

Environmental Justice Teaching Resource (EJTR) *Project Report*

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Introduction

My research yielded rich results that were both inspiring and surprising to me. Environmental justice is being taught as a course topic in very large numbers of classes across the US, generally as the focus of a day or a week in a course with broader scope. As expected, fewer courses focus entirely on EJ, but these are distributed across the country rather than being concentrated in just one or two regions. There appears to be no standard format or sequencing for EJ courses, nor does there appear to be a canon of works that are regularly used in most courses. These observations made my project more challenging because of the breadth and diversity of approaches to EJ education. I address some specific challenges in each corresponding section below.

As described in my proposal, the primary vehicle for dissemination of my results will be the Environmental Justice Teaching Resource website to be linked through CEJS. Developing the database and formatting my results for the EJTR has therefore been my main objective during the fellowship period. The database most appropriate for the EJTR—comprising thoughtful syllabi that are publicly available online for linking—is not necessarily the representative subset of EJ courses that would be most suitable for a scholarly article. I will be consulting with editors of appropriate journals about whether the database would need to be expanded for publication.

Database

As planned, through the released time afforded by the CEJS grant for Fall Quarter 2013, with continuing work through the academic year and subsequent summer, I have compiled an initial database of 34 undergraduate courses that have the term “Environmental Justice” or close variants in the title¹, which are available online for linking to the CEJS website, and which include features such as thoughtful design, well-defined and interesting learning objectives, thorough descriptions of notable student assignments, and/or extensive reading lists.

Search methodology. I initially used Google to search for university course syllabi that had the exact term “environmental justice” in the course title, using the search terms “environmental justice,” “syllabus,” and “site:.edu.” This approach yielded over 18,000 results, many of which could be quickly eliminated for being out of date, not linking to a full syllabus, password-protected, or other obvious characteristics.

In parallel, because of my project’s stated emphasis on Jesuit EJ education, I searched websites for each of the 28 US Jesuit colleges and universities to try to discover EJ courses and syllabi. Six Jesuit universities (Fairfield, Fordham, Georgetown, Regis, Santa Clara, and Seattle U) offer EJ courses with linked syllabi; two others offer EJ

¹ There are two exceptions in the database. The first is Robert Bullard’s “Environmental Racism” course, included because Dr. Bullard is one of the key founders of the Environmental Justice movement. The second is Trish O’Kane’s “Birding to Save the World” course, which came to my attention near the end of my research as the subject of a *New York Times* article. Its novel approach and national attention warranted its inclusion in the database.

courses that are not linked (Canisius, John Carroll), and three additional Jesuit universities list EJ as a topic in other courses (Gonzaga, Loyola/Chicago, and University of San Francisco).

Finally, because of the special connection of environmental justice to communities of color, I searched first a random sample of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU’s). After finding very few EJ syllabi in the initial sample, I went back and searched the websites for every one of the [approximately 100 HBCU’s](#). I found a total of seven EJ courses offered by HBCU’s, along with one EJ minor, and a variety of innovative/collaborative EJ projects.

An additional valuable resource has been established by the [Science Education Resource Center \(SERC\)](#) at Carleton College. Through its [InTeGrate project](#), focused on “interdisciplinary teaching about Earth for a sustainable future,” SERC hosted in April 2013 a workshop for faculty teaching environmental justice in their courses, entitled “[Teaching Environmental Justice: Interdisciplinary Approaches](#).” Although I learned about the workshop too late to participate, many of the workshop materials are posted for public use on the linked website, including both syllabi and course activities. I have included in the EJTR the three syllabi from that workshop whose primary course topic is environmental justice. (Other SERC syllabi are for disciplinary courses that include a briefer treatment of EJ as a topic.)

The SERC workshop site includes a number of [student activities](#) for use in EJ-related classes. This is an important contribution, since much of what faculty actually do in the classroom with students has significant impacts on students’ learning about EJ, but is generally not included in their syllabi, and for this reason is not available for this EJTR research project. This would be an excellent addition to the EJTR through a future CEJS fellowship for a faculty member.

Database characteristics: a snapshot. Data are being maintained in Excel and Word files that include, to date, these variables and numbers of syllabi:

- University designation:
 - Historically Black college/university (HBCU) 2
 - Total of 100 HBCU’s with undergrad EJ courses 7
 - Jesuit 6
 - Catholic, non-Jesuit 1
 - Carnegie category (non-Catholic, non-HBCU):
 - Bac/A&S 6
 - Master’s-L, M, S 12
 - RU/H 5
 - RU/VH 11
- Geographic diversity:
 - Northeast 11
 - Southeast 3
 - Central/Midwest 11
 - Northwest 4
 - California 5
- Ownership:
 - Public 15
 - Private 19

- Department offered:
 - Interdisciplinary depts, “Studies” programs, collaboratives 27
 - Disciplinary departments..... 17
(numbers add to more than 34 because of cross-listing)
 - Most common department: Environmental Studies 8
 - Second most common department: Geography 4

It must be emphasized that this is an initial collection of syllabi that does not reflect the actual distribution of environmental-justice courses being offered in the US. The need to carefully define parameters for initial inclusion of syllabi meant that many excellent syllabi are inevitably left out—for instance, because their title may not include the exact term “environmental justice,” because the course is at graduate level, because their university’s website does not link to the course syllabus, or because the linked course website or syllabus does not happen to include the rich material that may be present in the course itself and/or through password-protected sites.

Furthermore, environmental justice is included as a topic in many important courses in which it is not the exclusive focus. Some of these courses are included in the overall database from which the primary 34 syllabi are derived.

Finally, many, many universities are committed to critical environmental-justice work that takes forms other than undergraduate courses with EJ as their primary topic. EJ-related faculty research, conferences, workshops, on-campus work, community outreach and collaboration are widespread in US universities, and a university’s absence from this project’s broader or focused databases is not to be construed as implying that that university is not devoted to environmental justice.

An additional caveat is the inevitable impermanence of online links. For example, in just the past month, some links to syllabi have stopped working, either because the syllabus was removed from public access, or because of a temporary problem in the university’s system. I have tried to ensure that all links were working at time of submission of this report, and have noted where links are inoperable at the moment, but for which downloaded documents are available in my own database.

Bibliography

In designing this project, I had envisioned that there would be a “canon” of perhaps 50-60 resources, including both articles and books, that would be widely used by faculty teaching EJ courses, and that I could provide helpful annotations of many of these for faculty who might be starting out teaching EJ. One of the surprises of my research has been the lack of such a standard array of resources. EJ faculty, who come from a wide variety of backgrounds and offer their courses in a diverse set of departments, use highly idiosyncratic readings for these courses, and I found remarkably few commonalities. This finding has generated a bibliography of almost 600 sources (including books, articles, films, and websites), with many more to go: far less wieldy than I had anticipated. I have worked to try to organize these sources in a way that could be helpful to faculty seeking new readings.

In this initial set of documents for the EJTR website, I have chosen to include only books and articles and have omitted the films and organizational websites that are

also included in many syllabi. Compiling a useful set of EJ-related non-text items would be a good follow-up project for a future CEJS faculty or student fellow.

In the resource database (Excel file), each of the 500 article/document sources is categorized by theme (race, urban issues, history of EJ movement, etc.) as noted in the syllabus or by inspection of the work. I have also provided a written summary for the EJTR, listing resources by theme, along with some foundational textbooks used in multiple courses. I have provided live links to complete articles where available.

Institutional context of EJ courses

Environmental Justice courses are primarily offered by Environmental Studies departments (8), with Geography departments as their second most frequent home (4). Of the home departments, 23 are interdisciplinary “Studies” programs, departments, and collaborative units, and ten are disciplinary.

About 25% of the selected universities cross-list the EJ course with other departments. These departments are widely diverse, including, for example, Applied Ethics; Urban Planning; Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and others.

In almost every case, the course is one of a set of options that fulfill a major or minor requirement; I found only one department (Colgate) that required this course for all majors. The course generally fulfills options for more than one major or minor, typically in several departments at its university. Occasionally the EJ course can be used to fulfill a general-education requirement, such as a Liberal Arts core (College of New Rochelle), Multiculturalism (Macalester), Sophomore Seminar (Regis), and either Diversity or Theology and Culture (student choice; Santa Clara).

Student learning

Learning outcomes

To categorize the stated learning outcomes and course objectives of EJ courses, I used the [framework proposed by D.A. Green of Seattle University’s Center for Faculty Development](#). Below are paraphrased examples of learning objectives from courses in the EJ syllabus collection:

Knowledge/understanding

- Familiarize students with scope and potential impact of large-scale environmental problems (Fordham)
- Understand how socioeconomic status and skin color lead to unjust treatment (Regis)
- Learn how techniques from the multiple disciplines of environmental engineering, geography, and sociology can illuminate disparate and unjust exposure to environmental hazards (OSU)
- Know about particular contributions of racial groups and other organized communities in remedying environmental and health disparities (Brown)

Skills: Intellectual

- Be able to assess claims of environmental injustice in light of data and evidence (UCSC)
- Analyze strategies to prevent or remedy environmental justice problems (Berkeley)
- Apply strategies for promoting environmental justice from the course to appropriate situations and contexts in education, health promotion, counseling, and other human resources development fields (Georgia)
- To become a critical reader of the methods and materials of environmental justice studies by learning to interrogate the assumptions underlying scholarly research on human-environment interrelations and the politics of risk (UWa)

Skills: Subject-specific

- [In a service-focused course] Explain how your project was useful to the community group and fulfilled a need they expressed; reflect on how collaboration with the community impacted and shaped your learning experience; discuss what community members can teach students and vice versa (UCSC)

Skills: Transferable

- Develop skills in public facilitation (UC-Davis)
- Be able to engage with both compassion and intellect with stories of environmental justice and injustice (SU)

Affective dimensions: inspiration, motivation, attitudes

- Inspire and meaningfully engage students in local and regional efforts to promote environmental justice (Tufts)
- Become capable of assuming the perspectives of “the Other,” those groups, cultures, and communities that are usually disadvantaged or marginalized from processes of governance or ecosystem management (UWa)

Student assignments/assessments

Standard university assessments popular in EJ courses include term papers and other extended individual projects (50%), team projects and multiple shorter papers (31% each), reading responses (28%), and participation (63%). In the brief summary below, I am focusing on notable alternative assignments that offer unusual and/or promising approaches to student learning. Of these, I have selected a **few** for more in-depth explication in the separate summary to be posted on the EJTR website.

Alternative writing assignments

- Short pieces for publication in a national newspaper, campus magazine, religious or local news source ([Clark Atlanta](#), [College of New Rochelle](#), [Santa Clara](#))

- Primer for families who might be experiencing an EJ problem, to be presented to the state pollution control agency and in class ([Macalester](#))
- Weekly current-events reports ([Slippery Rock](#))
- Success stories ([Clark Atlanta](#))
- **Portfolio assignment including five disparate approaches to understanding a particular community's EJ problems: community profile, application of Catholic social-justice principle, fictional alternative autobiography, fictional solution narrative, op-ed for Catholic news source.** ([Santa Clara](#))

Field projects and service-learning

- Activism project: w/team, choose EJ problem that has generated mobilization. Research, journal, participation, future possibilities. ([Southwestern](#))
- **“Birding to save the world”:** weekly natural-history exploration (am) followed by sharing with individual child “co-explorer” (pm) from local low-income middle school. Research, education. ([UWisc-Madison/O’Kane](#))
- **Community-based research in extended field study. 3 days at UW-Madison, then 2 weeks in UTx-Brownsville. Teams of 2-3 go door-to-door collecting survey info in mornings; afternoon lectures; evenings creating database. Students also plan and conduct health-education workshops. Support from local health centers. Associated reading blogs, journals, team presentation, individual paper.** ([UWi-Madison/Arenas, Magaña, Lopez](#))

Other

- **Debates: teams of 4 students choose a complex EJ issue, divide into 2 pairs to research and argue opposite sides. Rest of class serves as jury.** (SU)
- iMovie “that conveys a dimension of the Catholic imagination to foster environmental justice in the Central Valley. Use one of the three perspectives: the elements (earth, air, fire or water), the sacraments, virtue, or Catholic social teaching principle. ... The text for this should have the flavor of a poetic essay, using your imagination to present moral possibilities, a better future for the people and place of this region.” ([Santa Clara/Warner](#))
- Mapping project: “choose an EJ issue to write about and map...showing the spatial relationships involved in the processes you study.” ([Syracuse](#))
- Role play/debate: 4 factions + townspeople: Waste-treatment plant operators, academics & EPA, Barry Commoner and staff, Nunavut Inuit. All teams given same initial info. Each faction speaks, answers questions. Class vote; debrief. ([Friends/Gumm](#))

Remaining work

Annotations and faculty consultations are still in progress as of this writing, and will be submitted for posting as they are completed. I am also in the process of creating an overview and executive summary for the website.