, in this article, we attempt to assist instructors in creating more inclusive and socially oriented classroom experiences. Through a critical pedagogic lens, we use the case of nonprofit management education (NME) to provide instructors with practical strategies they can use to help students build the skills necessary to address complex social problems and engage in critical social justice dialogues.

What is Critical Pedagogy?

Critical pedagogy provides a framework for understanding how to teach in liberating and empowering ways. In particular, critical pedagogy seeks to develop a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students. This type of teaching practice allows students to understand social, political, and economic contradictions and to act against oppressive elements of “reality.”

Critical educators recognize that knowledge learned in school is neither static, nor is it objective. Instead, school-based knowledge, in many ways, is a social construction rooted in power, historical context, and existing social relations.

Why Nonprofit Management Education (NME)?

Nonprofit management education (NME) is a field of study where liberation, empowerment, and other social justice topics are at the forefront of both theoretical and practical considerations. Since nonprofit organizations are known to provide critically needed services to the most vulnerable among us, they are viewed as the voice of the oppressed and marginalized.

Despite being established to confront and dismantle systems of oppression, however, many nonprofit organizations operate in ways that either deliberately or unconsciously uphold the status quo. For example, national surveys of nonprofit organizations have shown that while nonprofits exist to serve ethnically diverse and marginalized populations, the top management and members of the board of directors of these organizations are often socioeconomically homogeneous and not representative of the communities they serve.

This disconnect has led practitioners to criticize the sector for its own lack of equity and for, in many ways, exacerbating inequality and paternalism. Specifically, they have noted that rather than engage in critical discussions of “why” this lack of representation exists and questioning the systemic, institutional, and cultural systems that have created and maintained power imbalances in the sector, nonprofit boards and members of top management have simply existed within the historically unjust systems that have enabled them to obtain their positions.

Our Argument

Given these criticisms, we argue that NME is a field of study that is well-suited to equip future nonprofit leaders with the skills needed to address the complex array of social issues that they will undoubtedly face while working within communities. Although most NME programs focus heavily on tangible skills that are useful in the workplace (such as fundraising and governance), we argue that educational practices that emphasize the meaning of the nonprofit sector, the sector’s historical significance in the cultures and communities where it operates, and whether (and how) these organizations may or may not perpetuate existing systems of oppression, can provide students with a more critical and socially just educational experience.

In other words, we argue that connecting liberation to praxis allows students to act and reflect on their world in order to transform it.

By centering instruction on pedagogical practices that empower students to, either directly or indirectly, challenge dominant ideologies and gain agency through independent or team decision-making, critically oriented courses can help develop crucial critical thinking skills in students who will someday be presented with complex challenges as well as dynamic and evolving situations in their careers.

A Look at Practical Strategies

In our article, we focus specifically on three practical critical pedagogical strategies. We refer to these strategies as explicit integration, implicit integration, and sustained integration. For each strategy, we provide a detailed example of how it can be developed and implemented for NME instruction. This brief provides an overview of each strategy.

The first strategy, which we refer to as explicit integration, can be achieved by explicitly incorporating social justice topics into course lectures and/or or assignments. This type of integration is useful for both undergraduates and graduate students. At the undergraduate level, explicit integration can be achieved by inviting guest speakers to discuss social justice topics. Then, either individually or in small groups, instructors can ask students to develop recommendations about how the information that they heard can be used by a nonprofit manager to create a more diverse and inclusive organizational environment. At the graduate level, explicit integration can be achieved by directly including these topics in major class assignments. For example, instructors can require students to select a justice-oriented topic of their choice and develop specific nonprofit management recommendations about it.

Another method of critically incorporating social justice topics into NME is an implicit approach utilizing experiential education techniques. By implicit, we mean activities that upend power dynamics without directly calling students' attention to the upending. In the context of NME, an example of implicit integration can be seen in experiential philanthropy initiatives.

Experiential philanthropy is defined as a “teaching and learning approach that integrates charitable giving with academic study, in order to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (Olberding, 2009, p. 465). It is intended to teach students not only about philanthropy, but also about how to evaluate philanthropic responses to social issues; however, unlike traditional service-learning where “students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs” (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996), experiential philanthropy may or may not involve an organized service component. In fact, the primary goal of experiential philanthropy is not to create greater service opportunities, but to provide students with the opportunity to assume the role of a philanthropic funding agent on behalf of their local community.

According to grantmakers, from a practical standpoint, experiential philanthropy has numerous benefits. It equips students with grantmaking skills, it provides them with opportunities to financially address social issues, it enhances their philanthropic motivations, and it raises the overall visibility of philanthropy. By implicitly integrating social justice topics into classroom instruction using experiential techniques, instructors can help students consider the larger responsibility that they have to invest in their communities while not necessarily explicitly directing them to specific issues.

A third method instructors can use to critically incorporate social justice topics into their courses is what we refer to as sustained integration. With sustained integration, students are able to critically examine various topics as they are woven throughout the course. An example of sustained integration is the use of case studies and current events throughout the semester to provide examples of when the nonprofit sector intersects with different social justice issues.

Conclusion

In the article, “Teaching Social Justice in Nonprofit Management Education: A Critical Pedagogy and Practical Strategies,” we use a critical pedagogical framework to demonstrate how NME instructors can integrate social justice topics into their courses. Such integration, we argue, serves two purposes. First, it responds to the rise in student activism and calls for colleges and universities to engage more directly with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Secondly, it provides NME instructors with practical strategies and resources for engaging in socially oriented instruction.

While the strategies and resources provided in the article undoubtedly benefit students, they also benefit instructors, communities, and the nonprofit sector. Indeed, as opposed to more traditional pedagogical practices, the strategies and resources outlined in this article provide a critical perspective that allows students, instructors, and communities to learn and unlearn in symbiotic ways.

This brief is based on the full article:

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