**Creating Empathy for People in Difficult Environmental Situations**

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As an adjunct, I have had a limited opportunity so far to teach classes with a large environmental justice emphasis. The biggest opportunity was at Iowa State University, teaching the American Agricultural History course. Norman Borlaug, "Father of the Green Revolution," is a major hero in Iowa and a familiar name to most students who grew up on an Iowa farm. ISU's special collections has quite a few papers from Borlaug's early years of research, so I had everyone in the class, working in teams, focus on a different research topic related to Borlaug. The goal was to get them to move beyond being a Borlaug cheerleader for and to consider what kind of impact his work made in the areas where his genetically modified grain was introduced. Different groups did better than others on the project, with maybe only two of them (out of six) really delving into deeper considerations. Some of the students resented having to do a topic related to Borlaug when they were more interested in some other facet of agriculture (agricultural machinery was a special interest of many). Some didn't like working on a paper as a member of a group, which had some advantages, but I admit might not have been the best way to organize the class.

The project, though, fits in line with my philosophy of trying to teach empathy for as many sides of an issue as possible. Borlaug might have been influenced by a hegemonic worldview, but he was also motivated by compassion. He was not after money or fame; he was just trying to help people. I was trying to help students see beyond the vilification or hero-worship and understand how and why things turned out the way they did.

Garbage, my primary area of study, is a great topic for that kind of approach. Garbage is one of the most heated environmental issues out there, because whether you're conservative or liberal or apolitical, you probably don't want to live next to anyone else's garbage (or your own for that matter). The desire to move garbage as far away from oneself as possible is understandable to just about everybody. Is someone bad for not wanting to live by trash? Most people would say no. Is a community bad for sending their trash to a predominately African-American area? The law and most people would say yes. Is a community wrong for illegally dumping? The law and almost everybody would say yes. Is a community wrong for sending trash to a sparsely populated rural area? Based on current trends it would seem that most people would say no, but many rural activists would say yes.

My activity for the workshop is based on Ames, Iowa, a relatively small city that tried to take care of its trash locally. Almost everyone would support that basic notion surely. But Barry Commoner and his law that "Everything must go somewhere," said that the trash wasn't only being dealt with locally but was causing cancer thousands of miles away. What's the right thing to do in that case? Who do you believe? What is an acceptable amount of risk? If no one wants to live by waste and there's no way to get rid of it in a truly safe fashion, is any waste environmentally just? If the answer is no, why do we keep consuming? Because, no matter how much people have changed in their attitudes towards the environment and recycling, they still consume as much as ever.

Some environmental justice issues are very clearly black and white. There is plenty of greed and corruption out there that causes people to act in a way that compromises the health and well-being of other people without concern or regard. But many issues are the result of people trying to protect their loved ones or values, which is not necessarily a bad instinct. It's certainly an understandable one. Often people get entrenched by ideology and then are unable to hear the needs or concerns of people on the other side. I think it is important to help students see as many sides of an environmental justice issue as possible in a way that allows for empathy for all sides. Putting students on the defensive for feelings that are innately human does little to lead to a solution. I think activities and discussions that have students have to adopt the attitudes of different people will help lead to working out problems. A student might be too embarrassed to admit in class that, "I wouldn't want my kids living next to a dump," when they know that means someone else's kids are going to have to live by one. If we allow them to be another person and express those person's views, it might help break down barriers they are too ashamed to admit exist and help everyone start discussing what would be the healthiest and best option for all of us living on this planet earth.