

Actionable Learning for a Living Earth: Backwards by Design 2015-16 Project Report

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Reflective research into things that matter increasingly point to what is occurring as humanity jolts into awareness of the scope and pace of the debilitating pressures on Earth for we are responsible. We are meeting the enemy, and it is us. Many places and people are already devastated by plunder and unjust ecopolitical realities. The challenges are profound, and young people especially face rising seas of planetary uncertainties in years ahead. How do we live, when surrounded by, and ourselves part of, unsustainable and unjust ways of living? How do we educate (Martusewicz, et al. 2011), when looming ecological realities and associated social crises are so profound, their weightiness ever more palpable in disheartenment or denial?

In this learning and teaching milieu, I have come to see ethical and strategic thinking as requisites of acquisition of knowledge. My courses focus increasingly on the value of anthropological perspective and the lessons of human evolution, past and prospective. Inherent in that endeavor is commitment to discerning alternatives and affirming enlivening engagement that support a common imperative: to live peaceable together amid crises and critical, unavoidable decisions.

During the summer 2015 “Backwards by Design” working retreat, I explored the intricate pairing of knowledge and action as central to efforts to bridge anthropology and environment. The retreat initiated a focus on “actionable learning” as a threshold concept that would come to underlie my seminar on “Ecocultural Ethics” in Winter 2016. (This continued in Spring 2016 courses on Borderlands and disparities inherent in bordering, as well as anthropological methods; however, these are not included in this report.) In addition to dialog and readings suggesting that threshold concepts may be as “messy” (Cousin 2006:5) as they are connective, I developed course activities that ultimately also proved powerful for ensuring learning that is “durable” (Heath and Heath 2007).

Grounded in commitment to understanding how a healthy Earth and human wellbeing are intricately intertwined, the Ecocultural seminar probed ways in which active hope and interactive work shape both. Ecocultural and actionable are not phrases in common parlance, but their value became clearer as our seminar unfolded. In fact, an unspoken but common commitment to these new understandings emerged across a series of reflective and discursive classroom activities, particularly student writing assignments that were co-developed by instructor and students, as well as through action projects beyond.

With intentional inquiry into the cultural assumptions and privileged structures of dominant global systems, writing (including the option of multiple drafts) allowed

for deeper analysis not only of how these undermine the very ecosystems essential to life itself, but also generate and require pedagogical, interpersonal, and even spiritual responses, or “mobilizations.” The threshold concept of actionable learning was key to the first writing assignment, which we called “Roots.” It drew on personal experiences and formative values as a powerful approach to addressing a “radical” ecocultural concern. Radical – rooted in the Latin word “radix,” or root – is usually vexing and persistent. At the same time, stories embody the currency of one’s thinking. They are at once powerful and activating. Little provokes more attention in a class than sharing a story, and students came to both remember and to stretch their imagining. Together we sensed that never has a reality needed so much to be both remembered and imagined.

Actionable learning continued through “Global Us/Global U.S.,” an interactive investigation into the critical human interdependence on the services and diversities of the commons - land, water, air, and other species. Indices were wide-ranging, from calculating one’s carbon and water footprint, to identifying sources of our “stuff.” The sheer scope and pace of global trends, and our individual and collective collusion, was daunting. But this also became another path for encouraging continuing activist scholarship, as well as scholarly activism.

Sources of insight and encouragement from the world around us became an actionable antidote for us as we became knowledgeable about the sources of our varied practices, we ecosinners all. Through “Earth First,” we explored the resilience and wisdom inherent in biocentrism and in gratitude for intercultural and interspecies interdependencies evident in human diversity, and especially in indigenous peoples of the world. This, in turn, merged into “Policy Research,” which entailed focus on policy not as distant and specialized, but as central to engaged and visionary learning. Policy can be – must be – active and interactive. It has as essential aim, that of fostering awareness of each other as colleagues, and development of skills for becoming effective citizen scientists and scientific citizens. Students responded to the moral dilemmas at hand first by not avoiding them, and second by critically addressing any one through partnering in researching problems as well as alternatives. Seeing that policy means action, they took this still further. Seven students participated in Scholars Week during Spring 2016, prodding action by attendees, and proposing creative responsiveness that continues beyond a single class or academic term.

Actionable learning, evident in ecocultural understandings, involves enlivened endeavors. Central to the overall milieu of a class, it can become part of furthering commitment and involvement. As a threshold concept it also points to multiple possibilities for re-bordering – for challenging and bridging unquestioned and even lunatic borders that persist in disciplines, individualized lives, term research papers, and other constraints of current course constructs.

Echoing the words of Gandhi, who wrote of his life as “experiments with truth,” classes are also experimental. Multiple, progressive writing activities can build on

integrating personal experience and prior knowledge, be followed by comparative and team inquiry into common themes of interest, and culminate in addressing policy concerns. Student reflections reveal the value of combining research with social and environmental possibilities. In becoming more knowledgeable, students begin moving toward more effective and collective responses to the cosmic challenge of preserving humanity through the contemporary planetary crisis. In this process, we also come to see that rather than hoping that hope will bring encouragement to act, action and struggle are what bring us into hope.

References

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