NOTES FROM THE FIELD(S): FROM PULLING UP WEEDS TO PUTTING DOWN ROOTS IN THE COMMUNITY

MONIQUE MIRONESCO
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I, WEST O‘AHU

Keywords: agricultural activities, food politics, farming, food production, food consumption

Introduction

Among other things, food can both be our sustenance, necessary to our survival, and our downfall at the same time, with alarmingly high rates of obesity and diabetes related to overeating, and for women specifically, high rates of eating disorders. The politics of the food industry have started to become more transparent through the efforts of academics and consumer advocates, as well as public health and environmental advocacy groups. This article explores the pedagogical results of teaching a class entitled Politics of Food, and assesses the student learning outcomes for the course over two semesters through the lens of several service-learning projects.

Project Description

At three farms (Ka‘ala Farm, Hoa ‘Aina O Makaha, and Ma‘o Organic Farms), the class engages in agricultural activities that benefit the respective farms. At Ka‘ala Farm, the students and I pull weeds in the lo‘i kalo (taro patch), getting muddy in the process. At Hoa ‘Aina, we are given a tour of the farm and pull lettuce plants gone to flower, replanting beans in their place. At Ma‘o Farms, we help clear a new field of rocks for planting soon thereafter. We also spend some time weeding a field and mulching around the rows of Swiss chard and red Russian kale. At Sunset Beach Elementary, we clear garden beds and prepare them for planting for the kids involved in Kokua Hawai‘i Foundation’s AINA IS program intended to teach kids about the connection between sustainability, environmental awareness, nutrition, and their daily lives. By far, the most anticipated and difficult service-learning trip is to Ma‘ililand Transitional Housing Shelter, where the students, some residents and I build garden boxes (modeled after those at Sunset Beach Elementary) and plant vegetables for recently homeless residents trying to make positive changes in their lives. The garden beds provide the residents access to healthy food, which is sorely lacking in their community, and the students become teachers of sustainable agriculture and wholesome nutrition.

Project Timeline

The Politics of Food course is taught on a “Part of Term” basis which entails six, three-hour Friday night classes and five, five-hour Saturday morning classes for a six week period. This time slot is a bonus for the course’s success because it allows great flexibility for lectures, discussions and guest speakers as well as feature length documentaries on Friday nights, in addition to plenty of time on Saturday mornings for service-learning field trips, which take us all over the island of O‘ahu.

Steps for Implementation

Contacting farms and other community partners is done three weeks prior to the start of the semester to organize Saturday field trips according to everyone’s schedules. Each Friday night lecture prior to the next day’s service-learning experience is geared toward understanding the particular challenges faced by the farms we visit the next day. For example, we discuss the challenges facing organic farms in terms of meeting USDA standards; the relationship between farm to school programs and constant cost cutting measures in school lunch budgets, and federal guidelines on what is considered an appropriate lunch; or access to healthy food by lower income, or recently homeless people in minority neighborhoods.

Outcomes/Assessment

Every day we make political decisions about what kind of food to eat, where and when to eat it, and why. In this course, students learn about the processes of food production and how government and corporate involvement have changed the way society eats. This course provides students with skills for everyday life through experiential learning. It also impacts how students regard their daily sustenance. Furthermore, students become more critical food consumers and are able to make informed political choices about the kinds of food they buy and eat. This class serves as a space to question students’ assumptions about political issues surrounding food production and consumption, the links between agribusiness and the food we put on our respective tables, as well as a new way of understanding food issues through a political perspective.
Each student is asked to keep a journal of his or her field trip experiences. After the field trip experiences, they are asked to integrate the previous evening’s assigned reading and lecture and/or guest speaker and/or film with the field trip. At the end of the course, I ask the students to turn in a final snowball paper, which uses all of the journal material and reflects on the various components of the course. The process of thinking through each of their course experiences provides some very rich material for the final snowball papers, as well as productive reflections on the process of the course itself. The course evaluations for the students in the second year’s class included comments like: “This class was a great learning experience for me. Not only [did] we read about the politics of food, we got to experience firsthand what is great about fresh foods compared to ... processed foods. The [service-learning] field trips were really a good part of the class” and “The class is an eye opener ... The weekly service-learning projects make you appreciate how food is produced [through] the land and people. Every student is given the opportunity to shape their thoughts by journals and class discussions.”

Conclusion

While the class seems to be an overall success, there are limitations to this model, which need to be addressed. With regard to Ma’iiiland, the lack of follow-up is a serious shortcoming in the design of the service-learning project. While the project is community generated and rewarding for both parties, and the students and the residents do work together, the project timeline does not allow for a follow-up visit to the site by the student cohort. This seems to be a general design flaw in many service-learning models, but it seems particularly acute given the schedule required by this class, which I had originally identified as a positive aspect of the course.

This service-learning class has been a wonderful teacher to me as a teacher. I continue to learn how to use service-learning as pedagogy. Service-learning has the potential to be a vehicle for that effort combining content knowledge and experiential learning. This mixed plate (traditional Hawaii food with a variety of different ethnic foods on one plate) is our version of that endeavor.