

REBECCA TODD PETERS – EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION AS A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

I am deeply interested in the kinds of people my students turn out to be. I desire to not only teach students about how to think ethically, but to also see themselves and their own personal behaviors and lifestyle choices as intimately connected to the social crises of poverty, globalization, and the environment that we learn about in my classes. As an ethicist, I am interested in the moral formation of the college students that I teach. I approach this moral formation with two primary goals in mind: 1) to teach students how to critically analyze and evaluate ethical problems and situations; 2) to encourage students to see their own connections and responsibilities as human agents in a complex world.

Here I will briefly discuss my use of experiential education in a course on Environmental Ethics as a pedagogical strategy to deepen ethical reflection on the relationship between students' personal behaviors and lifestyles and the larger environmental crisis. I intentionally structure the learning environment in ways that I hope will not only help my students understand the origins of the environmental crisis, and the multiple players and perspectives involved, but that will also influence the habits, character, and behavior of students to become responsible environmental actors.

Reading different environmental theories and religious approaches to environmental issues is a familiar exercise for college students who are used to learning about different theoretical approaches to a particular subject. The challenge is to help students see the connections between their own personal choices/habits/behaviors and the larger environmental problems we study. I do this through the use of a series of experiential education exercises that encourage students to make connections between their lifestyles and the environmental crisis.

We begin the semester with a series of exercises that ask students to reflect on where and how their attitudes toward the environment have been shaped and formed. Working through an exercise on their environmental family tree as well as several exercises that prompt students to think about their attitudes and experiences with the environment, students are able to begin to articulate their attitudes toward the environment and to begin to think critically about how those attitudes were shaped and formed. Additionally, this information helps to inform me about my community of learners and what knowledge, experience, interest, and questions they bring to the table. Getting to know the history, background, and worldview of my students enables me to approach teaching them in more effective ways. It allows me to frame problems, questions, and challenges in ways that invite the students into a conversation about the problems of environmental ethics rather than putting them on the defensive or allowing them to simply dismiss the issues as unrelated to their own lives and well-being. Learning how to talk to and engage my students also enables me to challenge them constructively by framing issues and dilemmas in ways that resonate with their own life experience.

The first of two major experiential exercises in which the students engage in the course is to document and assess their environmental impact by recording their consumption habits for three weeks. Their environmental impact study begins the first day of class when they are asked to keep a record for the next seven days of everything they eat and drink, the following week they keep a record of all the waste they produce, and the third week they keep track of all the energy they consume (or produce, i.e. – walking). Then, the fourth week they are required to write a reflective essay that discusses what they learned about themselves and their personal impact on the environment over the past three weeks. In the essay, they must identify one thing that they are willing to commit themselves to change about their own personal habits over the rest of the semester. I ask them to discuss why they chose this habit to change, and to demonstrate a plan of action that will enable them to make this change. At the end of the semester they are graded, not on their success or failure in relation to this goal, but on their process and reflection about the

experience. The intention of this exercise is to challenge students to develop habits of action that might then impact their own environmental consciousness.

One of the values of focusing on individual or household habits is that it can prompt students to broaden their worldview. By raising students' consciousness about their own personal lifestyles and habits and challenging them to make changes in their lives, it forces them to think about the course on a daily basis. This is the point of consciousness-raising, for the issue to become a part of their lives. Though this might only last for a semester – the hope is that it will be longer lasting. While the environmental impact study helps students see their own complicity and responsibility in perpetuating the environmental crisis, it is also important to empower them with the understanding that they can be agents of change in the world around them. Requiring them to think through what kinds of changes they were interested in making in their own lives, and challenging them to try it out for a semester, gives them practice at being agents of change in their own lives.

But social change requires more than changing the habits of individuals, therefore, the second experiential education project is to conceive and execute a community based project that addresses a specific aspect of environmental injustice in our community. Because the purpose of the class project is to help students learn how to identify an environmental problem and then create a community response to that problem, the process is as important as the final outcome. Consequently, each student is graded on their personal participation, the process, an essay, and a final evaluation. Their task is to design a project that addresses the issue of how we, as the Elon community, can take steps toward caring for the planet. I urge them to think about the differences between procedural change, which is incremental; structural change, which is transformative; and ideological, or worldview change which is revolutionary. In class we talk about how these three types of change connect, which is harder and why, and what these different kinds of change might look like. Then as a class we discuss what kind of change they want to work toward, we brainstorm possibilities, and work toward building a consensus on what project to pursue. My vision for the class project is that it will be something that is challenging for the students that will teach them how to do community organizing, and will allow them to see themselves as moral agents active in a larger community of accountability. So far class projects have included developing a proposal for composting institutional food waste; an energy audit and education campaign; and the development of a community garden on campus. These projects enable students to engage in actions of social justice that begin to respond to the larger environmental crises we are studying in class. By teaching them how to organize community resources as a way of responding to ethical problems that concern them, it is my hope that these exercises train students in the concrete actions of civic engagement and social change.

Teaching for social justice is both a process and a goal. Sometimes I push them, sometimes I pull them, and sometimes I walk side by side with them through the morass of ethical complexity that we face as members of the human community. Some of them like me for this, others think I ask too much of them in the course of one semester. My hope though, is that the seeds that I plant today will eventually take root and grow, even if I am not around to see it. For my interest in who my students turn out to be goes far beyond how they do in my particular course to what kind of people they become when they leave the insular community of a private university. Will they one day run for office or serve on the PTA or join an environmental task force in their community? For most of my students, I will never know the answer to these questions, but I am committed, nevertheless, to continuing to educate for social justice in the hopes that my courses might function to create a context for a transformation that I may never see. This is my calling as an educator and a feminist Christian ethicist – to work toward developing the social consciousness of my students so that they may become more active participants in transforming social injustice in our world.