

How Do You Save the Planet?: Service Learning and Student Philanthropy in an Introductory Environmental History Course

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ABSTRACT

Service learning is a recognized part of the environmental studies curriculum at many institutions, but students usually complete these projects as part of courses in the STEM disciplines. This article explores the use of service learning in an environmental history course that focuses on the American environmental movement at an open-access, two-year teaching campus of a major research university. It details the design and execution of the course in Spring 2018, when in addition to regular service learning volunteer work, students participated in a Pay it Forward student philanthropy project. Issues explored include deploying service learning in content focused courses; encouraging students to think critically about philanthropy in American society; and general tips on course design and execution.

INTRODUCTION

“How do you change the world?”

That is a question I asked my students at the beginning of my class, “Environmental Activism.” Although they do not know it at the time, the question is both an intellectual and personal challenge. On an intellectual level, the question is asking them to understand the history and development of the American environmental movement, and to understand how various activists, groups and organizations went about trying to improve natural conditions, save endangered species, and protect their children and

families from toxic waste. But personally, it is also asking them to think about the work that needs to be done to create real social and environmental change, and how they see themselves engaging in that work.

Each part of this question represents one part of the class. “Environmental Activism” is a sophomore level class taught at the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College (an open-access branch campus), cross-listed in the history and environmental studies programs. It is designed as part of a core of classes to introduce students to different ways of approaching, and

understanding, environmental issues outside of a solely scientific and technical context. But since it also fulfills general education requirements, the course also attracts students who are simply interested in the topic, as well as a smattering of history majors. In terms of disciplinary learning outcomes, it is designed to introduce students to the structure, development and diversity of American environmentalism, as well as the broader field of environmental history, which examines how human and natural forces interact and shape human societies over time. In order to help students connect theory to practice, it has an optional with service-learning component, where students complete a service project with a local environmental organization over the course of the semester.

This was the structure of the class when I taught it for the first time in Spring 2016. In addition to regular lectures, readings and discussions, students were required to identify and volunteer with a local environmental organization, and then provide a final presentation on their experience, that connected the history and structure of the organization to what we had learned in class about the American environmental movement. Although I identified about twenty-five environmental organizations in advance and matched one to two students with each group, overall I provided little supervision for the service learning projects. This was a good model for the first time teaching the class, as it allowed students to follow their interests, and I was able to survey the diversity of opportunities in the Cincinnati area, and which organizations would be good partners in the future. The level of student engagement was mixed. Some got very involved with their organizations and continued after the class was over, while others simply

fulfilled their service hours, and did not make any real effort to connect, even critically, with the organization.

The primary lessons I learned from this first environmental service learning course were to choose partners more intentionally and carefully, and include more intensive reflection over the course of the project. I would apply these to the next time I taught the course in Spring 2018, which would be a fundamentally different, demanding (sometimes overwhelming) and ultimately more rewarding experience for both myself and the students.

PAY IT FORWARD

Originally, my primary revisions to the class were going to be with the historical content. My research focus is on the long history of environmental justice and activism by marginalized and minority groups, as well as critical histories of the mainstream movement. But in the Spring 2016 section, I had done a mediocre job of providing students with the tools to think about how particular groups develop certain types of environmental consciousness, and ultimately participate in certain types of activism, depending on their race, class, gender and general position in American society. But in Spring 2017, I taught a new class, "Race and the Environment in American History," which forced me how to address these issues head on in class, ultimately providing the pedagogical tools to help students understand how different forms of environmental inequality and privilege have developed historically in American life, and how they shape different forms of activism.

But then, in Spring 2017, I was part of a cohort of University of Cincinnati colleagues that applied for and received a Pay it Forward grant

from Ohio Campus Compact, which provided my class with \$1,000 to distribute to a local non-profit organization as part of a larger service learning and student philanthropy class. Working with staff and faculty from the UC Service Learning Program and Ohio Campus Compact, I realized that in order to successfully take advantage of this opportunity, I would have to significantly restructure the service learning component of the course, and, in general, more intensively manage the students projects than I had previously.

With this in mind, my first step was approaching local environmental organizations in the fall of 2017 to see if they would be interested in partnering with the course. My goal was to divide the class into four to six groups, with each completing a significant project that would provide a real benefit to the organization. After multiple meetings, I eventually decided on four nonprofits: Groundwork Cincinnati Millcreek; the Greater Cincinnati Civic Garden Center; the Miami Group of the Sierra Club; and Scrap it Up Cincy. These organizations represented the breadth and diversity of the environmental movement both locally and nationally, and all four were eager to partner with the students.

In addition to forcing me to focus in on a smaller number of nonprofit organizations, the Pay it Forward grant also led to the restructuring of the course assignments. For their final presentations, I wanted students to talk about their experiences as well as make connections to larger class themes. But we also needed to decide which groups would be receiving the grant(s). With this in mind, I decided that wrap the final presentation into a grant “pitch” that each group would give as part of a formal panel at Mediated Minds, the UC Blue Ash undergraduate student

research conference. In addition to discussing their projects and the organization, this would force them to work with their partners to decide how the money would be spent and convince their peers that their project should be funded.

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At the beginning of the semester I looked through the syllabus and realized that the course would be quite challenging for students, both in terms of material and workload. But, I figured, this was part of the challenge getting the real value from a course that synthesized a strong content component with service learning, so I did not immediately revise course expectations. This was a key mistake.

On the first day I told students that the service learning project was a core part of the class, and they would be expected to work in groups for both the project and their final presentation. On the advice of the staff at Ohio Campus Compact I did not mention the student philanthropy component until about a month into the semester, and it made sense to have the students get started with their projects before we rolled this out. I assigned them each to one of the four partners based on personal preferences the second week, and then worked to arrange orientation meetings. I did not attend any of these meetings, but told students they were mandatory. Nevertheless, some were not able to fit these initial meetings into their schedule. This was another small, but key, oversight. Students at UCBA are usually overcommitted in terms of coursework and outside responsibilities (work, family, etc.). In order to ensure better attendance, I should have scheduled the meetings well in advance, putting them on the syllabus, or actually had the partners come to class sessions, to meet with students.

By about a month into the semester, the majority of students had begun working on their projects but others were having difficulty. Some of these challenges were their responsibility in terms of procrastination, etc., but for other students, there were issues with the partner. One group of students was working with the local chapter of the Sierra Club on a campaign to create a “bag tax” to reduce the use of plastic bags in the City of Cincinnati. Although this was an important effort, the chapter had no full-time staff, and for this campaign, was also part of a larger coalition that was also all volunteer. This led to a lot of miscommunication and lack of direction, especially for the students. To help provide direction, I attended a coalition meeting with the students to assess the situation and open up lines of communications, and afterwards, helped the students decide on the best ways they could support this effort.

This intervention raises an important issue with service learning classes. Personally, my instinct is to let students solve issues with partners on their own. That is part of the experience. But sometimes assistance from the professor is necessary. After this meeting the Sierra Club group had a lot more direction, and required very little assistance from me. Service learning instructors need to strike a balance between giving students independence but also providing direction and direct support when necessary. They also need to be flexible with class time. At the beginning of the course, I told students we would have one or two in-class work sessions, and they would generally be expected to schedule group work outside of class. But I realized that class was often the best time for all students in a group to meet, and was also ideal for me to have give to ten minute conversations with each group to

check-in and provide direction. By the end of the semester we had five classes where I set aside twenty to thirty minutes for students to work in groups on their projects.

By the middle of the semester, most of the students were engaged in their projects, and I had introduced the Pay it Forward opportunity. I gave students detailed instructions on how to approach their partners about the program, how to develop the funded project, and their responsibilities with the final presentation and grant “pitch.” But although this part of the course was going well, we reached some significant issues with the content side. The course was designed to provide a survey of the American environmental movement, and by about week nine, we were getting into a critical exploration of different aspects of the movement, particularly environmental justice, radical environmentalism, and the role of philanthropy in shaping the environmental movement. In order to explore these issues in-depth, I assigned two monographs and a few other longer readings. This was a significant amount of work at the time in the semester when students were putting real effort into their service-learning projects. As a result, a number of students did not complete the reading (and failed the assignments associated with them) and attendance on days when we were supposed to discuss the readings suffered.

This issue also raises a bigger picture concern that instructors in introductory courses that marry service learning with course content need to consider: workload. Since this was a sophomore level course that also fulfilled general education requirements, I had a number of students who were not mentally committed to completing the amount of work I expected in the course, and it showed. All of the negative

feedback I received in course evaluations was from students complaining about the workload. When placing these types of expectations on students, think about their major and where the course fits in their degree plan. In a history course with significant content expectations—fifty to one-hundred pages of reading per week, along with papers and other forms of written assessments—having the students also complete a service learning project is a challenge. In the future I am going to work to more closely align readings with the service learning project, so students see the relevancy, and work to have the majority of enrollees be students majoring in history or environmental studies.

MEDIATED MINDS

In response to workload concerns, I cancelled or cut back some of our final readings at the end of the semester. Both explicitly and implicitly I wanted students to concentrate on their Pay it Forward grant proposals. Because of our commitment to the program, and our partners, I wanted these presentations to be as strong as possible, and was willing to make small sacrifices in other areas of the course.

In order to streamline the presentation, I told students to split their groups up into two teams for their fifteen minute presentation: “Team Grant” and “Team History.” The history team would be responsible for outlining the organization and connecting it to the history of environmental activism, while the grant team would present what the Pay it Forward grant would be used for. Two days before Mediated Minds we had presentation run-throughs in class and the students completed peer evaluations.

The overall presentations at the conference went well, and one of the groups, Groundwork

Cincinnati Mill Creek, actually won the best presentation award for the entire conference. In order to make sure all students attended each presentation, I had them fill out peer review sheets. I also invited the executive director of Greater Cincinnati Green Umbrella, our local sustainability consortium, to serve as outside evaluator. She gave excellent critical commentary and raised issues some of the students had not even considered.

The final task was for us to decide which organizations got the Pay it Forward grant. The class has \$1,000 from Ohio Campus Compact, and I decided that we would award two \$500 grants. Originally, I had planned awarding the grants at Mediated Minds, either through a student vote, or from the recommendation of outside evaluators. But based on the advice of Ohio Campus Compact staff, I decided to have the students debate and then vote on the projects at the next class meeting. This was arguably the best class session of the semester. A few weeks before, I had the students brainstorm what they believed a grant officer should consider when awarding an environmental activism grant. We had an excellent discussion about balancing feasibility with potential impact, thinking about long-term goals vs. short-term accomplishments, and funding established groups versus new startups, with new idea. I took all of their ideas and boiled them down to a one-page rubric where they had to rank each proposal based on four factors: feasibility, need, impact and passion. Each group had to complete the evaluation for the other three groups in the class.

By this point in the semester, the students had a good rapport with each other, and because of their experience constructing their own projects and presentations, had thought critically about

the benefits of different types of projects at environmental nonprofits. They debated within their groups more than thirty minutes, and I allowed them to ask the other groups questions to clarify costs and timelines. They put a lot of thought into ranking their classmates projects and had strong rationale for why they had scored different projects the way they had. We then shared all of the scores with the entire class, but then I said this was not the last step. For most grant giving agencies, the scores are only a guideline, and grantmaking is done by a final vote, which we did by secret ballot. Each student was told to rank the projects one to four (they were allowed to vote for their own) and in the end there were two clear winners: The Civic Garden Center of Greater Cincinnati, and Scrap it Up Cincy.

Overall feedback from students on the service learning projects was tremendously positive. Students remarked that they were hesitant about the projects in the beginning, but enjoyed the experience, understanding how nonprofits worked, and making a difference in their community. Many also enjoyed and appreciated the “hands-on” aspect of service-learning, and how they could see progress in a short amount of volunteering.

THOUGHTS ON CRITICAL PHILANTHROPY

Before final takeaways, I want to offer some thoughts on one of the goals of the course: Helping students take a critical approach to the role of philanthropists and foundations in shaping public policy. This goal emerged from my own research practice. As a historian of environmentalism, my earliest work was on the emergence of alternative forms of environmental activism, particularly by urban minority groups, during the 1960s, what might be called the long history of the environmental justice movement

(Gioielli 2014). One of my unanswered questions with that book was why more “mainstream” environmental groups have, until very recently, not paid attention to the concerns and specific issues of marginalized groups. That led me to explore the history of environmental philanthropy and, specifically how, during the 1960s and 1970s, a tight coterie of America’s largest charitable foundations provided key funding to certain groups, eventually cementing environmentalism as a politics that would be reformist in orientation, focusing on the universalist concerns of white, middle class suburbanites and their allies within the socioeconomic elite (Gioielli 2014)

For this class this semester, I was hoping to be able to bring that critical perspective to the students, to help them understand that philanthropy and private giving is not value neutral, but is in fact, highly political. Depending on the context, foundations can reinforce inequality and existing socioeconomic hierarchies, or they can be quite democratic and progressive. I lectured on the role of philanthropy and foundations in shaping the agendas of environmental organizations, we conducted readings on the role of the Ford Foundation in shaping the field of environmental law, and worked to apply these themes to our discussions of environmental organizing in general (Sabin 2015).

I was also hoping that the Pay it Forward project, by putting the students in the position of philanthropists, would help them think more critically about the power of foundations and other private giving entities shaping the environmental movement, and American civic life in general. This was not the case. Partially it was my fault, as I did not build in a critical discussion or reflection on the power that the grant-

maker has to shape organizations, their priorities, and ultimately society and public policy. If I do a student philanthropy project again, I will develop assignments that help students make connections between our critical discussions in class and their own practice.

But I also think that the problem lies with the larger Pay it Forward and student philanthropy pedagogy. These types of projects encourage students to become involved in the community, but also to see the private action of nonprofits and foundations, and private giving in general, as fundamentally a good thing, that is an important part of American democracy and civic practice. This philosophy follows from Tocquevillian model of that sees independent, civil society organizations and activism as an important part of American democracy, allowing citizens to congregate together to create community, address social needs, and put pressure on the state for more public oriented action (De Tocqueville 2003). What De Tocqueville's model leaves out, of course, is that not every American has the equal ability to form and fund these types of organizations (women and minority groups) and that, since the late nineteenth century, the accrual of massive personal fortunes by the likes of a Ford or a Rockefeller, or more recently, a Gates or a Koch, means that some Americans have exponentially greater power in the non-profit sphere than others (Zunz 2011). But the Pay it Forward model, by having students usually work with local nonprofits in a volunteer role, and then donate small amounts of money, reinforces a model for civil society practice that is in many ways more idealistic than realistic. The policies and practices of large foundations play an outsize role in the actions of many nonprofits; nonprofits can reinforce existing hierarchies and inequalities in society, directly and

indirectly; and women, minority groups and the poor often times have little access to forming and managing these types of organizations that would give them a larger civic voice in local communities.

This is not to say that there is not potential within student philanthropy pedagogy to provide a more critical perspective, and to lay bare to students the sinews of power within American civil society. But the existing structure, on its own, will not do this. Instructors need to work to have their students thinking critically, especially during and after the grantmaking stage of the course, about who has access to this money and power, and what it means for American society. In the case of environmental activism, what it means for how the environmental movement is defined, and whose environmental problems get addressed, and how.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Work to arrange partner organizations and decide student projects well before the semester begins.** For two of the groups students were provided with leeway as to what their individual volunteer work would consist of, but this led to some miscommunication and conflict with the partner organization. Better to have clear expectations at the beginning, and then allow students to change them if they so choose.
- **Be creative when looking for partners.** Three of our partners were traditional environmental organizations, but one, Scrap it Up, was a creative reuse center, that takes all sorts of old materials and resells them for use in crafting and art projects. It was a new organization whose founders were keenly interested in waste diversion, reusing materials to keep them out of the landfill. They turned out to

be our most enthusiastic partner, and also exposed students to a completely different way of thinking about environmental activism and sustainability.

- **Schedule, schedule, schedule.** Especially at a commuter campus and/or where students have significant commitments outside of coursework (jobs, family, etc.) schedule initial meetings and orientations with partner organizations well in advance, as well as dates for presentations and any sort of “check-in” assignments. Not all students will follow the schedule, but this reduces potential conflicts and misunderstandings.
- **Be flexible.** Each service learning course, especially where students are completing projects and/or engaging in student philanthropy, is its own special beast that requires constant attention and tuning. Many students are not great communicators when things are not going well. Check-in with individuals and groups on a regular basis, and adjust deadlines and expectations where necessary.
- **Manage expectations in content focused courses.** In hindsight, I simply gave students too much reading. I wanted to provide them with a thorough overview of the American environmental movement, but even without a service learning project, this “coverage” model is unrealistic. In the future I will tailor readings to make them relevant to student service projects, and also focus on a few key themes in the movement. If students have a significant project to complete, I will “front-load” readings in the first two-thirds of the semester.
- **Use team-building/ice-breaker exercises at the beginning of the semester to help students build camaraderie and trust.** I did not do this, but think it would be helpful

for students to make connections with each other earlier in the semester, rather than later, as well as possibly identify the strengths and weaknesses of each group. Also consider assigning roles to the group (note-taker, meeting organizer, chief writer, etc) to help lessen the possibility that one or two group members complete the majority of work on particular assignments.

- **For student philanthropy projects, have the students debate and decide amongst themselves who will receive the funding.** Also have them design the grantmaking rubric. This was the single best decision I made the entire semester. BUT in the future, I would also have students complete a reflection and discussion so that we could explore some of the assumptions that existed behind our final decisions, ultimately leading to more critical approaches to the role of foundations and philanthropy in environmental governance, activism and policy making.

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