

Bhavna Shamasunder
Occidental College
Urban and Environmental Policy Department
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Crossing Disciplinary and Movement Divides:
Towards an Integrated Environmental Justice Pedagogy

As an undergraduate, I majored in Biology and Ethnic Studies. As I progressed in my biology degree, I began to loathe the courses where I was asked to do tasks such as dissect a frog and give it an electric shock to watch the smooth muscles of the uterus contract. In order to finish my biology degree, I switched to courses in ecology and evolutionary biology and was introduced to concepts that immediately shifted my understanding of biology- systems thinking and evolutionary time frames. I was hooked. At the same time I was reading This Bridge Called My Back and The Ethnic Myth in my ethnic studies courses, learning slowly to integrate my own identity as the child of immigrants raised in a rural, conservative, small town in California that was also a hub of ethnic tension and often racism with the history of ethnicity and race relations in the United States. While immersed in both of these separate academic disciplines, I became involved in student driven movements such as efforts to diversify and create safe spaces for all women within the Women's Resource Center on campus. Over time, I slowly began to connect these seemingly disparate threads. My ongoing approach to teaching environmental justice stems from my own process of synthesizing pedagogy rooted across the sciences, social sciences, and social movement perspectives.

In 2000, I heard Luke Cole, the cutting edge environmental justice lawyer who passed away much before his time, give a talk at the Yale Law School on his work advocating for indigenous communities in Alaska. His talk crystallized many of the connections I was grasping for in my own work and set me off on my future path working with a series of environmental health and justice organizations. I conducted the advocacy science and research behind campaigns such as closing a medical waste incinerator in Oakland, diverting diesel truck traffic from West Oakland, and organizing for the Cal EPA to incorporate environmental justice and cumulative impacts into decisions made across its Boards, Offices, and Departments. At this time, I began teaching an evening course in environmental justice at San Francisco State University to students who often came from and lived in the impacted communities and situations we discussed in class. As my first students, these classes taught me an enormous amount about teaching environmental injustice in a classroom setting. I have since learned from my students in a variety of demographic and classroom contexts and these experiences have pushed me to develop a pedagogy that is inclusive of students' lived experiences while pushing them to develop sophisticated analyses of concepts of race, class, justice, and environment not contingent on their own personal experiences.

I joined UC Berkeley as a Ph.D. student in 2005, driven to learn from research allies who have been able to successfully leverage their academic positions to support movements for environmental health and justice through creative funding, research, and public advocacy. While my own research addresses how advocacy science has influenced environmental governance, I have learned firsthand in my second year as a tenure track faculty member at a small liberal arts college, the challenges of balancing academic constraints with movement research. I bring these types of real challenges into my environmental justice pedagogy.

I teach the required Research Methods course in my department. While still learning how to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methods into my course, I situate the class as a whole in community engaged, community based, and participatory approaches to conducting research. In addition to research ethics for example, we discuss structural power imbalances that deters equitable funding disbursements when partnering with community based organizations. I also teach introductory courses in Society and Environment as well as the senior seminar that requires students to conduct primary data collection for their thesis. This range of courses has pressed me to critically think about environmental justice pedagogy outside of the umbrella of a course in environmental justice specifically. Rather, I work to incorporate strategies for unpacking issues of power and inequities across topics such as climate change, national environmental policy, or cross-border trade policy.

Next year, I will be teaching an environmental health course that will be offered alongside a GIS course. I am truly excited for this innovative teaching partnership with James Sadd, a GIS expert who conducts cutting edge environmental justice research in California. When students take both courses as pair, we hope they gain a multi-dimensional understanding of topics in environmental health. It is with an eye towards teaching this course that I applied to and joined in this exciting workshop. I look forward to learning strategies that can help me extend my commitment to crossing disciplinary divides through teaching environmental justice.