FROM POLITCS and POLICY to PLACE-BASED INQUIRY and GLOBALIZATION

Probably the most important background to this essay is that I am a broadly trained Human and Environmental Geographer. I work at a small Liberal Arts College in a beautiful part of Northern New England.

My educational background as an engineer, planner, and geographer with a multi-decade interest in environmental issues has been coupled with a position which has encouraged me to teach and engage in scholarship in a trans-disciplinary vein. Professional development is a continuous process for me. My most recent environmentally-related opportunities in this vein have included a workshop on research ethics/community-based research and a law class on agricultural and pesticide law. I am enthusiastic about this opportunity.

I incorporate environmental justice concerns into my instructional practice in at least four classes – an introductory Human Geography class, an intermediate level Environmental Problems class, an intermediate Geography of Water class, and an upper level Environmental Policy class. The exact mix of activities and resources varies with a common theme of moving beyond the obvious into discussions of real cases in real places.

Let me start with the policy and politics of environmental justice. I try to make a strong connection with the genesis of U.S.-based environmental justice concerns through the work of Robert Bullard and the United Church of Christ and real cases (e.g. the Warren County, NC case). I use a chapter from the Vig and Kraft environmental policy book (the chapter doesn’t appear in the latest edition) to set the stage. In the upper level class, the concept of an environmental justice timeline is where I emphasize the differences between environmental racism and broader concerns with environmental justice. I also establish a legal and policy basis as well an ethical moral basis for conflict over environmental justice. There are lots of ways in which this occurs but it’s mostly case-driven.

I try to make a strong case that environmental justice concerns span geographic scale and make connections with international cases and globalization. For example, I’ve focused considerable effort in assembling video collages related to electronic waste and trace an arc of stories over several decades which involve corporations, international law, and investigative journalism and advocacy. This allows me to introduce ideas related to the discourses of environmental justice. I’ve also used water as a context for discussion distributional justice issues related to water and human health. I’ve been dabbling with incorporating climate change concerns here too but this is in its nascent stages.

I’ve built in other activities which focus on organizational development. For example, I use the EPA Environmental Justice Awards and the awards given by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences as one jumping off point. I also use an article and chapter by Phil Brown (Toxic Exposures) to engage students in a discussion of Community-Based Participatory Research. These result in student research and interpretation as well as discussion of the practicalities of environmental justice work. In the international dimension, I deploy ideas related to transnational environmental movements – both in a formal organizational vein in the work of mainline environmental groups but also in the evolution of looser social movements and advocacy networks.

In the context of advocacy, I assign chapters in several classes from Steve Lerner’s book Sacrifice Zones. This forms a nice context for class discussion of narratives of environmental justice from an investigative/advocacy perspective. It also provides a focus for some directed student writing and peer assessment of writing on the methods and examination of environmental advocacy in this vein.

I’ve coupled the Sacrifice Zones work with some hands-on lab work with the Superfund and Toxics Release Inventory (stimulated by a case in a science teaching journal and hearing Michael Kraft speak about disclosure at a conference). This activity is the one I’ve submitted for the workshop. It allows some quite structured activities to open avenues for self-directed inquiry into environmental justice, environmental remediation, environmental health and toxicology. I’ve delivered a conference paper on this work in the Fall of 2012.

I think that engaging students with popular culture representations of environmental justice is an important element of pedagogy – hence my use of video collages, occasional use of feature films (A Civil Action, anyone?), and even clips from The Daily Show (the Aasif Mandvi visit to Asbestos, Quebec and its link to asbestos exposure in India is a classic). For me, using the discourses of popular culture doesn’t mean dropping the rigor and analytical power of theoretical and technical analyses of environmental justice.

Teaching at a small liberal arts college with a service/social-justice ethos has given me a lot of room to work within Geography and across disciplines with themes of environmental justice in technical, policy and ethical/moral veins.

Again, I am thrilled to have been invited to join the group. I hope to be able to contribute to discussions and activities and to learn a lot!

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