

Consensus to Co-Create Curricula and Build Community

Course Description

The Backwards by Design workshop encouraged me to take a closer look at my pedagogy and to take risks when designing this new course. My main motivation was to stimulate self-directed learning and facilitate a learning environment that fostered the time and space to do so. Students are often socialized to see their professors as holding knowledge that will be transmitted to them, but I want students to see they themselves and their peers have just as much, if not more to offer. My ENVS 597B course, Justice and Equity in Environmental Education was an experimental course taught from the strengths of the instructor, a focus on justice and teacher education. The course focused on issues of social identity, social and cultural diversity, and societal manifestations of power, privilege, and oppression as it relates in environmental education. Using social justice frameworks, critical theory, and critical race theory and an interdisciplinary approach (incorporating the historical, political, economic, legal, social, psychological, philosophical, and curricular foundations) we did close readings of texts and used writing assignments to explore various topics such as racial identity and relationship to land.

Focus of Study

This was my first-time teaching ENVS 597B, therefore, I wanted to do it differently than I have other courses and take a consensus approach to the latter half of the quarter. The focus of my study was to see what would happen to student learning when a consensus approach was used to determine what students would focus their learning on for the last five weeks of the quarter.

Summary of Results

1. This was a challenging endeavor with graduate students, they were initially quite resistant. They are socialized to want the banking method of education.
2. We did several rounds of consensus to determine the two focus areas for the remaining five weeks of the course.
3. My giving up five weeks of course instruction was a huge trade-off in regard to what I may have covered.
4. Students chose to focus on Neoliberalism and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Environmental Education.
5. In addition to choosing two course topics, the students then broke up into groups and facilitated a class on either topic. This included teaching and facilitating class discussion.
6. At the end of the course, I administered the university course evaluation and received the following quotes from students regarding the co-creating of curricula experience:

“I also really like the student choice in how we want the course to go.”

“I loved that students facilitated a class based on our interests. Students seem to engage more on topics they’re excited/interested about and I felt that I got to know my peers well through that process.”

“The chosen readings were excellent and really pushed my intellectual boundaries.”

Backwards by Design Mini-Study Write-up

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“It was actually really helpful to see how we all approached class facilitation a little differently. The students who led class later got to build on the methods that seemed to work well for the group. This was really useful for reflecting on my personal pedagogy.”

“Student choice provided was huge- helping us decide what we wanted to learn/produce created community that fostered authentic realness.”

“We were able to choose what we wanted to focus on in the second half of the course!”

Future Plans

After fall quarter went well, I challenged myself to also co-create the curricula for ENVS 484 a WP3 writing course focused on Literature of Nature and Place. I spent four classes leading a consensus process for the class to select the reading topics as well as suggested readings. The topics students' chose were Culture & Nature, Language & Nature, Oppression & Recreation, Urban Environmentalism, and Environmental Hope. Some of the course topics I never would have chosen so I appreciated allowing student voice to include topics they were interested in, found relevant, and chose as a community. Moreover, some of the readings were also unfamiliar to me and this allowed for a breadth of material to be covered.