ENACTING SOCIAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES IN THE CLASSROOM... AND IN THE CITY

Submitted by Nell Gross on January 29, 2019 - 6:59pm

In autumn quarter, geography Ph.D. candidate Kristy Copeland offered a new iteration of GEOG 478 Social Justice and the City. While the class has been on the books for some time, Copeland took this opportunity to revise the course “away from its former urban planning focus in cities around the world toward a focus on local social justice responses across many sectors (local government, non-profit industrial complex, grassroots organizers, private sector).” Clearly this iteration has been a success as Copeland was nominated for a 2019 UW Excellence in Teaching Award! Here, Copeland details how the course was developed and what she hopes students learn by engaging with the material.

On learning goals: "The primary learning goal for the course is moving beyond critique towards taking grounded ethical action. The course is setup so that students choose a justice issue and form a justice group with classmates to study the issue throughout the quarter. There are several related written assignments: a media journal comparing coverage of a relevant local event by three news sources, an interview with a relevant change maker, and participation in a relevant action (anything from a vigil to a rally to a city council meeting). All of this culminates in a creative final group presentations and final individual papers."

On how the study of geography informs this work: "The geographical imaginary of Seattle as a national model for progressive politics is supported by the discourse of elected leadership and often by mainstream media narrative as well. However, such claims to progress serve to erase the city's continued colonization of Duwamish and Coast Salish land, its increasing displacement and resegregation of marginalized communities in the context of unchecked gentrification, and its regressive reinvestment in racist institutions like the prison industrial complex."

On building community and recognizing privilege: "I wanted the course to be very relational. I set this tone from the beginning by personally welcoming each student with a smile and an introduction as they entered the classroom the first day. This relationship-building continued via many pair-share and small group discussions. Another aspect I incorporated regularly was a practice of getting out of our comfort zone, which is important for anyone trying to change a system and especially those of us with relative privilege. To get out of our comfort zone, we incorporated physical activities like human sculptures and silly activities like the name game.

It was important to me that we enacted the politics in our classroom that we wanted in our communities. To demonstrate equity, we put our own spin on a ‘privilege walk.’ Each student approximated their relative privilege by calculating a score from the fit of several life experience statements. Students with lower scores (less relative privilege) chose their discussion facilitation dates before students with higher scores. I was definitely nervous about how students would feel or react to this exercise especially so early in the quarter before we got to know each other. However, several have cited that privilege walk as their favorite activity all quarter long."

On making connections between theory and action: "In their final presentations, students’ justice groups wove their theoretical learnings on equity, intersectionality, accountability, and solidarity with their applied research on regional issues including safe injection sites, the effects of light rail development on displacement, supporting unhoused neighbors, ballot initiatives like 1631 (carbon emissions fee), and local prison abolitionist efforts like No New Youth Jail and Northwest Detention Center Resistance. Their creation of petitions, community voting apps, music videos, interactive illustrations, recorded interviews, and photos..."
communicated their vision of a just Seattle and how we can get there. As geography major Ettie Bayya says, ‘social justice is often thought to be achieved through the signing or not of certain bills into law, but to truly achieve social justice is to change the culture and transform it into something that stifles oppression.’ It was a pleasure and a privilege to get to know these students and together to explore social justice in our city.”

People Involved:  Kristy Copeland

News Category:  Community Impact  Courses  Graduate Students  Honors and Awards

Program Innovation  Student Success  Undergraduate Students

Related Fields:  Community  Education  Urban Studies