

EJ Workshop Essay

Environmental Justice: making students comfortable with the uncomfortable.

I was first exposed to the concept of social justice as a teaching assistant during graduate school. This course exposed me to concepts of social justice and its relation to sustainability, attempting to tease out the compatibility between the two concepts. It was during this experience that I was able to think more closely about justice and its relationship to my research. On my own I continued reading about environmental justice and eventually had a base to apply the theory to my work on oil and gas drilling in Trinidad and Tobago.

On being hired to teach exclusively environmental justice, I was now challenged to bring my knowledge and personal experience with environmental justice to a group of students who are not readily exposed to these concepts. Additionally, for many students, social justice issues as it relates to the environment and more specifically as it relates to minority and marginalized populations is new. What I have found after my early years of engaging students on concepts of race, class, rights, and environmental problems as it relates to both domestic and international issues is that the missionary approach is often not the best. As such, I had to find creative methods to engage students with the difficult concepts but also to challenge their underlying worldviews of the contradictions that they believe might exist in addressing environmental justice, particularly in the US context.

I have begun to use strategies from the National Coalition Building Institute, which has a group of active participants on my campus. This has allowed me to use small group workshops at the beginning of the semester to allow students to address different forms of discrimination, and oppression and brainstorm ways in which these can be effectively addressed even when there are differences of opinions in the room. This I have found addressed the elephant in the room in an open manner and it also set a tone of openness for the semester. My classes have been much better with this approach.

Class discussions have become an important component of my classes on environmental justice. I schedule class discussions into my syllabi and I have students lead the discussions, with me as the facilitator summarizing the main points at major points during the discussion. This allows two things. 1. First, my students take responsibility for the material and own it. By this I mean that my students have to find their voice and develop their ideas on the readings and the problems that are assigned for that day. In this way they have to think about both their position and the position of others who may not agree with them and be effective in not just dismissing these thoughts but rather be able to engage someone in a conversation who has a difference of opinion on the issues of race, class, rights, and environmental issues as it pertains to minority groups. 2. Secondly group discussions allow my students to be able to work through problems with each other rather than rely on me to “tell them what I think is the right answer.” It allows

them to realize that in dealing with social situations, that often times there are no black and white solutions; hence the reason environmental justice is often contested.

My approach to teaching environmental justice is one of openness and to allow students to critically think about the processes that have resulted in minority and marginalized populations being negatively affected by environmental hazards. Most of my students though environmental studies majors are being exposed to concepts of race, class, rights, and environmental issues for the first time and to be able to provide them with an open classroom to explore these concepts in an honest manner, I have found to be the best approach.