

Student Civic Engagement Outcomes and the Politics of Food

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges and student learning outcomes of teaching a class entitled Politics of Food through service learning two years in a row. The students journal reflections on their service learning experiences are used as text for narrative interpretation to provide a qualitative dimension to the study of learning outcomes. The relative success of the service learning activities at two farms is analyzed through the students journal narratives. The findings identify potential challenges with the service learning model found in this course.

Introduction

Is the old adage is true? Are we what we eat? From the point of view of health and nutrition, the answer seems to be an unqualified yes. Even popular culture has embraced the notion that eating food that is good for us makes sense. The success of Morgan Spurlocks documentary *Supersize Me* in 2004, the making of Eric Schlossers book, *Fast Food Nation*, into a feature film in 2006, and the wide release of the documentary *Food, Inc.* in 2009 all attest to Americas growing consciousness that food is inextricably linked to a range of issues from health and nutrition, to environmental degradation, to food lobbyists influence on government policies, to corporate agribusiness, to the organic backyard kitchen garden.

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. While some argue that the obesity epidemic is being blown out of proportion (Glassner 2007), it is undeniable that food politics are related to our everyday material lives. As Marion Nestle has argued, people can quit smoking because they know it is bad for their health, even though the big tobacco companies are desperately trying to attract new smokers daily through advertising and product placement, but we cannot simply quit eating (Nestle 2006). 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 challenges and learning outcomes of teaching a class entitled Politics of Food using service learning two years in a row. I use the students journal reflections on their service learning experiences at two farms in particular as text for narrative interpretation to provide a qualitative dimension to the study of learning outcomes. I also examine the impact of the service learning process on my own pedagogy in this class as reflected through the continuum between the student civic engagement outcomes and some of the challenges the class encountered.

Hawaii provides a unique lens through which to view this experience since the state imports over 80% of its food from the mainland, adding 2,500 miles of transpacific journey to the already far flung locales of the foods origin. However, this classes structure and content are highly

replicable for other parts of the country, providing examples of students civic engagement with issues that affect us all.

Theoretical Framework

The University of Hawaii West Oahu (UHWO) student demographics along with our service area are quite relevant to the course topic. It was pertinent and ironic to teach this class at UHWO since we must acknowledge that to be in the position to be selective about the food we eat is to hold a privileged position (Katz 2006, 23). Most of the students at UHWO are from working class backgrounds, and their financial resources are generally limited. UHWO is a commuter campus, with an average student age of 31. Over 60% of the student body is female, working part- or full-time, caring for families, and going to school among a myriad of other commitments. So while we did have to acknowledge that we were in a privileged position as a class in comparison for example, to people in developing countries, or even to homeless people living on the beach in Hawaii; as a group, the students were not nearly as privileged as other segments of society.

One of the criticisms leveled at food movements of various kinds is that they are too exclusive. For example, within the Slow Food movement:

Taste is a part of knowledge, says Petrini, and taste education is one of the goals of Slow Food. One manifestation of taste education and the firm defense of quiet material pleasure is connoisseurship. Unfortunately, too much emphasis on buying fancy foods becomes highbrow consumerism, a costly pursuit of the very finest foods and wines that is disconnected from questions of sustainable production and far beyond the means of ordinary people. Some critics have dismissed Slow Food as elitist. [But] Slow Food has championed traditional local food production (Katz 2006, 128).

The students in this class recognized the tension between doing what's right in terms of buying organic and/or local food, not only with regard to freshness and taste, but also with regard to cost. This tension is indicative of the many dichotomies we must navigate when we make our daily food choices. The students learned that each of those choices is political, as Wendell Berry's oft-quoted phrase suggests: Eating is an agricultural act. But as Michael Pollan has reprised, it is a political act as well (Pollan 2006, 11). This political act is fraught with contradictions and recreated daily. Not only do we have to make decisions about our food choices, but we have to strive to understand what those choices mean in a variety of contexts. For example, Vandana Shiva explains that food politics are related to earth democracy, which in turn implies having both a planetary consciousness and a local embeddedness of how we produce and consume, and how we experience our identity and sense of self' (Shiva, quoted in Katz 2006, 129).

Currently, most of the available scholarly literature detailing the specific links between food politics and service learning in the U.S. is related to service learning projects in food banks (Block et al 2008; Bonilla 2009; Levkoe 2006) and to a lesser extent school and/or community gardens (Carlsson and Williams 2008; Thorp 2006). In any case, food issues are linked with many of the nations list of pressing issues: finding cheaper food to save money, yet balancing

sustainable growing practices, and providing access to healthy, fresh food to lower income segments of society.

There are many service learning practitioners engaging their students to partake in political acts surrounding food issues. In addition, many Political Science faculty work hard to engage their students sense of civic commitment by using service learning projects to address the links between politics and civic life (Walker, 2000); in large introductory Political Science courses (Markus, Howard, and King, 1993); and activist research in various kinds of classes (Cushman, 1999). However, many of these service learning, food-related activities center around individual service in soup kitchens and food banks or delivering meals to the elderly or infirm. The structure of this particular politics of food course enabled students to relate some of these issues to other political concerns discussed in class by making connections with farmers, Hawaiian cultural practitioners, and educators, as well as social workers, housing shelter residents, and most of all each other.

Structure of the Course

The Politics of Food course was taught twice on a Part of Term basis which entails six, three hour Friday night classes and five, five hour Saturday morning classes for six weeks. At three farms (Kaala Farm, Hoa Aina O Makaha and Mao Organic Farms) the class engaged in service learning/agricultural activities that benefited the respective farms. At Kaala Farm, the students and I pulled weeds in the *loi kalo* (taro patch), getting muddy in the process. Both years at Hoa Aina, we were given a tour of the farm and the pulled lettuce plants gone to flower and replanted beans in their place. Hoa Aina is an educational farm adjacent to Makaha Elementary School where a steward of the land, (a former Catholic priest) Gigi Cocquio, educates students about, among many other things, where their food comes from. The first year at Mao Farms, we helped clear a new field of rocks for planting soon thereafter. The second year, we spent quite a bit more time weeding a field and mulching around the rows of Swiss chard and red Russian kale. At Sunset Beach Elementary, we cleared the schools garden beds and prepared them for planting for the kids involved in Kokua Hawaii Foundations AINA IS program intended to teach kids about the connection between sustainable development, environmental awareness, nutrition, and their daily lives. The acronym stands for Actively Integrate Nutrition and Agriculture In Schools. The Kokua Hawaii Foundation organizes the promotion of healthy school lunches featuring locally grown produce, nutrition education in the classroom, garden-based learning, agricultural field trips, solid waste management, and community outreach (Kokua Hawaii Foundation). By far the most anticipated and difficult service learning trip in our second year, was to Maililand Transitional Housing Shelter, where the students, some residents and I built garden boxes (modeled after those at Sunset Beach Elementary) and planted vegetables for recently homeless residents trying to make positive changes in their lives.

Each student was asked to keep a journal of their service learning experiences. Students were asked to integrate the previous evenings assigned reading and lecture and/or guest speaker and/or film with the service learning field trip. At the end of the course, I asked the students to turn in a snowball paper using all of the journal material in a final essay that incorporated all of the components of the course. After students turned in their weekly journals, I replied to them

with questions or feedback to push their critical thinking on the relationship between their service learning experiences and the course material. The snowball paper required them to incorporate their responses into a polished work drawing on all of their course journals as primary sources. While the snowball paper relied on the students journal material, it was not necessarily organized in a chronological way. Instead, I encouraged the students to look for themes in their course journals and use those to organize their snowball papers. The process of thinking through each of their course experiences provided some very rich material for the final snowball papers, as well as a productive reflection on the process of the course itself.

Service Learning Field Trips

The course content was broken up into several sections, and it was my intention to use the service learning field trips to highlight some of the issues found in readings for the in-class portion of the course. One student described the food industry as full of magicians equipped with the power of illusion to influence [her] to make the right food choices regardless of its benefits to [her] (if any), but rather the company [they] represent (Cindy T., journal 1). The service learning field trips for the course were intended to pull the curtain back as Dorothy does at the end of her wonderful journey in the Wizard of Oz. In this paper, I will only focus on the two service learning field trips that elicited the strongest responses from the students in order to highlight some of the most significant student civic engagement outcomes throughout the course.

Kaala Farm (Year 1)

While there is a strong food security and sovereignty movement in Hawaii, there is virtually no current scholarly literature that deals with the topic in this region. Rather, the cultural knowledge about food is based mostly on immigrant culinary traditions. Students at UHWO are much less likely to know about indigenous food production and traditions than about other ethnic food traditions since Hawaii residents tend to pride themselves on their mixed plate heritage and food culture.

Even some of the native Hawaiian students acknowledged not eating traditional foods. This should come as no surprise since the native Hawaiian population has incredibly high rates of obesity and diabetes due to a very poor diet (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). The most acute nutrition-related health problems are actually found on the leeward side of the island, where we found ourselves for the first field trip. While many students knew the provenance of poi (pounded *kalo*/taro), few of them had ever seen it made, much less ever made it themselves. Furthermore, few students knew that there are many different varieties of *kalo*, nor had they ever seen it in a field.

Of the twenty nine students who came on that first field trip, only two had ever worked in a garden. Since this was a service learning field trip, after having had a tour of the entire farm led by Uncle Butch, students were tasked with getting down into the *loi kalo* and pull weeds. The result was a muddy, though very rewarding, mess. In just about an hour, the thirty of us cleared two *loi* for future planting. While there was a bit of grumbling about getting dirty and having to work hard, there was also a sense of pride and accomplishment with our finished product, as

well as a sense of camaraderie that proved to be an auspicious beginning to the class. This is not to say that some of the students didn't comment negatively about it in their journals. One student wrote: I can't believe we just had to pay five bucks to get dirty and pull their weeds! (JR A., journal 1) After we had cleared the *loi*, Uncle Butch asked us what we had gotten out of our experience. Many of the students mentioned the sense of teamwork and accomplishment that they now shared with their classmates. Some mentioned liking getting down in the mud, while others, especially those with manicured nails, hated getting dirty. One woman said that the most important aspect of the day for her was rinsing the mud off in the cool mountain stream water that irrigates the *loi*. She felt as if she were leaving the pollution of the urban center behind her and enjoyed the sense of rejuvenation she got from the feel of the cool water gliding over her arms and legs after the hard work of clearing the weeds from the *loi* (Leilani R., Journal 1).

The entire service learning experience was based in an awareness of the native Hawaiian cultural connection with the land, as well as understanding traditional methods of food production. These two components served as a critical backdrop for the rest of the class, because students were able to understand how the indigenous Hawaiian concepts of *malama aina*, roughly translated as caring for the land was connected to food production, spirituality, and daily life in ancient Hawaii. The learning outcomes detailed in the students' service learning journals highlight these connections. One student wrote in her journal: Our *kumu* [teacher], Butch was an incredible host, teaching us about the valley, past and present, and the farming methods of pre-colonization Hawaiians. They didn't think organic, they lived it, as did pretty much all our ancestors (Lisa P., Journal 1). As Lisa's quote explains, indigenous peoples have known that traditional farming methods are sustainable, and not until we bring the values of the past forward (Uncle Butch, Kaala Farm), will we as a society understand the depth of the damage our unsustainable farming methods have created.

Another student pointed to the distance between native Hawaiian values with regards to food production and farming, practiced in Hawaii for hundreds of years, and American consumerist values which tend to remove us as a society from our sources of food (Constance C., Journal 1). This chasm continues to grow, and it is only through the educational efforts of people such as Uncle Butch and others that the distance will diminish.

Hoa Aina O Makaha (Years 1 and 2)

Gigi Cocquio welcomed us with open arms when we arrived at Hoa Aina O Makaha, a teaching/learning farm adjacent to Makaha Elementary School. He has been at the farm for over twenty years, teaching elementary school age children from the school next door how to raise crops, build bee hives, cook in mud ovens, discover the wonders of compost and solar energy, among other things. The farm itself is devoted to a variety of activities, and all of the structures on the farm were built by the children themselves. Constance remarked: Our visit to Hoa Aina O Makaha showed how a school can integrate a community farm into a classroom for subjects other than agriculture and nutrition. Gigi teaches the children about geography, history, social studies, math, and culture, along with life lessons (Constance C., Journal 5). Gigi's teaching methods may be unorthodox, since there is virtually no time spent in any classroom, but there is not a single child who doesn't gain something out of her/his experience at the farm.

The Politics of Food students walked in the footsteps of the Makaha Elementary children, to see what they learn, and how they learn it. Gigi encouraged the students to taste tomatoes from the vine, to pull out carrots twisted into odd shapes by soil nematodes, to eat fresh green onions. He gave us honey to taste, and talked to the students about his holistic approach to teaching and learning. Hoa Aina O Makaha reaches out to the community in a variety of ways. Low-income parents can come to the farm on weekends and work to earn field trip credits for their children, so that if they don't have the financial resources to pay for their children's field trips, a grant through Hoa Aina O Makaha still enables their children to go. Gigi was trying to think of new ways to engage the homeless population on the leeward coast of Oahu in growing their own food on the Hoa Aina land as well, so his reach actually extends far beyond that of the neighboring elementary school.

With the second year class, we helped Gigi by pulling up old lettuce and weeds and planting bean seeds in the sun garden. The student learning outcomes were once again prominent in the service learning journals I received. Jaime Ann reflected on her experience by saying: I think I just had so much fun with him and he just had that warm feeling that you get when you go to your grandparents house. I thought that it was so sweet how he made lunch for everyone. It was very nice of him. I didn't think that something so simple to make could taste so good (Jaime Ann G., Journal 4). The family-style lunch enabled all of the students to reflect on the connection between the class, the work we were doing together, as well as the importance of educating children, as Gigi does so well, about the importance of food as a means of connection between the land, the people, and their respective families. Gigi taught us that sustainability can have many meanings when it comes to this impoverished community. It's not just about civic engagement, or being green, which seem to be popular at the moment (a step in the right direction, to be sure), but it's also about sustaining families, human connections with each other, in order to build sustainable, healthy communities in more ways than one.

Conclusion and Findings

As most service learning faculty would attest, there are many potential pitfalls to teaching a topical Political Science class with this unusual type of structure. Certainly, there are many other possible service learning sites. For example, we didn't go to any food banks as so many other service learning practitioners seem to in the social sciences. Another possibility would be to engage in service activities at one conventional farm. Near the UHWO campus, Aloun Farms grows a number of diversified crops on former sugarcane plantation land. This is one of the largest, most successful conventional farms on the island of Oahu. They are so large that they sell to Costco, among other large retailers. Since one of the criticisms leveled at small farms is that they cannot keep up with a steady demand, the Aloun Farms example might be instructive for students in terms of another business model.

Other potential pitfalls involve academic expectations and my own pedagogy. The first year, I had hoped that the students would read Marion Nestle's *Food Politics*, Michael Pollan's *The Omnivores Dilemma*, and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*. For a six-week class of returning students who work and have families, this was much too ambitious. The second year I offered the class, I scaled down my expectations on student reading for the class and only

assigned *The Omnivores Dilemma* but I increased the service learning component of the class as a pedagogical tool. As demonstrated through their journal reflections and the critical thinking evident in their snowball papers, the experiential learning on this subject replaced book reading in terms of knowledge gains made by the students.

While the class seems to have been an overall success, there are limitations to this model which need to be addressed. For example, in this class, I am doing the service learning *with* the students. While I get the satisfaction of knowing that I have also helped my community, most service learning models enable students to do their volunteer work on their own time for twenty or thirty hours throughout the semester. While this may be valuable to certain programs and organizations, it would be an organizational hindrance to the farmers we visit in terms of having to manage students on an individual basis.

Another limitation is both a blessing and a curse at the same time. It would seem that the students are not getting all that many service learning hours because everything happens faster than we anticipate. Whether we are clearing rocks from a field, weeding, planting, or building garden boxes, all of our service learning projects seem to be shorter than the five hours we have allotted for them. While this is wonderful because it indicates that the students enthusiasm is unparalleled, it also means that by the end of the semester, the students have really only engaged in about 15 hours of service learning and about five hours of reflection. This clearly shows that many hands working together can accomplish a lot very fast. It is also a wonderful metaphor for encouraging students to be involved in their respective communities, but also means that we don't actually do that much physical work. I am reasonably sure that the students would disagree at the end of each day when they are tired, sweaty, and most likely quite dirty.

This service learning class has been a gift to me as a teacher. I have increased the service learning component in my other classes since I have found that this type of experiential learning extends student learning outcomes beyond the classroom and fosters civic engagement in students who would otherwise have every reasonable excuse to shun being active in their respective communities. Students from the original Politics of Food class still seek me out on campus to tell me how it changed their lives. The value of using service learning as a pedagogical tool contributes to improved student learning outcomes that reach beyond the scope of the class. The value of joining hands together to work for the betterment of our communities cannot be overstated. Service learning has the potential to be a vehicle for that effort combining content knowledge and experiential learning. This mixed plate (a traditional Hawaiian food with a variety of different ethnic foods on one plate) is our version of that endeavor.

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