

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

More Than a Slogan: Or, How We Built a Social Justice Program That Made Our Campus More Just

by Nicholas Hengen Fox

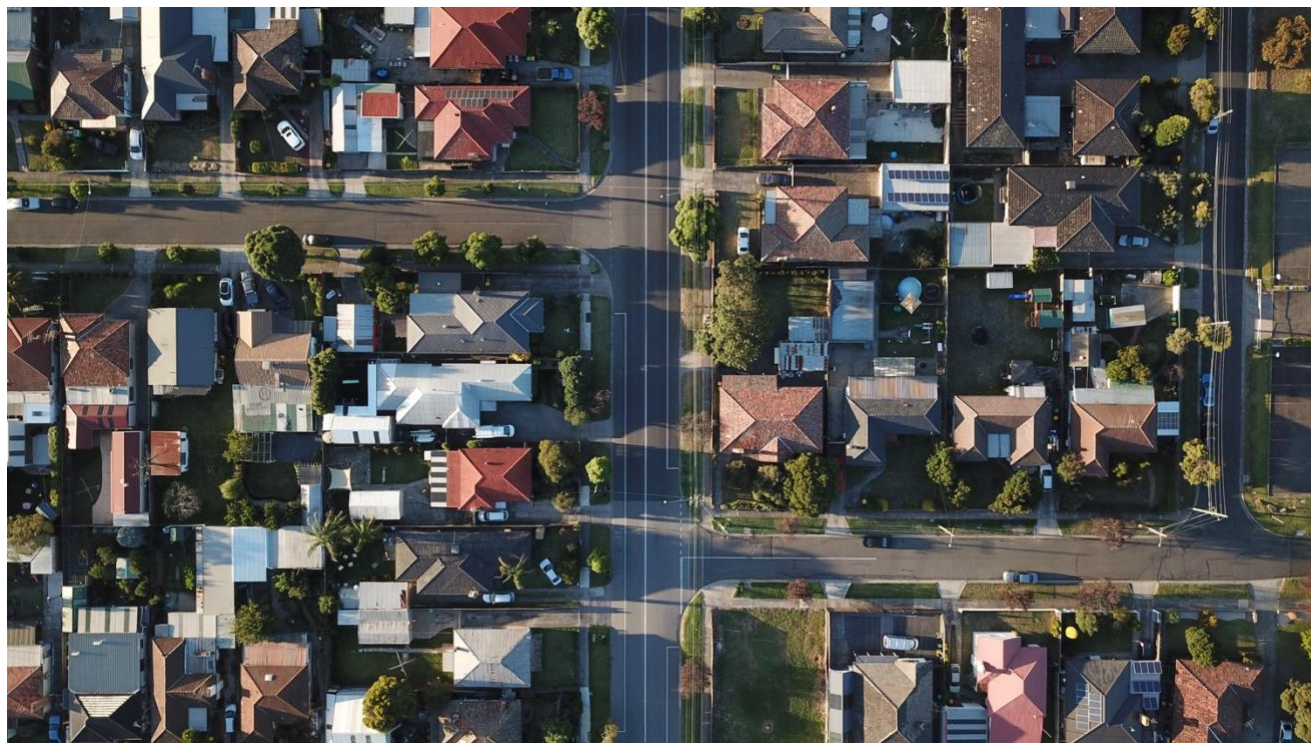


PHOTO BY TOM RUMBLE ON UNSPLASH

Today on college campuses in the U.S., “social justice” is everywhere—a bright signal of some institutional wokeness in institutions that have not always been good or awake to the needs of many in their communities. It proudly names staff positions, like a “social justice advocate,”¹ and programs—concentrations, minors, majors, even graduate degrees. There are now so many such programs that the conservative website *The Blaze* created a public spreadsheet to mock them! (Airaksinen). More informally, the term is lobbed at those “social justice warriors”—students and faculty—involved in these varied projects.

I am, alas, one of them.

In 2014, I was part of a small group of faculty and staff at Portland Community College (PCC) that created a concentration of courses called the Social Justice Focus Award and, the next year, built a curriculum for a capstone class called “Social Justice: Theory & Practice” (SJ210). One purpose of this article is to share this experience for faculty considering building such a course, program, or major; maybe you can learn from our successes (and our mistakes).

But in telling this story, I am also tracing the contradictions tied up in the proliferation of “social justice” on college campuses. Clearly, part of it is an attempt at relevance (a.k.a. student recruitment) in a world that youth (the people we mostly serve) see as pretty dramatically unjust. But even as a marketing strategy, for higher ed to claim it’s doing social justice sparks off massive institutional identity conflicts. Higher education’s long-term investment in (scientific) objectivity, neutrality, and teaching students “*how* to think not *what* to think” stands in direct contrast to doing the work of justice.² What’s more, social justice is proliferating in a moment that Joe Kinchloe calls the “Great Denial”—when, in defense against right wing attack on our independence and our funding, our institutions first claim neutrality and then deny that education has a political dimension at all (10).

But you can’t be doing the work of justice while embracing an imaginary apolitical neutrality. So claiming to teach social justice—to grant degrees in it!—begs important questions about the kinds of promises we’re making to our students and our communities, to say nothing of our conception of who we are as institutions.

I’ll argue here that if we teach social justice in the framework dictated by traditional higher ed commitments, we probably do a bad job. Justice—especially when discussed in a classroom or a journal article—tends to go big: national institutions, global considerations, abstract questions. These focuses, as Amartya Sen has convincingly argued, don’t much help the work of justice.³ Particularly true, I’d add, on campus: such scale is probably out of reach in the space of a paper, a classroom, even a multi-year degree program.

But we *can* make good on the promise of social justice. Based on our work in building the Social Justice program, I will argue that the work of justice is in reach when such courses are built around three traits: they should be (1) centered on a student-led, class-defined, campus-based project that (2) involves collective action. That work must

be grounded in a classroom that is (3) explicitly *not* neutral. Such an approach doesn’t align with traditional academic norms or common practices in many social justice programs. It does, however, align with commitments of radical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching, as I’ll detail here. This approach, to borrow language from Sen, leads to a more practical “enhancing justice and removing injustice” at the exact points of its impact; in our case, making changes in our college each term (5, ix). We don’t aim at global justice; we aim at making the changes we can make on campus.⁴

As our students learn to identify injustice, talk about it with others, and enact strategies for change, they are meeting the course’s learning outcomes while improving life for many on campus, including undocumented students, nonbinary students, and students living without housing.

And what we’ve learned is that by starting there, our students are actually making the world more just. As our students learn to identify injustice, talk about it with others, and enact strategies for change, they are meeting the course’s learning outcomes while improving life for many on campus, including undocumented students, nonbinary students, and students living without housing. Their work has made “social justice” more than a slogan on our campus.

Nuts & Bolts: Making SJ at PCC

We had no idea, in 2014, that we were so on trend. From George Mason University (with its vaunted, Koch-funded think tanks) to Eastern Kentucky University; from selective liberal arts colleges (Ohio Wesleyan) to big state schools (U of Iowa, U of Kansas), to a raft of Christian colleges (Cornerstone, Trevecca Nazarene, Oral Roberts), programs—minors, BAs, MAs, even PhDs in “social justice”—were showing up. At the time, all we really knew was that one local school had a Social Justice minor.

But our students were demanding more. A few faculty—teaching in History, Women’s and Gender Studies, Sociology, and Literature—noticed that students were taking all of our classes centering on different facets of social justice, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes in sequence. They were reading novels about the exploitation of the working class, studying the corporate agriculture that has destroyed our planet and our health, looking at great social movements across the landscape of the history of the United States... and they kept asking us what other classes they could take.

Working through typically convoluted processes,⁵ we began to build a program that would tie these courses together. At PCC, we don’t have majors, so this non-degree program would be designated a “focus awards”—weird institutional language for a concentration of three, four, or five classes in a particular area of study, but which (per our

college catalogue) “won't appear on your transcript.” Institutionally it's basically a sheet of paper, but it can help students find more of what they are interested in learning. In the initial stage, we also talked a lot about how we might mitigate (if possible) the weight of the subjects in these classes. We worried that however important our subjects felt in isolation, our classes, especially in concentrated doses, were potentially doing some damage—both to individuals with the heavy emotional labor and to the better world we think of ourselves as working towards.⁶ As one student said about my class, “everything in here is a trigger.” And if what you keep learning about justice is that everything is unjust and that many good people have failed to make justice happen, it's hard to go out and work for it. (Sadly, a quick chapter from Rebecca Solnit's *Hope in the Dark* or a triumphalist recounting of the victories of the civil rights movement just isn't enough to pull everyone through.) It can be a quick route to cynicism—the opposite direction we intend to send our students.⁷

Our first practical step: to figure out what classes, beyond those we regularly taught, would go in the program. We emailed our college's almost 2,000 faculty members to ask for nominations of courses that might fit along these two vectors:

Theory	Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify, understand, and critically analyze systems of power, privilege, and domination in society • Identify, understand, and critically analyze theoretical frameworks and approaches to social change • Identify, understand, and critically analyze key organizations, events, and struggles that have shaped the development of social movements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a toolbox of skills and strategies to advance social change • Build mutual and responsible relationships with community partners • Expand a sense of social responsibility and agency and a commitment to diversity and equity • Transform assumptions and beliefs in order to imagine new ideas and possibilities (“[ft faculty] Does your course fit into a Social Justice Focus Award?”)⁸

Faculty recommended courses and a small committee (a few faculty beyond the original three, as well as coordinators of two of our campus multicultural centers) juried them, looking particularly for learning outcomes that grounded every section the course taught in these practices. For instance, while a few First-Year Writing (FYW) instructors suggested their courses—and, like some FYW courses, they were clearly connected to social justice—we

didn't include them because not *all* FYW courses would necessarily feature social justice practices. It's not in the course's learning outcomes.⁹

In the end, we built an interdisciplinary award with about 20 courses that students would choose among, including Food Systems and the Environment, Chicano/Latino Studies, Communications, Philosophy, and of course our own fields.¹⁰ And—within the institutional frames and our capacities to take on more administrative work—we were happy with it.¹¹ At the very least, more students would find more courses that linked to their particular interests—and even faculty who didn't have personal connections to the work at the start would be able to guide curious students towards them.

And, yes, at that point we jumped on the bandwagon, naming the program the “Social Justice Focus Award.” We went with “social justice” not because any of us particularly valued the term; in fact, we hesitated for the same reasons I mentioned in the intro: the lack of shared understanding around the term, the way it was easily appropriated. But we also felt “social justice” would be appealing to both administrators (whose approval we needed) and students who might (we worried) hesitate to sign up for a class with a more radical or activist name—we talked about “Revolution 101,” among other unlikely names. We adopted “social justice” in a fairly opportunistic way. And however vexed I was feeling about all of that, I admit to feeling a blush of excitement when “Social Justice” eventually popped up between Sign Language Interpretation and Spanish in our college's course catalogue.

During that first year of talking to deans and presidents and the Degrees and Certificates Committee—slow going, given that no one received release from teaching for doing it—we continued our conversations with students about what would help make the classes feel more hopeful. This feedback was initially informal, but we clarified it further in a series of panel discussions with student leaders in our various student centers (e.g. the Women's Resource Center, the Multicultural Center) and student government. We consistently heard that students wanted a class that applied social justice thinking to our campus. They wanted to directly address some injustice within our immediate, shared scope.

I was surprised by the consistency of this message. Perhaps my own common sense was shaped by those dominant big picture approaches to justice described by Sen.¹² Those perfect institutions, somehow, were always—in my mind—off campus, elsewhere. Perhaps, also, the prevalence of community-based learning or other campus-college partnerships were shaping my expectations (more on that below). But at the very least, the students' interest made practical sense: At a community college where students are often working full-time in addition to their courses, doing the work on campus made some practical sense.

It took us most of the next year to create and get approval to put this vision into practice with the award's capstone class: SJ 210: Social Justice Theory & Practice.¹³ We again had to represent at multiple committee meetings

(mostly committees that had a few friendly faculty, thankfully); had to line up documented support from various upper-level administrators; and of course, then had to deal with the logistics of making sure the course arrived in the Courseleaf system our college uses. While the last step seemed simple, just procedural, we learned that even that required persistent attention. Despite the institutional approval of the course, it didn't just show up in the catalogue; and if it wasn't in the catalogue, it couldn't be scheduled; and if it got scheduled late, there might not be room on campus or students available to sign up.¹⁴ It took almost two years, but by Fall 2016 Social Justice: Theory and Practice was on the books as the capstone, the one course required of anyone getting the Social Justice Focus Award.

How our Program does the work of Justice

In the last three years, it's been a thrill to see familiar faces on splashy posters about how microaggressions harm education, to see students working to inform others about sexual violence on campus populating the tables usually reserved for people handing out free bibles or selling posters of John Belushi. It's exciting to hear from colleagues who come to us because they're frustrated by what students are up to. It's exciting (as a tenured faculty member) to get called to the president's office because of something students have done. These instances are thrilling because they exemplify how students in the class (many for the first time) "practice noncooperation"—a phrase from Gene Sharp—by shouting in buildings, marching around with signs and posters, trying to interest strangers in their cause during the day of action (35).

But beyond these momentary eruptions, the work students do in the SJ program and capstone has changed our college. The results of the class projects aren't just a final paper, a grade, four credits, and some happy memories of a good class. Two years ago, student protests directly led to the hiring of the college's first tenure-track ethnic studies faculty. Other student projects forced a coding change on how gender is entered into student records and the development of a center focused on the needs of undocumented students on campus. I'll say more about these victories—the students' victories I want to emphasize—below.

The rest of this essay examines how the design of the capstone course has enabled learning opportunities, hope, and these tangible, long-term changes to the institution. While I opened this essay by harrumphing at "social justice" as being little more than a virtue signal for higher ed institutions, the work that happens in the capstone class has made me understand that, whatever the institution might want to do with social justice, a well-defined program can do the work of justice and help colleges become more accountable for their use of the term. The rest of this essay focuses in on the three aspects of our capstone class that have enabled this: (1) a curricular focus on student-defined projects that (2) are centered on collective action and (3) anchored in a classroom space that rejects neutrality—an all-too-common posture in higher ed, which is (more surprisingly) praised in a lot of writing about social justice programs.

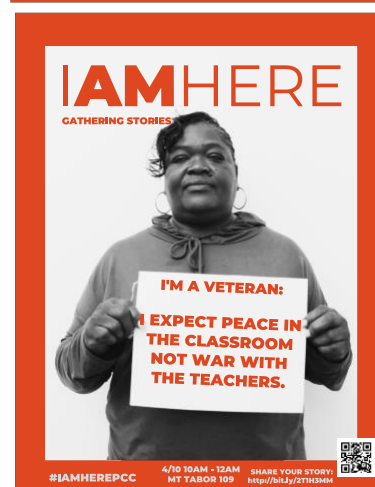
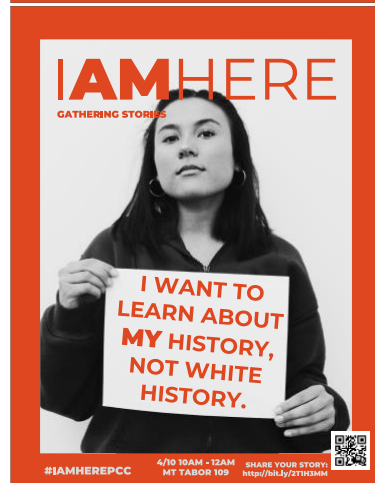
Feature #1: A Shared, Class-defined Project

In one section of the capstone, students discussed—for a whole two-hour class meeting and parts of another—whether the class project should focus on the unmet needs of undocumented students on our campus. Students heard from one another, reflected on what they heard, shifted positions, reconciled their desire to do good with the risks this work presents for undocumented students (even in a self-proclaimed sanctuary institution). There were difficult moments. Some students (who were personally unaffected) said dismissive (or, more generously, naive) things. Some undocumented students came out to the class during this discussion (others were already public with their status). But the conversation, shaped by the use of stack ("stacking" of speakers in an equitable way, which was run by a student), developed real clarity.¹⁵ And—after all that—the class ultimately decided to focus on supporting students without stable housing instead.

I can imagine some teachers getting vexed here—So much time lost! What about the readings?! I was definitely feeling that in the moment. And, along with that, other pressures: some students were ready to get moving on the project; others evinced real anxiety about the intensity of the conversation. Still, talking it through and building consensus is part of the learning of

the course—we literally teach these skills.¹⁶ And, of course, democracy is slow.¹⁷

In each of our SJ capstone classes, the students complete a self-defined collective project. It's in the learning



outcomes.¹⁸ The class picks the issue in which to intervene. They decide how they will intervene. This is a substantial contrast between our version of this course and many social justice programs capstone courses,¹⁹ many of which explicitly require work *in* the community (as opposed to on campus) that happens within already existing partnerships. Some social justice programs depict such work—students building houses, Habitat for Humanity style, or working in the fields—on their webpages.²⁰ As I noted above, there’s a clear link between Community-Based Learning (CBL) and many social justice programs. Anecdotally, when I spoke with folks at other regional institutions about my research on this project, CBL came up in every conversation.²¹

Our approach is different. We, as faculty, don’t define justice by aligning the class with a particular non-profit and their already existing mission. It’s up to the students. Picking the class issue and intervention makes up the middle part of SJ 210. It is a topic of conversation for weeks and eventually takes over the class entirely. But the time is worth it. The opportunity to make this decision helps students recognize their agency. And if they can’t pick a topic—which sometimes feels like a real possibility!—then they won’t have met the learning outcomes (or made the campus more just).

Beyond the development of agency, this approach has other benefits. Starting by *talking through* a shared project within frames where people in the room are explicitly affected pushes students beyond “positional confinement”—the phrase Amartya Sen uses to describe how our identities shape our understandings of justice (154). While each student has their own personal project as well, they can’t—in this shared work—dwell fully in their own particular (often already-explored) spaces for thinking about justice. This fracturing—where one student works on animal testing, one on deforestation, one on “improving treatment of skaters”—is a theme in social justice-focused courses.²² The shared project forces conversations—and pushes students to evaluate which aspects of justice merit the work and attention of their classmates.

Pedagogically, the way this work is shared strengthens the bonds of the classroom. Since everyone is implicated, everyone is more likely to contribute. This leads to better conversations (and of course it’s a baseline principle of culturally responsive teaching).²³ And because we teach consensus decision-making, more voices are heard than in a traditional classroom conversation.

None of this is easy. It takes time. And it can be stressful. In one section, a student had a panic attack while the class was practicing consensus process by trying to order an imaginary pizza. Still, having been with these students in this work, I feel confident these are worthy risks because of

the learning they enable in the moment—and the action the students can do together as a result.

Feature #2: Collective Action

In a class that focuses on immediately felt injustices, justice requires doing something. Once students have picked their issue, they begin the work of planning a day of action, which typically takes place near (sometimes *very* near) the end of the term. For me—and other faculty—there’s anxiety around this. You show up for a class meeting over which you have very little control. I felt this acutely with the class that focused on unhoused students. Their day of action had been devised by three subcommittees. I had a sense of what they were up to, but I could see they weren’t fully communicating amongst themselves. I feared, walking to the classroom that



morning, that I’d find the students sitting in their customary circle, waiting for me to tell them what we were going to do.

But when I showed up that morning, the classroom was full of noise. There were tents and sleeping bags, lots of poster board, a bunch of toothbrushes, cans of food. Before class started, the students were running around the

building, throwing up posters with facts about students and poverty, taping things (like the toothbrushes) to them, and setting up tents with facts and stories hanging on the outside.

I watched them as they watched people reacting—some students and staff passing by preoccupied (or deliberately ignoring them), others noticing the unusual display of camping gear in the common areas of a building full of classrooms, the cafeteria, and the student center. I was standing there, feeling proud of them for pulling it together, when they all started whispering that campus security was coming—one classmate had texted an alert.

The security officers showed up. They bought coffee at the kiosk. They surveilled a bit. And they left. The class giggled.

If the day of action ended there, I would've been happy—and we would've had a lot to debrief. But a student—he was president of the student government that year and often a vocal leader in the class—pulled out copies of some chants his group had written. In the atrium, he began to lead one, missing the rhythm over and over and inspiring more giggles. They stuttered along for a few minutes and then with the president again pushing, the students picked up some of the tents and set off marching and chanting—out of the building and through the quad.

After marching for ten minutes, the students were exhilarated. One woman in the class, who almost never spoke in the big group, was beaming as she shouted the class's slogans. On our quiet, exurban campus, it was a remarkable day.

In that day of collective action, I found myself watching students move through stages of dismantling their well-trained sense of obedience. As Gene Sharp argues, a default sense of obedience to power is the foundation of social control—and, I'd add, is often taught to students from their first moments in school, making their rebellion *at school* particularly powerful. For a class, for credit that day, students were breaking with *habits* (being quiet, sitting still, learning from a teacher at the front of the classroom), with *fear of sanction* (they were spying on campus security officers, they were putting up posters without permission), and, perhaps most importantly, the *absence of self-confidence to disobey* (32). They weren't just learning Sharp's theory or facts about the stunning number of students living unhoused. They were chanting slogans they wrote, putting up posters they created, asking for food and supplies (on behalf of those in need) from other students and staff on campus. Their day of action was an exercise in putting their learning together by "practicing noncooperation" (Sharp 35).

And doing these things, they felt powerful.²⁴ As more than one student reported the next week in our class debrief, they had never done anything like this before. They were fulfilling the course learning outcomes (the collective action, the use of targeted communication strategies), but also "gain[ing] understandings of how social justice movements achieve change"—through disobedience, through hope, through action (Social Justice 210 Course Outcomes).

And the doing is a foundational part of the work of justice. By resisting—even for just a couple hours on campus—the obedience that enables the injustices that structure our world, they are making some change. Not that the college is suddenly and immediately just, but *more* just. And a *more just* campus is good work for a ten-week course.

Feature #3: Not Neutral

It probably seems obvious to say at this point, but this is not a class led by the familiar "fiction of the completely objective robot prof" (Gooblar). Still, I want to pause here to acknowledge that the class's explicit non-neutrality is foundational to the work I've been describing. It merits saying, I think, but particularly because, neutrality shows up consistently in writing about social justice work on campus.

For context, two quick examples from instructors specifically thinking about social justice-focused courses. Kristi Holsinger's book *Teaching Justice* delves into "barriers and limitations ... to teaching about social justice and activism in the college classroom environment," particularly *within the field* of criminal justice. Holsinger finds resistance from students (who may not see themselves as committed to social justice) as well as concerns from faculty about "ideology" (111). One faculty member she surveys worries about "walking the line between espousing my political ideals and encouraging students to think broadly," while another complains that "Many who teach social justice tend to be liberal" (114).

Lauretta Frederking's *Reconstructing Social Justice* details a minor in social justice at a private, Catholic university. Her description of the social justice course repeatedly evokes neutrality: "For the introductory course, my colleague and I determined that it was a good sign that typically both sides were equally angry with us" (11). This is the pedagogical equivalent of bothsidesism in media—where all positions are put forward as if they are of equal value. Later she writes of her responsibility in class to "ground the [students'] emotion in empirical cases and contexts, and to analyze ideas *rather than pick sides* within the context of a social justice debate" and of "rigidly limiting [her] participation during the emotional moments precisely to affirm *neutrality*" (163, 164, italics mine).

This is a familiar impulse for many in higher education—shaped by cultural practices (refraining from displays of emotion, maintaining hierarchies) based in the "epistemologies of the North" that have defined both campus norms and the conventional ways of knowing within many disciplines.²⁵ I admit that I defer to this impulse in some courses I teach²⁶ and I can see how this approach might feel right as shaped by some disciplinary spaces, particularly Holsinger's field of criminal justice. (Which, for me, begs a bigger question of how effectively one can teach social justice in certain pre-existing disciplinary fields.)

In teaching social justice, I think the answer cannot be neutrality. We need to acknowledge from the start that the course is not neutral. First, because even with the vexed and shifting definition of "justice," I do not think many conservative positions (at least as currently defined in the United States) can find a home in social justice courses. As

philosopher David Miller, in his analysis of social justice, notes: “The traditionally conservative focus on personal liberty and individual rights is often used to *block* conversations about social justice before they begin.”²⁷ In other words, if the course doesn’t own some explicit commitments—if it performs a version of neutrality common in academic thinking and teaching—it will be quite hard to do the things I describe above. For instance, if the class is structured around neutrality, those long group discussions could end up being even longer because we’d have to start with whether migrants deserve justice at all, punishing underrepresented students who might feel the need to defend themselves. Put another way, because the class is explicitly not neutral from the start we don’t risk the most vulnerable members of the class being coerced into a “debate” about their status because the class has already moved past that debate. If we approach social justice as a term that encompasses any concern students might have, it will be impossible to narrow down the issues or spaces of intervention as a group.²⁸ And what happens to us if we refrain from reacting emotionally to things like the students chanting and marching around campus? Does that diminish some of the repair in that work for the students (or for us)? Does it signal to them that their behavior isn’t what the instructor wanted?

***To me, in naming the course
“social justice,” we institutionally
announce some commitments—that,
say, people, particularly those who
experience oppression, deserve
justice.***

To me, in naming the course “social justice,” we institutionally announce some commitments—that, say, people, particularly those who experience oppression, deserve justice. This is made more explicit in the course’s learning outcomes, which name “systems of power, privilege, and domination” and the work of “critique[ing] structures of power and oppression and their impact on communities, the environment, and society” (Social Justice 210 Outcomes). By naming and framing the course as we have, we set up a big tent around social justice—it’s not a course in X-ism or Y-ism; and debates about whether bad parking is an injustice or about anarchism’s effectiveness are common in the class. While there are other classes where neutrality may be helpful, for the conversations, collaborations, and actions I’ve described here, rejecting neutrality is an essential foundation.

Doing the Work of Social Justice

When you put those three features together you have a curriculum that teaches social justice effectively by engaging the students in a transferable set of practices—identifying local injustice, finding consensus, and working to make changes. And it’s in the way these practices—of talking, deciding, feeling anxious, and ultimately acting and feeling the joy in it—come together that the class achieves that goal we all held at the start: repair. The hope and joy students

find in the action (and the glow that follows, illuminating the debrief session) is the most visible aspect of overcoming the hopelessness and trauma that so much learning about injustice can engender. We haven’t solved all the issues, but the class creates space and time to disabuse students of any of the conceptions of their powerlessness that have been pushed on them by the institutions they’ve lived within.

The weight this class puts on the intervention is why, throughout this essay, I’ve been drawing on Amartya Sen’s *Idea of Justice* as a way to contrast what we do with most dominant philosophical understandings of “justice.” Like Sen, we give primacy to what is essentially a pragmatist approach: doing what we can to make the world *more* just without worrying about the perfect justice it’s all too easy to become fixated on. This is an important contrast, though I haven’t named it explicitly, with John Rawls. Rawls—whose paradigm for thinking about justice is dominant in lots of contexts, including lots of writing about programs like ours—offers a very different approach to thinking about justice.²⁹ While I can’t neatly capture his complex, career-spanning work here, I can say that many of its aspects are a mismatch for our work. His focus on a normative approach doesn’t gel with our pragmatist needs; his interest in how abstract figures apply fairness behind a veil simply doesn’t map onto the world our students live in. Rawls is useful for thinking through, for asking questions, but because of his normative orientation, his work is a mismatch for teaching social justice.

To emphasize the contrast with that normative orientation, I want to close here by detailing some of the long-term impact of this work on our college—the changes our students have made to the institution beyond the course or the focus award. Some of the projects that have come out of the class have, in specific ways, made our campus a more just place. The project around houselessness I was just describing aligned with the development of the Panther Pantry; a year-round resource for anyone on campus, the Pantry has food, but also clothes, bus vouchers, and more (PCC Student Leadership). The Pantries officially opened six months after the class’s day of action. While they were not a direct result of the class, cross pollination in their design (students in the class were also part of student government group that worked on the Panther Pantry) and the class’s demands amplified their visibility and helped explain their necessity to the college community.

But perhaps an even more remarkable change is the DREAM Center. Officially established in 2017, the DREAM Center is a dedicated, staffed space on campus designed to support undocumented students. While many colleges have declared themselves sanctuary institutions, a space like the DREAM center makes that symbolic support more tangible; offering everything from peership to advisors who know how DACA impacts financial aid to community resource connections, the center explicitly supports a targeted group of students at school—and in their lives beyond campus.

The idea of the DREAM center grew out of student projects in the capstone class. Within a year of that class, a group of students, all of whom had enrolled in the SJ capstone course, had—in collaboration with the campus Multicultural Center—made effective demands for dedicated

funding, written grants, and raised money. Now the college proudly trumpets their work in speeches, press releases, and accreditation reports (Hill, "Liliana," Hill "A Dream"). One of those students worked for the college, for nearly two years, as the DREAM Center's coordinator. The student's work has literally reshaped the space of the campus and the college's org chart.

As those two examples show, the students' work persists, even when the students have moved on. And how could those victories not mitigate against despair?³⁰ The students' work, in the context of the class, has made the campus a more just place for themselves, but also for students who never enrolled in (or even know about) the course. And we're running the capstone course each term of our academic year—four courses, four collective projects, connecting around 100 students a year to peers doing this work.

These students' leadership shines a different light on the contradiction I framed at the start between the pursuit of justice and the long-standing self-articulation of higher ed as neutral and rational body. Even if these projects don't embody those traditional views of higher ed, they clearly connect to a deeper, older commitment: they show students who are preparing to lead the world.³¹ And they do it a touch better than even someone like Cardinal Newman would've imagined, since our students are not just preparing to lead, but are actually *already leading* our institution.

Through the practices that shape our program—and especially its capstone class—I believe we are making good on the vague promise of social justice. Year round at PCC, students are doing the difficult work of trying to eliminate the injustices that are part of our everyday lives.³² Their work has made me a believer in what can happen under the banner of "social justice."

Acknowledgement

I hope this piece honors the labor of my colleagues who created this program and who teach in it, as well as the students whose work in the Social Justice Focus Award is truly making our community more just.

Notes

1. Googling this term in 2019, I get hits for job postings at Texas Tech and Georgetown; other universities already have this position, including the University of Portland.
2. Cohen nicely sums up Clark Kerr's dominant paradigm of the multiversity as: "objective, neutral, and dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and services to the community" (*The Shaping of American Higher Education* 232).
3. Throughout this paper, I rely on Amartya Sen's critique of traditional philosophizing about justice. Sen suggests much thinking about justice has embarked on a quest for "perfect justice" focused predominantly on building just institutions like governments and courts; he calls this fixation "transcendental institutionalism." In our

classes, a version of this critique comes from Nancy Fraser, whose "Abnormal Justice," helps set up our discussions in SJ210.

4. As Susan Dieleman, David Rondel, and Christopher Voparil put it in the introduction to *Pragmatism and Justice*, "There has never been a political movement that [...] in the name of nothing but transcendental 'justice itself'" (5).
5. As a community college, our capacity to charter new degree programs is somewhat limited—and many of our students are in the process of transferring for a four-year degree, so picking up an Associates of Social Justice probably wouldn't make much sense for most of them.
6. While we didn't do this work under the umbrella of trauma-informed pedagogy, the five principles of trauma informed education—"ensuring safety, establishing trustworthiness, maximizing choice, maximizing collaboration, and prioritizing empowerment"—are on display in the way the courses work together. Digging deeper in, it turns out, may have been part of the solution. Carello & Butler "Practicing What We Teach."
7. In a short piece from *Rethinking Schools*, Bill Bigelow quotes a student summing up this position: "If everything is connected, then you can't change anything without changing everything. But you can't change everything, so that means that you can't change anything." (Bigelow, "Defeating Despair")
8. It's worth noting that much of this language would eventually show up in both the outcomes for the capstone course and the focus award description.
9. This focused space for studying social justice probably helps militate against the concerns expressed by critics of too much social justice on campus (which often seems to me a code for not conservative enough). See, for instance, Reedy, "Social Justice, the University, and the Temptation to Mission Creep."
10. See the full list here: <https://www.pcc.edu/programs/social-justice/courses.html>
11. That parenthetical is important because if you're thinking about doing something like this, keep an eye on the—probably uncompensated—work. To us, it felt short term—and there were enough folks invested to share the load. But it would be easy to dip into overload.
12. For example, "The characterization of perfectly just institutions has become the central exercise in the modern theories of justice" (Sen 8).
13. We did the award before the class for a number of reasons, but one important one was that once the award existed, we felt the argument for a (fairly radical) capstone class would be easier to make: We weren't making up something new; we needed to strengthen the already-existing award!

14. To be clear, these weren't extra hurdles because of the subject matter—they're the hurdles of a class that doesn't fit easily into the disciplinary divisions of the college's administrative structure. Without a clear commitment to that kind of support, faculty can look forward to a similarly DIY experience.
15. Taking stack is a common way to order speaking to minimize the domination of conversation by one or two members who feel entitled to speak more than others. A quick overview: [http://cultivate.coop/wiki/Taking_Stack_\(Meeting_Facilitation_Technique\)](http://cultivate.coop/wiki/Taking_Stack_(Meeting_Facilitation_Technique))
16. We model the process using Seeds for Change's simple consensus pamphlet: "Consensus Decision Making: Short Guide." There, students learn practices of taking stack, of sharing space; some of our classes decide with fist of five; others use full consensus models (complete with twinkling).
17. Calling back to the previous section, it would be slower if the class pretended to be neutral—opening even more points for endless discussion.
18. The outcome language is: "Complete a whole-class collaborative campus or community-based social justice action project" (SJ 210).
19. Dominican University literally names the major "Social Justice and Civic Engagement." Also: Eastern Kentucky U: SJS 450S: Learning through Civic Engagement; Merrimack University, in which "you'll have the opportunity to participate in community-based or nongovernmental organization internships." (https://www.merrimack.edu/academics/liberal_arts/social-justice/major/)
20. Trevecca Nazarene University
21. Perhaps, as I say above, this is part of a larger conception of justice as living elsewhere—not on a college campus. Perhaps it is also tied to the institutional focus on neutrality—we can do the work of justice elsewhere, not on campus, because that would betray some bias.
22. Those examples come from Jessica Singer's high school curriculum for an English class as an "activist" project (117). The range here leaves plenty of room for students to remain in their own lanes without having to encounter disagreements or differences of opinion. One more example (from Kristi Holsinger's *Teaching Justice*): "The most common approaches tend to be volunteering with a local agency that is already involved in addressing a particular social problem.[...] Another approach utilized by many students was letter writing. They wrote policymakers, various governmental representatives, and additional newspaper editorials. [...] Others joined organizations and donated money, food, or clothing." (91)
23. See Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2015), particularly the section that traces the impact of "connect[ing] with others in community" and linking new information with "Existing funds of knowledge" (47, 48).
24. And they learned practical things, too: how to make a sign or banner, what kind of tape works on what kind of walls, how to start a chant, and how to keep an eye on the people that might stop you from doing what you want to do, among others.
25. Many, many thinkers have critiqued the scientized, logic-driven, framing that today's colleges and universities inherit from the European institutions that have shaped both our disciplinary frames and our institutions. Philosophically, this is akin to what de Sousa Santos calls "epistemologies of the North": ways of knowing that find legitimacy *only* in "science based on systematic observation and controlled experimentation [...] rigor and instrumental potential" (5).
26. For instance, when students want me to tell them who the most important writers are in an intro literature class, I maintain a sort of neutrality. (What's the value in me telling them that Zadie Smith or Ernesto Cardenal is more important than someone else?)
27. "My point is that we cannot confront aspirations to social justice with the predefined conception of individual liberty, because what counts as liberty, as well as how it should be distributed, will depend on how we understand justice itself" (Miller 14).
28. Isn't the centrality of "personal liberty" a lesson taught through nearly every facet of life in the United States today?
29. Rawls's name shows up a lot in writing about social justice on college campuses—e.g. Frederking, Holsinger, Patterson et. al.
30. The course has helped to mitigate against those feelings of despair I mention above—winning things you want usually does that, right? I ask this question in the spirit of Jane McAlevey, who points out that winning (in the context of union strikes) is often underestimated: "Winning strikes, not losing them, will build a more confident, fighting, politically educated working class."
31. "If then a practical end must be assigned to a university course I say it is that of training good members of society" (Newman 125). Newman also mentions that it teaches "facilitating the exercise of political power" (126). Charles Eliot doesn't say leadership, but it seems strongly implied in his famous 1869 essay "The New Education."
32. This final sentence is a version of one of Sen's clearest crystallizations of his position. Our students are not ineffectually "agitating for a perfectly just world society, but merely for the elimination of some outrageously unjust arrangements to enhance global justice" (26).

Works Cited

- Airaksinen, Toni. "Want Credit for Studying Social Justice? Here are more than 100 Colleges with Academic Programs." *The College Fix*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.collegefix.com/want-credit-studying-social-justice-100-colleges-academic-programs/>
- Bigelow, Bill. "Defeating Despair." *Rethinking Schools Online*, Spring 2002, <https://www.rethinkingschools.org/war/pdfs/desp163.pdf>
- Carello, Janice and Lisa D. Butler. "Practicing What We Teach: Trauma-Informed Educational Practice," *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 2015, 35:3, 262-278, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059>
- Cohen, Arthur M. *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- de Sousa Santos, Boaventura. *The End of Cognitive Empire: The Coming Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Durham, NC. Duke UP: 2018.
- Dieleman, Susan, David Rondel, and Christopher Voparil. *Pragmatism and Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Frederking, Laretta Conklin. *Reconstructing Social Justice*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Gooblar, David. "How to be Political in Class," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 21, 2017. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-to-Be-Political-in-Class/241258>
- Hammond, Zaretta. *Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain*. Thousand Oaks, Cal., Corwin: 2015.
- Holsinger, Kristi. *Teaching Justice: Solving Social Justice Problems through University Education*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Hill, James. "Liliana Luna is leading a 'DREAM' effort to establish first DACA resource center in state," September 14, 2017. <https://www.pcc.edu/news/2017/09/dream-center/>
- Hill, James, "A 'dream' opening for PCC's newest resource center for undocumented students, families" January 26, 2018. <https://www.pcc.edu/news/2018/01/dream-opening/>
- Kincheloe, Joe. *Critical Pedagogy Primer*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Macalevey, Jane. "The Strike as the Ultimate Structure Test," *catalyst*, 2019. <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol2/no3/the-strike-as-the-ultimate-structure-test>
- Miller, David. *Principles of Social Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999.
- Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*. Ed. Frank M. Turner. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996.
- Patterson, David A., et. al. "Social Justice Manifest: University-Community Outreach Research to Reduce Homelessness," in *Social Justice and the University: Globalization, Human Rights, and the Future of Democracy*. Eds. Jon Shefner, et. al. London, Palgrave: 2014.
- "Courses: Social Justice Focus Award," *Portland Community College*, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.pcc.edu/programs/social-justice/courses.html>
- "SJ 210: Course Content Outcome Guides," *Portland Community College*, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.pcc.edu/ccog/?fa=ccog&subject=SJ&course=210>
- Reedy, David A. "Social Justice, the University, and the Temptation to Mission Creep." In *Social Justice and the University: Globalization, Human Rights, and the Future of Democracy*. Eds.
- Jon Shefner, et. al. London, Palgrave: 2014. Seeds for Change, "Consensus Decision Making: Short Guide," *Seeds for Change*, <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/shortconsensus>
- Sen, Amartya. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Sharp, Gene. *Waging Nonviolent Struggle*. Manchester, NH: Extending Horizons Books, 2005.
- Singer, Jessica. *Stirring up Justice: Writing and Reading to Change the World*. Toronto: Pearson, 2006.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).