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Writing and Presenting Policy Briefs: A Pedagogical Approach to Student Engagement

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In this short article, we make an argument for immersing community psychology students in the public policy process in order to promote critical thinking and engagement. A short review of literature on student engagement is followed by some specific ideas about the pedagogy of the public policy process. Several relevant active pedagogical approaches to teaching about policy are reviewed. We describe the objectives and assignments from a class on Child Welfare, Law, and Social Policy, including written policy briefs and subsequent oral presentations. We present student feedback, and then we end with some conclusions about the approach. The interested reader is directed to Britner and Alpert (2005) for a more expansive article on the topic.

Promoting Student Engagement by Engagement in the Policy Process

In many educational settings, students have been socialized as passive learners and faculty as passive teachers. Students become bored and unmotivated while faculty become disappointed and frustrated. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2004), a survey of faculty and 163,000 first year students and seniors at 472 colleges and universities, offers some insights into the relationships between educational practice and student success. Consistent with pedagogical literature, the NSSE data suggest that faculty who expect students to study more and arrange class to this end wind up with students who are more engaged and productive. In turn, student engagement in the higher education classroom has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, including improved critical thinking (Burbach, Matkin, & Fritz, 2004). Student engagement in the classroom is difficult, but attainable through faculty preparation and class assignments that demand students' active involvement in the learning process.

Why would policy-related courses and assignments help with engagement? Community psychology students must understand how policies and laws affect individuals, families, and communities and how research can affect laws and policies (e.g., Bogenschneider, 2002, 2006; McCall & Groark, 2000). Several recurrent themes appear in the discussion of essential components of policy-oriented courses. Many authors agree that the goals of such courses should include an increase in students' critical thinking skills, full engagement of students in the course content, and an increase in students' knowledge of course material, as well as an acknowledgement of the contextual nature of public policy (Anderson & Skinner, 1995). In addition, researchers agree that policy courses should go beyond the delivery of course material. A successful policy course prepares its students to be educated and active consumers of public policy information. Furthermore, students should emerge from such a course better able to

participate in the policymaking process (Rocha & Johnson, 1997). Community psychologists have much to offer to public policy, provided that they are clear about their biases and role conflicts and can offer an objective conclusion about the state-of-the-art in their field of research (Bazelon, 1982).

Course Overview

We now describe a course taught by the first author in the School of Family Studies at the University of Connecticut. As stated on the syllabus for the undergraduate version of the course on "Child Welfare, Law, and Social Policy," the goals of the class are to acquaint students with: various areas in which public policies and laws affect children and families, and in which family/social science research and practice are germane to legal policy (and case law); the methods through which empirical research findings may influence case law and legislation (*amicus curiae* and policy briefs); intensive, empirical examinations of contemporary social problems that relate to children and families; and, the relationship between the fields of family studies/social science, policy, and law, and how this knowledge can affect study design and dissemination. Key areas of focus include: primary prevention vs. secondary and tertiary intervention approaches to promoting child/family welfare and mental health; policies and services directed toward individuals with special needs; and, family violence prevention and intervention efforts. The course has been taught as a small seminar (10-20 students) and as a medium-sized class (40-55 students).

In this course, the instructor attempts to get students excited about the material by "sharing" the field and his experiences with them, so that they in turn will explore areas that they find compelling. Asking students to select an issue or a policy that is important to them is an essential part of getting students to develop a commitment to the class. There is a clear focus on active learning and critical thinking. We know that learning by doing is an incredibly effective approach. Taking actual policy issues and current events and creating practical solutions and strategies drives home the connection between abstract concepts and how they manifest in the real world.

Graded Course Elements

With an emphasis on skill building, final grades in the undergraduate course are determined by students' performance on a mid-term exam, final exam, class participation, critical literature review research paper, written policy briefs, and the oral presentation of a brief. Students are given grading criteria for all assignments in advance.

Research paper. The first major assignment is a standard literature review. This is the kind of assignment with which many undergraduate students are already familiar. They select a topic, find relevant scholarly articles, and synthesize them in the form of a 10- to 15-page *critical review* research paper. This assignment is intended to get students familiar with the social science literature relevant to their policy issue. The suggested structure for the paper includes: a critical review of the available literature (noting strengths and limitations of research methodology); conclusions about what is known from the convergent findings, and what is still not conclusively known; and, recommendations for future research.

Policy brief. What exactly is a policy brief? It is an exercise in science translation. It summarizes and critiques existing research for a non-scientific audience in order help to inform

policy or law at any stage. Policy briefs are intended to be objective; therefore, social scientists need to be careful not to allow their personal biases and influence their writing. At the same time, in order to be useful, a policy brief should make a statement regarding the status of the scientific literature. A brief that does not assist policymakers in making a decision will not be useful. "Science translation" briefs that summarize and critique existing research can help to inform policy or law at any stage, from identifying a problem to an extensive evaluation of existing policy (Roesch, Golding, Hans, & Reppucci, 1991). A policy brief is one of the major forms of communication between legislators and their staff; it is also used for translating research for a variety of applied audiences. The construction of such a document, after an extensive review of the research literature, provides the student with practice in preparing a succinct summary of information for practitioners and policy makers.

Thus, after receiving feedback on their research paper, students write a shorter (3- to 5-page) policy brief directed to a specific applied audience – for example, a state agency or a Congressional committee. Here, the student has to consolidate their research paper findings and remove jargon. The brief should address a specific issue on which an intervention or policy is being considered. The task is to: summarize the issue; present the relevant perspectives and the associated research support; and, make a recommendation for action. One key is to remember the audience. For example, in a policy brief relating to the Adoption & Safe Families Act, one student proposed changes to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families that would increase federal financial support for reunification efforts for biological parents.

Oral presentation. Finally, students give a short oral presentation, condensing their information even further. At the end of the semester, students have 5 minutes in class to present their briefs orally, as if the class was the legislative body or community entity that they seek to address. The students then field questions from the class for 3 minutes.

Grading criteria. The written and oral policy assignments are graded according to the following criteria: quality of content; logical and cohesive argument; use of relevant research articles (especially primary sources); demonstrated understanding of the topic; critique of research; integration of cited articles; appropriate citation; quality of references; and, organization (issue; critical review; conclusions; recommendations). For the written assignments, the quality of writing is assessed. For the oral presentation, preparation, professionalism, and the quality of the visual presentation (usually PowerPoint) are also evaluated.

Student Evaluations

Quantitative feedback. At the end of the semester, students rate instructors/courses on 11 dimensions in courses at the University of Connecticut. The rated dimensions are: presented material effectively; organization; clear objectives; fulfilled objectives; clear assignments; stimulated interest; graded fairly; appropriate exam; accessibility; shows interest, concern; preparation. Ratings range from 1 ("Unacceptable") to 10 ("Outstanding").

The mean for these 11 ratings, completed by all students in the course, is 9.7. This rating is fairly consistent over five undergraduate course offerings, from 1998 to 2005 (mean class size = 35; range of 10 to 55). At face value, the high scores suggest that students were satisfied with the course's organization, assignments, and objectives.

Qualitative feedback. Over the years, a number of undergraduates have stated that although the class required the most work or writing or thinking of any course they have taken,

they have learned the most, liked the class the most, and/or found the class to be most relevant to their future work as any class they have taken. Students in the Winter 2003 undergraduate course were asked to provide written feedback on their experiences of the course, including the writing and presentation of their briefs, at the completion of the class. There were several recurring themes in the students' responses. We now present those themes in terms of perceived challenges, issues related to the process of translating research, and outcomes.

Students appreciated being able to choose their own topics. They reported that it made the work more enjoyable and motivated them to dig deeper into the issue. At the same time, many students were anxious about trying a new form of writing, about presenting in front of the class, and about having to "take a stand" rather than simply summarize research. Students were uncertain of their skills at the beginning of these assignments. For many students, the concept of a research paper was familiar. Translation from research to brief, however, was challenging. Students found it difficult to be concise and write without employing research jargon. The students also showed a bit of savvy in understanding the importance of adding a compelling story, a sobering statistic, or a real face to go with their data-based review of research findings on their chosen topic.

By the end of the course, every student reported learning a great deal from the brief-writing exercises. Many reported that, in spite of their initial fear of the unknown, they emerged from the course with a feeling of "empowerment" or an increase in confidence. Students reported that the course increased their knowledge of their topics, and helped them develop research, brief writing, and presentation skills. Students ended the course feeling confident in their ability to participate in the policymaking process. Several students commented that brief writing and presenting were helpful and exciting methods of learning. They appreciated the practical application of information, and they gained a sense of how research studies are put to use in the real world.

Conclusion

We present a promising approach to teaching undergraduate students about policy-relevant issues. The idea of brief writing and oral presentations in an undergraduate course is hardly new (e.g., Rocha & Johnson, 1997), but the literature on its effectiveness is limited. At this point, we feel comfortable suggesting that student ratings and open-ended comments on an assessment of end-of-the-semester reactions to the assignments support the notion that the course and assignments challenged the students. Students also emerged from the course reporting that they had developed skills, confidence, and an appreciation for the interplay between law, policy, and the social sciences.

On a broader level, the course described here represents a model for promoting students' critical thinking and engagement in science translation or advocacy. The written and oral simulations conducted in the course offer the undergraduate participants the opportunity to engage in problem solving with some real-world constraints. Though the assignments allow for some degree of creativity, students are compelled to present policy recommendations in a way digestible for *other* consumers (i.e., legislators, bureaucrats, practitioners). Students must communicate their platform yet rein in their passion or opinions in order to be persuasive within the parameters of our social policymaking system. In this way, the brief writing and oral presentations help develop students' scientific research *and* lay communication skills. Such skills

are critical not only for students who may pursue careers in community psychology, but also for any student who hopes to cultivate change in our society.

Note

Parts of this article are based on a paper on policy brief writing that we presented at the 2005 SCRA Biennial Conference as part of a symposium on "Integrating Social Policy and Psychology Education," and an article we published in *Marriage and Family Review* in 2005.

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