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Commoning the Classroom: Teaching Sustainability and "Decolonizing Imaginaries"

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Abstract

This paper provides details for and commentary on two semester-long point-sharing activities I include in my Sustainable Development class, an undergraduate-level course cross-listed in Anthropology and Environmental Studies. In a course that deals with finding solutions to the issue of resource scarcity, both absolute scarcity and distributional inequity, I ask students to think about the possibilities for significant cultural shifts in values and norms rather than only technological fixes and "green consumerism." Using class points as a resource, these activities challenge students to consider making sacrifices of time for future generations of students and to work together to conserve a communal pool of points. Combined with ethnographic case studies of the diversity of resource management strategies in the world, putting alternative ways of thinking about resource use into practice helps "decolonize our imaginaries," making neoliberal ideology and its effects on our values and behaviors more visible and open to critical reflection.

Introduction

S*ustainable development* – development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – first officially defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission, included at least two revolutionary concepts and potential calls to action. First, inherent in this definition and the report containing it was a sense of collective responsibility for the Earth's resources and the well-being of all its inhabitants. Second was a call for equity between present and future generations, a responsibility to not only meet the needs of Earth's current inhabitants but to ensure resources were available for future generations. The U.N.-commissioned report challenged practitioners, policy makers, and educators to confront life on a finite planet and to recognize that environmental, economic, and social problems and solutions were inextricably linked. Dealing with scarcity, therefore, is a fundamental aim of sustainable development and Kallis and March (2015) point out that there are two very different strategies for managing scarcity: "limitations of ends versus the expansion of means" (p. 363). Do we work to limit our wants and rethink the meaning of "scarcity" or do we find new ways to support current levels of consumption using fewer resources? While the answer certainly is not confined to one or the other, sustainable development, as a policy and education directive, is mired in the latter.

"Sustainability as an ideal can be radical," but to teach it in this way involves "not just calling for changes in the rules of the game (i.e. market dynamics), but also to the game itself (i.e. the global economy" (Dauvergne & Lister, 2013, p. 25). Tasked with teaching an undergraduate course called Sustainable Development at Eckerd College, a small liberal arts school in St. Petersburg, Florida, I strive to address the issue of scarcity by helping students rethink the very ways we produce and consume goods and services in our global economy. However, every semester, I struggle against student expectations that sustainability education will entail anything other than a greener "business as usual" (Huckle & Wals, 2015). The hegemonic force of neoliberal ideology, so pervasive and naturalized, makes it difficult for most people, including our students, to imagine possibilities for values and behaviors beyond the imperative for economic growth, resource privatization, and individual

entrepreneurship and profit maximization (Hursh, Henderson, & Greenwood, 2015). Through ethnographic case studies and two semester-long point-sharing activities, I attempt to help students see and experience other possibilities for resource management through what Latouche (2015) calls "decolonizing our imaginaries."

One of the strengths of Anthropology, particularly in a liberal arts curriculum where we are trying to develop our students' "narrative imagination," or the ability to understand the point of view of another person (Nussbaum, 2004), is that it exposes students to other ways of knowing about and behaving in the world. Through ethnographic case studies, students come to understand that people around the world have different morals, ethics, and rationalities that govern their perceptions and behaviors within their social and natural environments. Therefore, in my Sustainable Development course (cross-listed in Anthropology and Environmental Studies), I have students read ethnographic case studies from environmental and economic anthropology to introduce students to different ways of understanding the human-environment relationship and different ways of making decisions about resources. While I remind my students that there is no recipe for successful sustainable development, there is more on the menu than we might see from our own cultural standpoint.

To press this point further, to "decolonize the imaginary," I implement two semester-long activities that actually give the students an opportunity to *experience* alternative ways of managing resources. Latouche (2007), drawing on Cornelius Castoriadis' (1987) definition of "imaginary," calls for "reopen[ing] the area of inventiveness and creativity of an imaginary blocked up by the totalitarianism of economism, developmentalism and progressivism" (para. 4). In the context of my course, I ask students to manage class points (a very valuable resource indeed!) as something other than private property that is theirs alone to earn and lose. To experience making sacrifices now for the good of future generations, students have the opportunity to earn extra credit points for next semester's Sustainable Development students. Additionally, to experience collective responsibility for managing a common pool resource, students must work together to conserve the extra credit points earned for them by the previous semester's students. In this paper, I will describe these class activities in greater detail, providing language from my syllabus, and describe informative bumps in the road as I experimented with different ways of implementing these activities over the past five years. While I couch these activities within the fields of Environmental and Economic Anthropology, I believe they could be put to good use in any course dealing with sustainability, resource management, or other related subjects.

Earning Extra Credit for the Future

The idea of making sacrifices in the present that will not directly benefit those making the sacrifices but will benefit future generations is an important component of sustainability that is often neglected because it flaunts deeply-held cultural convictions of the primacy of the individual. Much of what can be considered "sustainable" resource management, however, demonstrates this sense of responsibility, individually or collectively, for people in the future. Ethnographic examples of these types of cultural institutions and behaviors abound. In two undergraduate-appropriate ethnographies, Menzies (2016) describes community harvesting rules and other cultural values that encouraged the sustainable harvest of salmon, herring, and abalone in a coastal indigenous group in the Pacific Northwest and Reed (2009) describes a system of sustainable agroforestry in a Paraguayan indigenous group. In both cases, contemporary trends in market integration, privatization, and even conservation have constrained these groups' abilities to continue their sustainable harvesting practices and other cultural institutions that encourage sacrificing for the future.

In order to practice this future-oriented behavior with class points, I give students the opportunity to earn extra credit points for next semester's Sustainable Development class. As with most extra credit opportunities, this one is completely voluntary. As a required component of the course, students must write "response cards" for every class reading, film, and guest speaker. These responses are written on

4"x6" index cards and they must have a thesis, two to three supporting points, and two to three sentences of the student's own reflection on the reading, film, or presentation. Each response card is worth up to five points (out of 350-400 total possible points in the semester). To earn extra credit for the future, students can elect to attend any extracurricular event that the class agrees is related to course content and write a response card. These extra credit response cards are also worth up to five points each. Because we begin each new week of class by listing and discussing that week's various campus events that are related to the course, this activity has had the added benefit of encouraging students to be more attentive to campus events and to connect these events to course content.

I have now taught Sustainable Development five times. My average class size is 26 students. The classes have earned an average of 66.9 extra credit points for the next semester's students, with a wide range of 15 to 113 points. While I would need more data to make a conclusive statement, I believe there may be a connection between student attitudes towards effective common property management and willingness to make sacrifices for future generations.

> Text from my Spring 2018 syllabus:
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> **Earning extra credit for the future** Something that is often neglected when putting sustainable development into practice is that it involves sacrifices today that will not directly benefit those making the sacrifices but will benefit future generations. You have an opportunity to earn extra credit points for next semester's Sustainable Development class. If you attend any [institution] event that relates to the issues discussed in class and you write a response card for it, you will earn up to 5 points for next semester's students. **Last semester's class earned XX points of extra credit for your class, which will be evenly distributed among you (if you effectively conserve the points).** I hope you will consider earning more than that for next semester's students.

Collective Class Points

Another important component of sustainability is the acknowledgement of the communal nature of our natural resources and our collective responsibility to make decisions about how to use them. This involves a discussion of common pool resources and ethnographic examples of collective decision-making, and there are many examples that are inspiring to undergraduates. Some of these include: collective decision-making in intentional communities or ecovillages (e.g., Parkhill et al., 2015); bioregionalism, a movement promoting the idea that human economic activity should be restricted to distinct geographical regions (e.g., Berg, 2015); *ol-opololi*, or Maasai temporary grass refuges, where social rules and collective decision-making help pastoralists maintain livelihoods and conserve pastureland in a constantly-changing ecosystem (e.g., Curtin & Western, 2008); and Tokelauan communal fishing grounds on the Atafu Atoll (Ono & Addison, 2009).

Each semester, the class starts with a collective pool of points earned for them by the previous semester's students. I have experimented with different ways of encouraging students to understand this pool of points as a common pool resource and to work together to conserve the points. My missteps along the way have been illuminating (if damaging to my course evaluations) and illustrate the wisdom of Elinor Ostrom's characteristics of effective common property institutions (Ostrom, 1990).

In my first semester of teaching Sustainable Development, I told the students that, every time the class average on a response card (described above) fell below a 3 out of 5, they would lose a communal extra credit point. I hoped this would give students an added incentive to engage with course materials carefully and, as a result, benefit class participation and discussion. This did not work well. Students did not connect to the activity, could not see the relationship to ethnographic examples of common pool resources, and their behavior did not seem to be influenced in any way by the threat of losing communal points. Two of Ostrom's characteristics of effective common property institutions are that

the community must be able to monitor the resource held in common and the community must be able to enact sanctions against people who do not respect community rules (Ostrom, 1990). In this case, while I presented the class the number of remaining extra credit points at the beginning of each week, individual student behavior was anonymous, as I did not reveal who had earned low scores on response cards. Because "bad behavior" was invisible to the community, they had no real impetus to encourage or sanction each other.

For the next two semesters, I tried linking the communal pool of points to attendance. Every time a student was late to class or absent, they would all lose one of these extra credit points. Once the resource was gone, I would start taking points away from individual grades when students were late or absent. Thus, in this case, the communal pool of points acted as a buffer against individual penalization for class attendance violations. This also did not work well. While it gave us an opportunity to talk about the difference between open access resources and commonly-managed resources (Feeny, Berkes, McCay, & Acheson, 1990) and how some students were treating these extra credit points as an open access resource, the rest of the class felt powerless and conflicted about controlling the behavior of a few students. This exercise created a very negative dynamic in the classroom.

While the common pool resource acting as a buffer against harm to individuals is a better analogy for the use of physical resources, I could no longer allow one class exercise to derail the whole semester. Subsequently, over the past two semesters, I have settled on a much more agreeable way of encouraging students to collectively conserve a communal pool of points. As another required component of the course and the students' individual grades, they must write three position papers on issues related to sustainable development. On the day the papers are due, they have a class debate on the issue. I assign the class a grade as a whole on their performance during the debate. I assess them on their understanding of the topic, the organization of their arguments, the effectiveness of their rebuttals, full team participation, and respect for the other team. The whole class must earn a 'B' on the first debate to conserve one-third of their communal pool of points, and they then must earn at least an 'A-' on the next two debates to conserve the other two-thirds of the points.

This strategy has been successful in a number of ways. Ostrom (1990) argues that common property must have clearly-defined boundaries. In this case, temporal boundaries are important. Instead of having to monitor each other's behavior over an entire semester, allowing what exactly the community has collective control over to become indistinct, students responded well to opportunities to monitor each other's behavior in three very clearly-bounded class periods. Another characteristic of effective common property management is the absence of top-down decision-making and the community being given freedom by nation-state governments to organize (Ostrom, 1990). I believe my first two strategies were ineffective, in part, because my control over the situation as professor was too visible. The control of the resource, from the perspective of the students, still seemed firmly in my hands. Within these clearly-bounded class debates, while the overall rules were still mine, the two student groups on either side of the debate had freedom with 45 minutes of preparation and 45 minutes of debate to decide among themselves how they would work together to conserve their common pool resource. The overall successes of this strategy have included the best class debates I have ever had in any of my courses, participation by every single student in the class, higher quality individual position papers, and improved participation outside of the debates.

Text from my Spring 2018 syllabus:

<u>Conservation of communal pool of extra credit points</u>: In order to better understand alternative ways of understanding resource conservation and decision-making, you must cooperate to conserve a communal pool of points this semester. This communal pool is composed of the extra credit points last semester's students earned for you (see below). We will have three class debates corresponding to the subjects of your two position papers and presentations (see Course Schedule below for dates). The class will be divided in two. You will have a portion of the class period for preparation and a

portion of the class period for debate. The class **as a whole** will be assessed on understanding of topic, organization of argument, effectiveness of rebuttal, full team participation, and respect for the other team. For the first debate, the class must earn **at least a 'B'** in order to conserve 1/3 of the communal pool of points. For the second and third debates, the class must earn **at least an 'A-'** in order to conserve the other 2/3 of the communal points.

Conclusion

Latouche (2015) calls for "decolonizing our imaginaries," "to really change the world before the change of the world condemns us" (p. 117). Many of my Sustainable Development students are deeply troubled by the vast inequalities perpetuated by global capitalism and irreversible ecological damage wrought by the drive for sustained economic growth. However, it is difficult for any of us to recognize the ways in which our values and behaviors are driven by the very same neoliberal paradigm, "difficult in both thought and deed to imagine a society proceeding on different principles" (Hursh, Henderson, & Greenwood, 2015, p. 300). As a professor of Sustainable Development, I strive to help students think critically, not just about these cultural institutions in the abstract but about how societal values of individualism and profit maximization shape their own behavior and even how they define sustainability. As described above, I do this by exposing them to ethnographic accounts of alternative ways of thinking and using resources and, going further, by asking them to manage their own class points in new ways.

At the beginning of each new semester, as I go through the syllabus with each new class of Sustainable Development students, without fail, they smirk and roll their eyes as I describe earning extra credit points for next semester's students and look at me with wide-eyed disbelief when I describe the conservation of their common pool of points. However, many comments from end-of-semester surveys indicate success in exposing students to alternative values and management strategies, encouraging students to examine their own values and behaviors, and providing the setting to imagine new possibilities. I have included a few representative comments below:

> "I think, from the start, I felt a responsibility for earning next semester's class some points because, if we didn't earn for them as much as we desired, it was no one's fault but our own. From there, it was easy to see a tie between our communal pool and how cultures throughout the world depend on sustainable practices to ensure future generations can thrive."

> "My first thought after hearing about the extra credit was 'oh jeez.' I understood your methodology, but I like to be very much in control of my own grades. That being said, the more I learned about what being sustainable is really about, the more I softened to the structure of the extra credit. It is so easy to be self-centered and criticize those who have come before us as being unsustainable. But are we really willing to make those sacrifices ourselves to benefit those who come after us? There is such a disconnect between thought and behavior."

> "The thought of having to conserve the extra credit points as a group was scary. I like to be in control of my grades and, in all honesty, I tend to be pessimistic about group grades, especially when it involves the whole class. Having made it through the semester, I now understand not only what it takes, but that it is possible. Even though this exercise was on a small scale, it gives me hope for both the work that individuals are willing to put in and the ability of groups to work together in order to benefit all."

Dimick (2015) argues for pedagogical and curricular innovations that help students develop as environmental citizens and "that actively push against neoliberalism's privatization of responsibility for the environmental commons" (p. 396). As with any representation of our social reality that contradicts deeply-held convictions about the way the world works, Dimick goes on to say that these decolonizing

classroom activities will not be without their emotional pushback. But, to paraphrase Frederick Douglass, without a struggle, can there be a revolution?

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