

The Food Justice Portrait Project:

First Year Writing Curriculum to Support Community Agency and Social Justice

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In the process of creating portraits that document the lives and knowledge of community leaders who are engaged in food access work and urban farming in Chester, PA, students in a first year writing course at Widener University are introduced to a rhetoric of social change and the multivocality and creativity that characterizes food justice work in Chester. The Food Justice Portrait Project is community writing created collaboratively with the goal of reciprocity that provides an archive of biography and institutional history. The exhibition of the portraits challenges the problematic charity model of addressing need in a community and supports community agency.

Among the principle challenges of teaching Freshman composition is engaging the students in meaningful activities that potentially have positive consequences in the world. Similar to Veronica House, I want my first year writing students to see “rhetorical practice and the act of writing as potentially powerful and creative forces for civic engagement” (“The Reflective” 38). Therefore, at a university that, according

to the Food Research and Action Center, is located in “the second hungriest place for families in the US” (Lubrano, “Hunger”), I have developed a “Food Justice Portrait Project” as a way to connect my students with leaders involved in food access who are effecting social change in the community. Through the process of framing questions and listening to these leaders in formal interviews, the students gain community literacy and understanding about innovative agency. The posters, based on the material gathered in these interviews, are created as portraits for exhibition to honor the lives of community leaders, place their work in the broader context of community and global sustainability, and create a possibility for further connection between the University and the community. Thus the portrait project uses food justice as a pedagogy to teach about critical thinking, issues in social justice, reciprocity, and personal agency by connecting students to people who create positive change in the world.

The portraits were exhibited on April 6, 2016, at an event called “An Evening of Sustainable Thinking” at a locally owned arts venue in downtown, or “overtown” as it is called locally in Chester, PA. The event was organized by Widener University senior lecturer in English, Jayne Thompson. Community members, professors at Widener, and students spoke about sustainability in a classroom, local, and global context. I introduced the portrait project as a way to bring community voices into the classroom and use food access as the lens to examine the sustainability issues faced by the community.

Gro H. Brundtland argued that essential dimensions of sustainable development are ethics and social justice:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs. (Brundtland and World Commission on Environment and Development)

Emphasizing Brundtland's essential role of ethics to sustainability, I use the portrait project to have students actively listen to the heads of small local agencies who address community food access to enhance the sustainability of the community as an ethical proposition. Students then transcribe and analyze this viewpoint. They confer in groups about the important points in the interviews, a metacognitive task, and the transcript provides me with a way to provide scaffolding for students to consider the important points they might have missed that connect to food justice, as it is defined by Eric Holt-Giménez. The experts' words are also analyzed in the context of Gruenewald's "critical pedagogy of place" as they "address critically and comprehensively ecological, social, economic, and cultural issues" (Hogg 121). Students further provide context to the interview by connecting it to academic sources, local history, and global sustainability movements.

The Food Justice Portrait Project combines methodology and pedagogy from Glenn Whitman's long term oral history project with high school students, called The American Century Project, documented in *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students & Meeting Standards Using Oral History*, with what both Veronica House and Stephanie Wade recognize as the exigency of teaching about community based sustainability literacies in first year writing classes, as we face the end of "the anthropocene" (Wade 88). Veronica House lays out as part of an effective agenda of service learning and composition courses on "community-centered food literacy," the introduction of students to genres of writing that "intervene in public discourse" (House, "Reframing" 5), genres that connect our students with the community discussion about food justice as part of social justice. Stephanie Wade, in her discussion of a first year writing program that has students engaging with "ecological community literacies," also encourages students to engage in public writing (4). Similarly, the portrait project provides a way for students to reciprocate with the interviewee by creating an acceptable document for exhibition and archive. To enhance student critical thinking, I use an oral history approach to create student immersion in a local expert's critical thinking and rhetoric about food access.

Three biographies illustrate how food becomes a vehicle by which my students learn about a myriad of community issues that are linked to poverty. My students interviewed Sister Jean Rupertus, a Sister of St. Francis, director of Anna's Place. She refers to Anna's Place ministry to the people in Chester as "radical hospitality" in that, for the weekly lunches, they do not stand in a line outside the building but enter as they arrive. The visitors do not have to show any ID or verification of income. The tables are covered with table cloths and are round to encourage conversation; no plastic forks and spoons are used. Volunteers, who serve the meal, introduce themselves as they list the items on the menu, allowing each visitor to place an order and be served. This approach seeks to connect people to a community that works to create a more equitable world. In one of our first meetings, Sister Jean looked each of us in the eye and sternly relayed that in her experiences "charity alone can be toxic." Therefore, visitors are encouraged to volunteer to serve meals. These volunteers are requested to sit and converse with the visitors so that personal relationships are nurtured. Sister Jean grew up in Chester when the city was a thriving industrial center and has presently witnessed the disappearance of jobs, evisceration of community capacity, and the rise of chronic urban poverty and crime. However, she said she does not want to let the difficulties that the community faces today define it. At Sister Jean's suggestion, my students also interviewed eight African-American clients of the hospitality center, all of whom were attending the weekly free lunches. One woman told one of my students that her continued connection with the hospitality center enabled her to learn to use a computer and get a job; she now attends college classes in social work with a goal of working to help those with mental illness. Others told their stories of coming to lunch and then signing up for computer classes. Through the interviews, my students heard empowered voices that articulated a model of engagement in the community.

My students learned that the Sisters created the hospitality center based on a door to door survey they conducted, where people asked for a "safe place to go and meet new friends." When discussing the safety offered by the hospitality center, Sister Jean also considered the lack of safety in the community and how the Sisters, along with other sponsored community organizations in Delaware County, are part of a local manifestation of a national interdenominational group,

“Heeding God’s Call to Prevent Gun Violence.” The Sisters, along with others, including Anna’s Place visitors, demonstrate at local gun stores to demand that gun shops adopt a code of conduct that prevents the illegal purchase of or traffic in handguns; in addition, this group sponsors “A T-Shirt Memorial to the Lost,” a traveling exhibit of 145 T-shirts bearing the names and ages of people lost to gun violence in Delaware County over the past five years. Visitors at Anna’s Place are encouraged to participate in the activities in Chester in the hope of revitalizing their home town. Throughout the interview process, students were able to understand how important it was to advocate for solutions to the many issues the visitors face daily. They learned that working for justice along with charity is key to finding solutions to hunger, poverty, unemployment, and crime.

When another group of students interviewed Dr. Marina Barnett, a social work professor at Widener, they heard first-hand the words of what Christian Weisser calls an “activist intellectual” whose work connects “teaching, scholarship, and community life” (qtd. in Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 123). They heard the story of an academic who is effecting social change through a multitude of projects in Chester. It was Barnett’s discussion of how documentation is critical to understanding lack of food access that students learned of a concrete result of many individuals, organizations, and residents working together: in 2013, the first grocery store in twelve years and the first nonprofit grocery store in the nation was established in Chester by Philabundance. Barnett told the students about how she, with students enrolled in her graduate course on Community Practice, walked throughout the city of Chester, which is four miles long and a mile wide, to document every food store, mostly corner stores, in order to determine what food was available in Chester. The GIS data was presented to city officials and was highlighted in a 2010 Philadelphia *Inquirer* article (Lubrano, “Poverty”). The article got the attention of many regional and local agencies who responded with action. The students learned the avenues by which social change can occur if concerned academics, nonprofits, and local government become involved.

Finally, in this service learning course, as many students as possible get their hands in the dirt at an urban farm in Chester. The manager of

this farm, which is on public housing project land, portrays the farm as site of rebellion against social disruption caused by the decades of environmental racism and lack of access to healthy food in Chester. Only a few blocks away lies the largest trash to steam facility in the tri-state region, which sends tons of harmful particulates into the air each day. The manager has an undergraduate science degree and gently explains to young members of the housing project, during the two day a week after school program that he runs, about the value to personal health and wellness of growing and eating healthy food. Moreover, he and the city-wide program of which he is a part, enable community members to sell the produce in the housing project as well as at farmer's markets in the city, thus connecting personal well-being with empowering strategies to achieve community resiliency through sustainable development.

The Food Justice Portrait Project is community writing that is created collaboratively with the goal of reciprocity that provides an archive of biography and institutional history, introducing first year students to the wealth of rhetoric and action in the surrounding community and providing a public context for local activists to articulate their missions and inspire community discussion. The exhibition of the portraits of the variety of leaders in the local food security, urban farming, and nutritional literacy movement in Chester will communicate to my students, and to those who view the exhibition, the multivocality and agency that characterizes the social context of food justice efforts within the Chester community.

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