The course in which my teaching of environmental justice occurs is “Introduction to Environmental Studies.” It is primarily taken as an intro to the major or to fulfill a requirement in the Educational Studies program. Some students take the class as an elective. This course is very broad, covering many topics, and neither delving deeply, nor focusing much time on any one. None of the various textbooks I have seen adequately addresses environmental justice (hence my interest in learning additional ways to teach it). The objective of the course is for the students to have a general knowledge base and to recognize that “everything is connected.”

My approach to teaching “environmental justice” has been to endeavor to enable students to recognize instances of environmental injustice. My goal is to get students to ask “who decides?” and “who pays?” and “in what currency?” For example, we visit a landfill. After learning about the management of the facility, we talk about considerations for siting “sanitary landfills” and about where other types of waste goes, and who must deal with it. We consider whether NIMBY (not in my backyard) is ever a reasonable attitude, from the point of view of what’s best for society, not what the individual might prefer.

Development (at any scale and in any locale) involves many environmental decisions. I want students to consider the basis on which those choices are made. Who are the stakeholders; are they all part of the decision process? Who benefits; who loses? What/whose are the resources? Are they renewable? What is being accomplished by their exploitation?

Sometimes, I use outside speakers. One that has been particularly well-received speaks about mountaintop removal coal mining. Because this person is from a state where MTR occurs, and because she is a very dynamic speaker (and has a well-chosen set of slides), the students become very engaged. Additionally, because most of the electricity in our state is generated by burning coal, it demonstrates that WE are causing the impacts THEY are suffering.

I have also had a lawyer engaged in environmental advocacy speak to the class. The first-hand perspective of trying to obtain “justice” is instructive for students. One thing it helps them see is that the laws are not always clear and what may seem intuitively “right” may not be the legally correct outcome. It also helps students realize the costs in terms of time for the lawyers and time for cases to proceed through the court system.

The choices made by consumers play a role in environmental justice. Each purchase is a sort of vote in favor of the provider’s business method. I try to get students to be more thoughtful consumers. We all consume. Consuming has environmental impacts. Their money is buying more than products. What are the hidden costs? (Who pays?)

It is also important for students to understand that many of the decisions affecting them and their environment are made by representatives. Thus, it is vital for them to be active citizens, participating in the political process and doing what they can to let their representatives know about constituent’s viewpoints. This engaged citizen imperative applies to all levels of government. The greatest opportunity for environmental injustice occurs where people are powerless to influence decisions affecting them.