

Teaching Ethics through Environmental Justice

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Abstract

Student and faculty taught courses on environmental justice are analyzed in terms of ethical learning, drawing on a liberation theology model developed by Gerard Fourez. Experiential exercises working with stereotypes, racism, and mechanisms of domination helped to decode the internalization of social values. In-depth case study research provided students with intellectual tools for structural analysis. A culminating toxic tour of local environmental injustice sites served as an avenue for conscientization and development of calling ethics. Student writing revealed ethical insights gained from this liberation-oriented approach to teaching environmental justice.

Résumé

Les cours donnés par des étudiants et des membres de faculté sur la justice environnementale sont analysés sous l'angle de l'apprentissage éthique, en faisant appel à un modèle de théologie de libération conçu par Gérard Fourez. Des exercices fondés sur l'expérience et qui traitaient des stéréotypes, du racisme et des mécanismes de domination ont permis de décoder le processus d'intériorisation des valeurs sociales. Une recherche poussée ayant été effectuée dans le cadre d'une étude de cas a fourni aux étudiants les outils intellectuels nécessaires à l'analyse structurelle. Concluante, une tournée des sites locaux d'injustice environnementale a permis d'ouvrir la voie à une prise de conscience de la question éthique. Les travaux des étudiants ont révélé qu'une nouvelle compréhension de l'éthique avait été acquise grâce à cette façon d'enseigner la justice environnementale, caractérisée par une approche fondée sur la libération.

Toxic tour—the local power plant. Students crowd around a community activist who points to clouds of dust above the wood chip unloading. She argues the power plant has not done enough to mitigate impacts; her neighbours still suffer from asthma. Next stop, neighbourhood lead pollution. A legal aid lawyer holds up paint chips from the yard. Those living in the student housing zone realize that they may be victims of environmental injustice themselves. Next stop, former jet fuel storage site. The class considers the impacts of jet travel on city labourers. They begin to see the environmental consequences of their privileged status. They begin to wonder, what hidden patterns of domination have they colluded with in ignorance? After the toxic tour, course lessons become obvious: students can't escape the stark truths of suffering associated

with environmental injustice. Young people today, perhaps all people, find it difficult to negotiate such complex ethical terrain. This learning is not easy; it engages students in their own struggles with lifestyle choices, political positions, and activist commitments. How can a course on environmental justice support such a useful learning path, leaving a student empowered instead of cynical, engaged rather than aloof, morally concerned, not psychologically numb?

At University of Vermont, about half the students come from mostly rural Vermont; the other half are drawn north from urban New York, Massachusetts, and points south. These students are primarily white Euro-Americans, many from wealthy families. The significant absence of racial diversity on this campus has generated a history of student concern about racism. In the Environmental Program where I teach, students and faculty are awake to the range of attitudes and values that affect choices regarding environmental protection, social justice, and human rights. This sensitivity to values often galvanizes environmentally-concerned students to resist exploitation and abuse of not just nature, but also women, people of colour, and indigenous nations (Kaza, 1999).

In the early 1990s, UVM students were on fire as the latest environmental movement protesting toxic racism spread across the United States (Bullard, 1990). Awakened to the combined impacts of prejudice and pollution, UVM students petitioned for a special topics course in Environmental Justice. At the time there were no faculty available to teach such a course, so they proposed the alternative of developing their own syllabus and course readings. The students gained support from LEAD, Leadership Development and Education, USA, a nationwide non-profit organization that was promoting Students Teaching Students (STS) courses at the time. LEAD provided training and guidelines on how to engage students more directly in their own learning. To formally adopt student-taught courses, the Environmental Program created a catalog course number and approval process. The proposed syllabus and student qualifications were reviewed first by the course advisors, then the curriculum committee, and finally the full faculty. I served as a course advisor for five years, and in spring 2001, when the hoped-for student teachers backed out of the course, I co-taught it with a new faculty member in our program, Hector Saez. This article is a report of our combined learning story, a journey of liberation and empowerment through ethical engagement.

How did the students approach this challenge? First, they had to overcome their own ambivalence toward liberation movements. For the most part, they had benefitted from the privileges associated with their favoured race and class and the gains made by previous activists. Most were not personally involved with the feminist or civil rights movements. Some were even reserved about the confrontational tactics of the environmental movement. They did not want to take up the labels “feminist” or “environmentalist” for fear of peer backlash. Even the term “anti-racist” suggested affiliation with something that seemed too radical and demanding. Though these liberation movements had

extended freedom and protection to many people and ecosystems, the students did not seem to accept them as part of their own ethical heritage.

Second, they had to deal with issues of power and authority in the student-teacher relationship (Lipson & McDonough, 2000). This directly raised all the foundational questions about privilege, social construction, whiteness, and historical patterns of domination across cultures. Course organizers felt it essential to have some anti-racism training as part of the syllabus. They worked with labels and habits of language. They grappled with grading, facilitating, and classroom dynamics as they took up the responsibility of teachers.

Third, they had to confront the scale of these daunting social concerns, seeking resources to sustain them as they encountered distressing evidence of structural and systematic oppression. For this, they turned inward, engaging individual beliefs, experience, and values to understand racism, sexism, classism and all the other “isms” of power relations. This turn toward the subjective had the potential for isolating learners from each other or promoting a kind of political paralysis. Often students moved by new insights remained hesitant to reach out to classmates, until they could see where others stood morally. Thus an important feature of the course was community building with peer accountability (Lipson & McDonough, 2000). For some, this was a painful and reluctant engagement; for others it was the greatest gift of the course.

The goals for the most recent Students Teaching Students facilitators in developing their course were to:

- encourage justice-conscious environmental activists and students;
- be examples as individual students to the environmentally concerned community;
- create change in the broader definition of the environment to include justice issues; and
- leave a legacy on the UVM campus of their work as environmental justice educators (Lipson & McDonough, 2000).

They clearly saw their role as social change agents, facilitating campus consciousness on this particular issue.

When my colleague and I took up the course, we developed additional content-oriented goals for the course:

- to bring an environmental justice analysis and perspective to environmental issues;
- to study activists, scholars, and theorists for their contributions to this field; and
- to articulate personal views of race, class, gender, and the environment and associated patterns of environmental domination.

We felt it critical to engage these goals ourselves in order to model a deep level of inquiry and self-reflection. We also wanted to provide students with

intellectual tools of empowerment, i.e., theoretical frameworks they could use for understanding environmental justice conflicts at the structural level. Further, we were committed to looking at positive as well as negative case studies to begin to develop creative solutions to intractable problems.

Liberatory Ethics

In reflecting on the nature of the teaching in both the student-taught courses and the faculty-taught course, it seems clear that a primary dimension of learning was at the ethical or moral level. Though students gained basic knowledge of the history and dimensions of the environmental justice movement, they also left the course with a different lens for viewing the world of differences. But how was this an ethical process? What kind of theory describes the sort of moral engagement that took place in these courses?

One model I have found useful is based in principles of liberation theology as explored by physicist and Catholic priest Gerard Fourez (1982). In teaching ethics to science students in Belgium, Fourez developed a process for analyzing justice issues from the lens of social conditioning regarding patterns of oppression and domination. Fourez felt “that ethics is liberating only when people are aware of its cultural, political, and economic presuppositions” (p. xi).

The first step in Fourez’s method is assessing dominant social norms and naming the agents which promulgate these values. For environmental justice students this meant looking at racial stereotyping and similar conditioning around class and gender. They had to assess their own patterns of thinking and try to determine where they picked up their accepted values, especially around racism. We looked at how individual experience is shaped by institutional messages and structural policies promoted by specific agents—teachers, priests, bosses, etc. The second step is to see how these social values reflect an ideology which serves those in power. By analyzing rhetoric that hides the dominating nature of class and race relations, students could see the conditioning behind structural policy. When these values are internalized, they shape the ethical ground of “conscience.” Fourez challenges the traditional view that moral reasoning is shaped by moral codes, arguing that dominant ideologies play a much more significant role in moral response. The ethics of free trade, private property rights, and economic profit reinforce reigning social norms to the ethical disregard of those who suffer in their wakes. White privilege, gender inequality, and structural racism thus tend to be rationalized by those who benefit from them.

The third step for investigating patterns of internalized norms and power relationships is what Fourez calls “conscientization”—waking up the conditioned conscience to see the influence of socially-framed values. By seeing through the conditioning, the student recognizes the possibility for another moral choice. Fourez contends that people negotiate ethical dilemmas based

on the experiences and stories of others. Over the course of a life, they develop a relational ethic as they are “called” to respond to others. To take an ethical position is to stand in solidarity with those who have “called” you. Naming these values and relationships in the course of student learning then leads to questioning moral absolutes and authentic recognition of calling relationships.

A fourth element of Fourez’s work is particularly useful for environmental justice analysis. He points out that most ethical principles were developed to address individual human social relations. They are not necessarily adequate for challenging structural situations which maintain patterns of oppression. One of the projects of the environmental justice movement is to articulate principles of structural ethics that engage white privilege, patriarchy, and economic class. Fourez’s approach offers a way to distinguish social change from individual guilt, thus empowering students to act responsibly in a complex relational world.

Engaging the Model

Let us look, then, at how this model reflects what happened in the classroom. What experiential learning activities engaged students in this empowerment process? Where exactly did conscientization take place? Here I will review three aspects of the model and some of the exercises that most seemed to foster the liberatory ethics described by Fourez. Some of these exercises were central to both the student and the faculty taught courses; others were added only in the faculty taught course.

First, it was important to lay the groundwork by looking directly at racism and whiteness. Without this necessary prerequisite, it would be easy for students to fall into abstract generalizations which would prevent authentic dialogue. In both student and faculty-taught courses the class began by looking at language and the values communicated by specific terms. The student facilitators uncovered a rich training guide for “Moving from an Obsolete Lingo to a Vocabulary of Respect” (Anglesey, 1997). For each commonly used racial or ethnic term, the guide provides a set of preferred phrases and reasons why these terms are more respectful. For example, instead of using “black,” the guide suggests “African American,” “people of African descent,” or naming the specific African nationality. These phrases provide more information about origins, culture, or nationality compared to the physical descriptor “black.” Similarly, “Indian” is a misleading word coined by Columbus to convince Spanish funders that he had been in the Indies via the Indian Ocean. The guide suggests using “indigenous” or the actual name of the people such as “Choctaw” or “Mohawk.” Reviewing the guidelines, students confront terms they might have assumed were politically correct but, in fact, reveal values being promulgated by the dominant social group. By

bringing awareness to language, the students developed standards for respectful discussion and began the process of naming values and social agents.

To further understand processes of racism (as well as classism, sexism, and other isms), the faculty facilitators led a free-write exercise called “Marginality and Mattering.” This was developed by educator Lee Knefelkamp in her anti-prejudice training work, drawing on the work of Schlossberg (1989). Students wrote on two scenarios:

- Describe a situation in which you felt you really mattered. How did you know? How did you feel? How did you act?
- Describe a situation in which you felt marginalized, i.e. your opinion, presence, or experience was of no value. Again, how did you know? How did you feel? How did you act?

Students could work with valuing and non-valuing expressed in age differences, sports competition, gender clashes, or racial conditioning. Very quickly they touched the core experience of not mattering and how devastating it is to the individual psyche. The class discussion revealed the scale of this psychic undermining by showing how non-mattering is deeply woven into the social and economic fabric.

Another exercise, “The Power Shuffle,” added a systematic look at hierarchical prejudice across many categories. This exercise was developed in the early 1990s by Allan Creighton, Battered Women’s Alternatives, and Paul Kivel, Oakland Men’s Project (1992). Students stand on one side of a room, and in silence, walk to the other side of the room in response to categories named by the facilitator. In this silent roll call, the facilitator says in a neutral voice, “Please step to the other side of the room if you are . . . ‘a woman.’” Then, “if you are Arabic,” then, “if you are African-American,” “if you were raised poor,” “if you speak English as a second language,” etc. This goes on for 20-30 categories of distinction. The silent testimony indicates how many or how few differences are contained in the room. There is no commentary during the walking, but after a space of silent reflection, people share their thoughts with a partner and then with the whole group. The comments begin the uncomfortable work of self and cultural examination of the internalization of social values.

The students leading the Students Teaching Students courses felt anti-racism training was crucial for deeper understanding of environmental justice concerns. Year after year, they raised the necessary funds to bring anti-racism trainers to campus for a 1-2 day workshop. For some class members, this training opened up a depth of self-awareness beyond the shorter classroom exercises that changed their understanding of racism forever (Lipson & McDonough, 2000). For our particular campus which is diversity-impooverished, trainers emphasized investigation of “whiteness,” or the role of white privilege

in sustaining structural injustice. These discussions exposed students to their own classism and racism and how these tied in to other forms of prejudice.

The second element of the model built on the work of assessing values conditioning by engaging intellectual work in analyzing power relations. For this, we provided several theoretical frameworks from ecofeminism, environmental justice, economics, and anthropology (Capek, 1993; Churchill & LaDuke, 1992; Seager, 1996; Warren, 1994). For their major class project, students worked in small groups to analyze a specific case study of environmental injustice, using these frameworks. This tradition had been developed in the student-taught courses as a way to share the teaching of the course; we continued it in the faculty-taught course as a way to deepen student research and analytical skills. Across the course syllabus, we had exposed students to a range of environmental justice concerns: hazardous waste dumping, farmworkers and pesticides, lead impacts in major cities, nuclear waste storage on indigenous lands, etc. (Bullard, 1993; Camacho, 1998; Hofrichter, 1993; LaDuke, 1999; Westra & Wenz, 1995). We discussed well-known case studies such as Love Canal, Warren County, East Los Angeles, Cancer Alley in Louisiana, among others.

Each week, following guidelines developed in a University of Michigan course (see www.umich.edu/~snre492/cases.html), one group presented an in-depth case study related to the topic of the week. They had 45 minutes to present a history of the situation, the key actors and their political interests, strategies used by organizers, evaluation of the effectiveness of those strategies, and finally, a review of solutions and recommendations for future actions. Each group provided a double-sided handout to the class, with an outline, bibliography, list of key organizations, and important websites. Groups used posters, map transparencies, video clips, interviews, and web charts to communicate their findings. By the end of the course, students had a dozen resource sheets for their own reference material.

For example, one group studied Altgeld Gardens in Chicago, a well-known toxic zone or “cancer alley.” They showed how this specific neighbourhood first began to degenerate when its wetlands were drained and filled, allowing the steel industry to move in. Housing projects were built for workers in the 1940s, but when the steel industry departed, they left all their waste behind. Over time, the neighborhood deteriorated further with the siting of a toxic waste incinerator, four landfills, a sewage treatment plant, and several paint factories. The students outlined the long years of efforts by People for Community Recovery, a local citizens’ group calling for fair and healthy treatment of their neighborhood. This group engaged in community education, civil disobedience, lobbying of city government, filing legal complaints, and leading “toxic tours” for concerned officials. Through their cumulative initiatives, People for Community Recovery was able to achieve some success in forcing a response to the local superfund site. The students recommended they pursue legal action, increase media attention on the problems, and

pressure local environmental organizations to hire people of colour to facilitate more engagement in urban environmental justice issues.

The third aspect of Fourez's method calls for direct encounters that foster conscientization and help develop solidarity with those experiencing the injustice. This is the basis for what he refers to as "calling ethics": responding with moral intention from direct experiences of compassion. In the most recent year the course was taught, we created a new learning experience for students that would focus on environmental justice issues close to home: the toxic tour. Toxic tours have been used successfully by groups such as Citizens for a Better Environment in San Francisco to communicate the actual parameters of injustice in local regions. Though Burlington, Vermont comes nowhere close to the scale of such hazardous neighborhoods as Love Canal, Altgeld Gardens, or Louisiana's Cancer Alley, we thought we might find some lesser-known problems in our otherwise environmentally reputable town.

After researching various community contacts, we set up five tour stops:

- the McNeil biomass electrical generating plant;
- community apartments affected by the plant;
- low-income housing impacted by lead;
- a former site of jet fuel storage tanks with benzene toxicity; and
- a plastics factory generating seasonal pollution.

The students toured by bus over a three-hour class period, meeting an informed representative at each location. They took notes, read handouts, asked questions, and shared impressions during and after the tour. The tour was held several weeks before the end of the course, serving as a culminating experience for the whole group. Some of the learning that took place was evident in their writing on the final exam.

First, it seemed that a common reaction was to recognize their own *denial* about the existence of environmental injustice in Burlington and to assume that meant everyone else was in the dark as well. One student wrote:

After the toxic tour I have a huge desire to tell all people living in Vermont that their state is not as "green and clean" as they think! I feel like it is way too easy to adopt an "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" mentality when dealing with issues like environmental justice. We have to somehow make the people of Vermont realize that just because they don't see an injustice occurring doesn't mean that it isn't occurring. I feel like everyone living in Vermont should have to take a toxic tour of their state so that they are forced to deal with some of the hidden issues that are affecting their fellow Vermonters.

This experience corresponds to Fourez's sense of being called to "wake up" from denial to the realities of injustice within one's immediate surroundings.

Second, students gained a direct experience of *inequity* as it involved not just a generalized other, but students themselves. They saw the gender dimension of inequity in the female community activist's struggle against the

male bureaucracy of the power plant and city hall. They saw the class dimension of inequity as they learned about lead pollution in older housing in Burlington, some of which was in student neighborhoods. One student wondered how she herself might be affected by this environmental injustice:

The landlords in Burlington know that college students and low-income families need to rent cheap houses or apartments. The landlords also know that many of these people don't have enough information and don't know their rights when it comes to dealing with lead contamination. Thus, the landlords in Burlington can take advantage of the people renting their units while getting away with the environmental injustice of subjecting their tenants to lead contamination.

Students were conscientized by observing a contaminated yard and house, and then by hearing about their own rights from a community Legal Aid lawyer. He provided them with a guidebook to tenants' rights which would give them legal power in confronting irresponsible landlords.

Third, the students gained a greater awareness of their own *complicity* with situations of injustice. They came to see that these problems were not confined only to those who suffered the consequences. In fact, they often depended on the privilege of those more well off who were benefitting in some way from the situation. One student considered her own role as a consumer of power generated by the McNeil plant:

This issue [McNeil plant] affects me as a resident of Burlington, since I pay for power from the city. I use power by writing this paper in my room, by walking into stores downtown lit and heated or cooled with electricity, by relying on traffic lights and street lamps to guide me back home. I live in Slade Hall [the environmental coop dorm], and a few weeks ago we had Purity Week, something like a mini-Lent. I decided to give up electricity, which turned out to be very challenging. Although I did not turn on any lights or machines, I still went to classes and stores powered by electricity. Simply going into a lit public bathroom with other people in it made me have to use electricity unwillingly!

This aspect of conscientization was perhaps the most painful, for the students often felt helpless to affect their part in the suffering.

Fourth, many students witnessed the importance of *resistance* as exemplified by the local community organizer. Finally they met a real environmental justice advocate speaking up for citizen rights despite the odds. As one student wrote:

This issue affected me the most because I actually looked at and listened to a person that the problem was actually hurting. I saw the homes and the people driving by who were also affected, and I listened to [the organizer] talk about how thankful she was that she is able to take time off from work in order to go on receiving the kind of quality of life that we all have enjoyed since birth.

Though the students did not join in the struggle themselves, they were inspired by those who took matters in their hands, formed alliances (in this

case with the local Sierra Club chapter), and insisted the power plant mitigate the environmental impacts that were causing asthma from dust pollution.

The toxic tour was a clear success and an important pedagogical piece of the course design. It left many students with unexpected emotions and generated a new level of reflective thinking and conscientization. Coming after weeks of exposure to national and international case studies, this tour grounded the environmental justice principles in the local place where students live and study.

Closing

It has been a privilege to work with these dedicated student teachers and also with my faculty colleague. The material we engaged together was without doubt some of the most acutely depressing of any course I have taught. To see people bound into situations of multiple environmental assaults was often utterly heartbreaking. Watching the students respond to the course, I felt affirmed in believing that moral response to environmental concerns may foster great life transformation. The role of a supportive community cannot be underestimated. Discussion, dialogue, and field exposure reduce the all too common isolation of student learning. By sharing the journey of conscientization together, we found ways to celebrate the bright possibility of our own courageous lives.

Through Fourez's method, our moral callings ripened into stances of solidarity. As students accumulated stories of injustice and felt the power of these stories to inspire response, they came to act from a more settled ethical base. Less bound by the blind habits of social conditioning, they sought out peers for validation and company. Week upon week, the students developed a sense of community engaged with justice concerns. Their brave and difficult work helped bring the level of ethical accountability up one more notch on this university campus.

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