

Holsinger, K. (2012). *Teaching justice-solving social justice problems through university education*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company. 164 pp.

Review by Patreese Ingram

*T*eaching Justice: Solving Social Justice Problems Through University Education is a book in the series Solving Social Problems, edited by Bonnie Berry, director of the Social Problems Research Group, USA. The series provides a forum for the description and measurement of social problems with a focus on proposals for their solutions.

The author, Kristi Holsinger, strongly advocates for a transformative approach to teaching criminal justice programs in higher education. Particularly noteworthy is the importance this author attaches to the overarching concept of justice and its counterpart, injustice. An important starting point is defining the term justice itself. Students are challenged to wrestle with the complex notions of justice and to position criminal justice within the larger justice perspective. Holsinger astutely notes that an examination of introductory criminal justice classes and textbooks supports the conclusion that the concept of justice does not get the attention it deserves (Owen et al., 2006).

According to John Rawls, "social justice is about assuring the protection of equal access to liberties, rights, and opportunities, as well as taking care of the least advantaged members of society" (Robinson, 2010, p. 79). Are criminal justice and criminal justice practices consistent with social justice? This is a question that deserves a critical examination. Throughout the book Holsinger suggests that engaging students in critical thinking and evaluation of social justice and the justice system requires attention to issues of diversity. She references an American Sociological Association report (2011) that suggests the study of criminal justice requires extensive study of sociology and is currently lacking in its focus on issues such as race, class, and gender (Jaschik, 2010). The level of importance attached to cultural competence and sensitivity to issues of diversity in analyzing the criminal justice system is particularly significant. One area of diversity that could be given more attention in the book, however, is religion, considering the growing number of crimes related to religious differences.

Arrigo (1998) asserts that criminal justice policies often perpetuate injustice and will continue to do so unless thoughtful attention is given to the undergirding principles of criminal jus-

tice. A clear example is the war on drugs, which has resulted in a disproportionate percentage of blacks and Latinos being incarcerated. Although the majority of illegal drug users and dealers nationwide are white, nearly 90% of all people imprisoned for drug offenses in 2007 were black and Latino (Alexander, 2010; Robertson, 2011). Alexander (2010) refers to this inequity as a new form of the Jim Crow caste system that existed earlier in our country's history. In this vein, Holsinger's bold call for attention to white collar and corporate crime, which may cause harm to larger proportions of the population than crimes committed by and against individuals, is encouraging.

Throughout the book, the author describes the development of her capstone course for undergraduate criminal justice majors. In preparing to write this book, she conducted a survey of criminal justice faculty to determine (1) the most effective methods of getting students actively engaged in social justice issues, (2) whether justice as an overarching concept was taught in the field of criminal justice and criminology, (3) how colleagues measured the effectiveness of their teaching, and (4) what faculty perceived as barriers and limitations to teaching about these topics in the college classroom. Findings from the 126 responses received, as well as the author's own classroom experiences, are shared throughout the book and integrated into each of the book's six chapters.

Chapter 1—Teaching Justice. Holsinger advocates for the active engagement of students in the learning process, which reflects a critical dimension of good teaching. This chapter focuses on the necessity of moving away from a reductionist view of education with the teacher as the authority figure who dominates and controls the classroom to a teaching approach that empowers students and gives them more responsibility for what they learn. Critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and critical thinking promote an understanding of deeper, more socially constructed meaning. Critical pedagogy acknowledges that injustices exist and emphasizes the role of culture, diversity, and social position in how we understand and experience the world. The more students can personalize course materials, the more likely they are to become actively engaged in solving problems in the world.

Holsinger recognizes that certain circumstances can make active learning about social justice more difficult. Many students are comfortable with the traditional teacher-centered classrooms, and resist personal investment in the learning process. Others may have limited experience with individuals very different from themselves and may be unaware of social realities around

them. Although many criminal justice programs tend to focus on examining social process in concrete and observable ways, college faculty should encourage students to explore the more abstract concepts of justice, which can lead students to consider larger societal patterns and encourage questioning of the status quo. Recognition of and attention to these issues help to make this book a unique contribution to the field.

Chapter 2—Learning Justice. Although the chapter is titled “Learning Justice,” much of it is devoted to the many ways that survey respondents teach social justice in the classroom. Approaches include the use of classroom discussion, documentaries, films and film clips on social themes, current events, real-life and personal experiences, service-learning projects, field trips to prisons, and opportunities to interact with prisoners and victims of injustice. Detailed survey responses reflect how faculty teach justice as an overarching construct of criminal justice/criminology. In one example, a faculty member asks students to apply Miller’s and Rawls’ theories of social justice to criminal justice practices. This instructor asks students whether criminal justice helps bring about or interferes with realizing social justice. However, some respondents disagreed with the goals of teaching about justice as an overarching construct, feeling it did not fit into their courses.

Holsinger uses nine short writing assignments in her capstone course to help students personally connect with issues of injustice. For example, one assignment asks students to evaluate a statement made by Weisheit and Morn (2004): “Becoming aware of how justice issues are woven through our everyday decisions is an important step in righting wrongs.” Writing assignments and projects are designed to help students distinguish between justice and injustice. The author provides an abundance of ideas for teaching about social justice and activism as an overarching construct in criminal justice.

Chapter 3—Personally Connecting. Chapter 3 focuses on student apathy or lack of engagement with justice issues. This chapter also shares strategies professors use to engage students and help them personally connect with existing social problems. This is perhaps the most important chapter in the book. Personal connection to the issues of criminal justice is necessary to awaken students’ passions and inspire activism and action. Holsinger argues that the burden lies with teachers to develop strategies that will engage students in the learning process and the topics taught. Survey results shared a number of strategies, including allowing students to write their papers on self-selected topics of interest to them; use of video

content, current events, and interviewing assignments; and asking students to take a stand on controversial issues. Strategies used in the capstone courses include writing about witnessing or personally experiencing an injustice, writing an editorial on a recent news story, and addressing a social issue or social problem that the student feels strongly about.

Chapter 4—Taking Action. The call by Ernest Boyer (1990) for universities to use their resources to help communities solve problems was re-conceptualized in the 2000s as “engagement.” Holsinger endorses the benefits of service-learning as a strategy to engage university students in social problems. Survey respondents shared a variety of ways students were engaged in local communities. Their strategies included requiring students to actively advocate for a neighborhood or group, involving an entire class in an initiative to address a community, and requiring students to volunteer in the community. She also requires a project in which students must engage in activism related to a justice issue. A list of topics her students have addressed in previous classes is provided. Criminal justice faculty in many university settings would unquestionably benefit from the examples this author shares that bring college students together with court-involved youth in joint learning experiences. These kinds of experiences have the significant impact of helping college students develop more empathetic attitudes toward these youth.

Chapter 5—Assessing Learning. Despite increasing attention to assessment of student learning in higher education, many faculty use only student evaluations and grades to determine the effectiveness of their teaching. Few use outcome-driven student assessments. Some faculty, however, use pre- and post-tests to measure changes in students’ attitudes. Holsinger provides examples of pre-and-post survey items used to determine changes in attitudes and perceptions about the correctional system, justice, equality, and opportunity. Surveys were also used to determine whether students believed the class met the main learning objectives, to evaluate the teaching methods, and to obtain students’ suggestions for methods that might be useful in learning about the topics.

Writing skills are an important component of assessment in the author’s classes. Student definitions of justice at the end of the class are compared with those given at the beginning. Definitions at the end of the class tend to include concepts of fairness and equality. There is also a greater focus on activism associated with justice—the idea that one must address or respond to injustice. Students

recognize the desire to include more active work in the community as a part of courses in criminal justice programs.

Chapter 6—Justice Redefined. The last chapter of this book begins by addressing what faculty perceive to be barriers to teaching about social justice and activism. High on the list of survey responses are student apathy, political indifference, sense of powerlessness to make a difference, and inability to see a relationship between larger societal problems and students' own lives.

A number of barriers were directly related to faculty ideology. The ability of the teacher to “teach the student how to think, not what to think” and to lead students to examine their own perspectives on issues rather than teaching a particular perspective were noted. Holsinger warns that teachers must also guard against letting their own beliefs influence their assessment of student work. Other barriers included limited time to teach social justice and activism in the course, lack of student diversity in the classroom, conservatism of some students, and time constraints on students' engagement in social activism.

It is critical that the academic discipline of criminal justice move beyond preparing students solely for jobs in criminology. The field must incorporate the larger perspective of justice that includes concepts of social justice and activism. Incorporating opportunities to address real-world, problem-based issues will help students gain critical thinking skills, be more informed citizens, and develop the ability to see the inadequacies of our existing justice system.

Teaching Justice is a must-read for anyone who teaches criminal justice courses. This book offers insights that can help increase the legitimacy of the discipline of criminal justice and criminology. It not only encourages, but also provides specific methods for, faculty to challenge students to critically examine our system of criminal justice and the theories of criminology. Being exposed to the lives and problems experienced by real people in the community can empower students to become actively engaged in addressing injustice and challenging the status quo. The author provides a wealth of practical tools and strategies for teaching a criminal justice class. The book supplies numerous resources, specific activities, strategies, and concepts to incorporate in these courses, including resources by the author, as well as those recommended and shared by national and international professionals in the field of criminal justice/criminology. If more professors follow Holsinger's recommendations, a greater number of students will be motivated to actively engage in addressing injustice in our world.

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