

Chapter 6

Education for Environmental Equity and Justice: A Graduate Degree in Urban Environmental Education



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In designing the Urban Environmental Education program, I unraveled and reknitted a long history of academic work in environmental education. For years on end, Antioch University graduated mostly white “nature-based” educators into the EE field. They were well intentioned and resolved to make a difference in the world and most lacked a multicultural and multiracial perspective of environmental issues. A few of my own powerful experiences in which I worked with urban youth and teachers convinced me that most of the approaches and intentions of traditional environmental education were simply not relevant to their lives. An essential perspective of the urban social network was missing.

My environmental work, our work, had to expand into the places where most people live. The mostly “nature-based” environmental field would benefit from a deeper and broader understanding of the intersectionality of environmental issues impacting our cities. Representation from the highly diverse racial and cultural demographic of our cities was missing from our workplaces, our audiences, and our efforts to engage change-makers. Power lies in our multicultural solidarity. The environmental field is challenged to figure out how to become more widely inclusive of all people, places, and realities.

“Nothing About us Without Us is For Us” (African proverb) adorns the t-shirt given to each student upon graduation from Antioch University Seattle’s Urban Environmental Education M.A.Ed. program. The 15-month academic experience reflects this sentiment throughout. We pride ourselves on pioneering pedagogy shaped by an ethic of listening from the ground up before settling on solutions to the complex social and ecological issues. The UEE program operates in a cohort model. All of the students take all of the classes together. At the end of the first quarter, a

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safe space is created for sharing difficult issues of race, equity, and inclusion within the environmental and educational fields. As one of the UEE partners expressed:

The UEE program provides a brave space to really lean in and make a difference by holding the promise of bringing front and center the stories of historically marginalized and disenfranchised people and their ways of knowing the earth. Daylighting those stories and voices provides the consideration that they deserve and that we need. The work of UEE expands the brain trust of ways of knowing the earth and respecting multiple voices. (Belinda Chin, Seattle Parks and Recreation)

Our students learn how to engage community members in conversations that unearth their “real” concerns. Each student is embedded in a community-based organization for 30 weeks, which provides critical knowledge about how people live, work, and play in urban places. The students learn to encounter head-on matters of health, safety, housing, and access to food that impact environmental integrity and well-being. The relationship of social justice and environmental leadership informs all aspects of this groundbreaking program. The UEE program reworks traditional “nature-based” approaches. We thread urban ecosystem dynamics into each quarter of study uncovering how ecological integrity is shaped by politics, economics, diversity, and equity.

Each closely knit student cohort is as diverse as the urban communities we study and serve. This rich diversity ensures authentic and visceral representations of how race and inequities impact experience with pollution, gentrification, access to healthy food, waste management, lack of green space, and the impacts of climate change. For many of our students, it is their first experience in a classroom with a majority people of color. For most of our students, UEE is the first academic experience with mostly instructors of color. For our white students, it is the first “environmental” set of courses where they may be in the minority.

We are breaking the “green ceiling.” What does that mean? Racism and inequality, displacement and exclusion are as important to the environmental conversation as urban ecology and educational strategies. The faculty work hard to create a safe space for reflection and direct confrontation of these facts without sacrificing attention to issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, or waste streams. The students work with each other - in and outside the classroom - to find truth, clarity, and a way forward that integrates the social/cultural and environmental realities. Environmental issues are laced with social exploitation, unfair health and wellness policies, disparities in pollution, the lack of inclusion in urban planning, and more. Once we work through initial raw and angry feelings, our goal is to find a way to work together with respect and understanding.

This chapter will provide examples of some of the educational approaches designed by the faculty in the UEE program. The faculty are challenged to prepare future environmental leaders to grapple with the environmental issues in urban habitats where most of the human population lives. Our approaches and strategies are innovative and responsive to a changing climate and dense, complex urban centers. We are out on the streets and in communities as much as we are in the classroom.

The chapter will also capture some of the learning reflections penned by UEE students. We encourage our students to think critically, to develop cultural

competency, and to cultivate educational approaches that embrace equity, inclusion, and collective action. UEE faculty work together to examine the deep intersections of ecology and infrastructure, politics and place, social justice and environmental integrity as the basis for research projects, learning, and praxis.

As we work to extend the focus of environmental education into city streets and step into the places where most of us live, justice issues become an integral part of understanding the dynamic forces that shape urban centers. Why do some have greater access to health, shelter, work, food, and green spaces than others? How does the movement and settlement of people influence the ecology of a place? How does infrastructure and new development influence the quality of water, air, access to food and shelter, displacement, and homelessness? Instituting “ways of knowing” that intentionally frame “environment” through the urban experience considers the reciprocal relationship between the social and the ecological.

We start with what’s around us: the people close to home and the issues they are facing. We work with schools, communities, local organizations and systems to understand the most important factors that come with living in an urban environment and what can be done to create positive change. CJ Goulding, 2016 graduate, employed by Children and Nature Network Natural Leaders

As educators, long-term results rely on building Trust among constituents, learners, and community members. First, we build relationships...authentic and real relationships. Relationships are key to the longevity of any environmental solutions. We need to step outside of our personal assumptions, our biases, our stereotypes and listen to the stories from inside a community. The real experiences of everyday people shine a light on the environmental issues they face. Embedded in those stories are the keys to building stewards of urban places. (Jess Wallach, 2016 graduate, employed by 350.org)

The Future of Environmental Learning

The foundational UEE course, The Future of Environmental Learning, takes a critical look at the field and its necessary transformation. Mitchell Thomashow’s course introduces new ways of thinking about environmental issues, widening the traditional scope of the discipline. In his own words, “*Feverish tides of change are sweeping the globe. The same tensions that converged in the 1960s (Civil Rights, Feminism, Peace, and Environment) inflame educators as a result of the very environmental issues we’ve been worried about—scarcities prompted by natural disasters, political upheavals, and religious extremism; refugees forced to abandon their homes and livelihoods; interconnected global economic cycles that result in demographic dislocations and migrations; with the attendant impacts on ecosystems and the biosphere.*”

One of the first activities in this class introduces “sense of place” and the formation of ecological identity. Understanding one’s ecological identity is a critical aspect of environmental work and intention. Sense of place activities get at the heart of how one’s identity fuels the nature and quality of environmental leadership. The description from his syllabus reads:

Sense of place is a search for ecological roots. This is best accomplished when you have a relationship to the land on which you live, when you can place yourself securely in a tangible place. It's through the place that you live that you construct your personal identity, your relationship to the landscape, and you determine what is important in your life. Sense of place concerns your home and region, feelings about land and community, kindred species, community niches, and sacred places. To have a sense of place is to merge your personal geography with the ecological landscape, incorporate maps of memory with how you dwell in a bioregion.

The sense of place map is a rite of passage that links ecological identity to life cycle development. What are the feelings, events, and choices that characterize how you see yourself in the biosphere through different periods of your life, through various dwellings and travels in time and space. How will you communicate and illustrate the places where you've been, where you live now, and where you see yourself in the future? (Ecological Identity, Mitchell Thomashow, MIT Press)

Powerful student exhibitions provide the venue to share multiple dimensions of one's connection to the biosphere, to each other, to land and history, to culture, race, and politics. The "maps" serve as provocative expressions of value and intention that expand the sense of what connects all of us to ecosystems, environmental issues, and the tumultuous issues of race, culture, and justice.

Thomashow invites the students to consider how environmental leadership must evolve to include the "tides of change":

For the field of environmental studies, including approaches to activism and education, it's not sufficient to work mainly in the area of conservation and environmental protection. To remain pertinent and responsive, environmental citizens must demonstrate how these convergent challenges are inextricably linked to the fate of the planet. Let's reframe the tides of change as questions:

1. *The rapacious exploitation of the biosphere and its life systems continues unabated. How do we best communicate the necessity of ecosystem thinking?*
2. *There is an increasing disparity between rich and poor. How do we promote economic equity and social justice in cultures of materialism and entitlement?*
3. *There is great apprehension concerning the integration and separation of global cultures. How do we promote intercultural understanding and cosmopolitan thinking in the midst of nationalist responses and ethnic tribalism?*
4. *Violence, weaponry, and terror compete with deliberation, diplomacy, and collaboration. How do we settle our differences through community democracy, service and compromise, in the midst of conflict, extreme behavior, and fear?*

The emerging environmental movement of the early twenty-first century has a new shape and form. Visit any grassroots community-based environmental project and speak to the staff and participants. You will find a young generation of activists who understand the necessity of working in diverse communities to promote constructive change. They are concerned about environmental issues, but they are equally committed to approaches that emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion. They are flexible users of social media and they utilize these skills to build coalitions and promote their ideas. (Mitchell Thomashow, To Know the World: A Vision of Environmental Learning, MIT Press, 2020)

Migration is raised as a seminal feature of environmental change. Following the sharing of "sense of place maps," each student creates and shares a chart of their

own family's history of migration. One student may talk about a farming heritage that has rooted their family to a particular place for generations while another may talk about spending a childhood moving up the coast of California from Mexico picking fruit; yet another may have fled political terrorism and come to the U.S. for asylum. Intentional relocation, unresolvable displacement, purposeful migration... all of the students have an experience of moving, uprooting, leaving family, and establishing a new sense of place. This activity reveals how common the experience of migration is to humankind; how humans and animals are often on the move to escape drought, ecosystem changes, and climate impacts. The study of migration is linked to the dynamics of climate change, of power dynamics, of health concerns, and political upheaval, and all are related to environmental integrity.

Urbanizing Environmental Education

Students are anxious to take their new awareness into the streets. "Urbanizing Environmental Education" converts what they have learned theoretically into action. They all investigate the mechanics of the city, how power and money determine the shape and access to private and public spaces, how and why movement through the streets is managed, the ways that water, waste, and wildlife are moved through places, where the displaced have gone, "red-lining" impacts on community make-up, where food can be accessed and why some have green space and others do not. All of these factors become educational priorities. The students are encouraged to invent strategies that organize the engagement of communities in learning the answers to questions that impact their lives.

I teach this class. There are "big ideas" hiding in the streets of cities that are central to environmental learning. Identifying and articulating these important concepts is critical to shaping effective civic engagement and environmental education. Big Ideas lay the groundwork for educational activities. Here are a few from this summer:

- The design of parks and green spaces impact the health of communities.
- Public artwork serves a political purpose.
- Cultural integrity is maintained through architecture and design.
- *Structural urban development influences the movement, settlement, and displacement of people.*
- Private property influences the access to public spaces.

Activities are developed to unpack these "big ideas." We go out into the city to try them out. As an example, one group of students settled on creating activities that focus on the concept "private property influences access to public spaces." We walked down seven blocks of Seattle's Belltown neighborhood with notebooks in hand. As historical background, we learned that as recently as 10 years ago, Belltown was a city-sponsored free bus ride away for anyone in need. That has changed. Now, Uber and Lyft are your choices for transport.

The class researches the settlement, gentrification, and displacement of inhabitants within the Belltown area through narratives and photos. Belltown in the 1990s was filled with low-income housing, services for unemployed and homeless, a destination for mental health services, and shelters. Some of the people who used these services still call this home but now find shelter in the alleyways. In 1994, I hired three “houseless” men from the “Millionaire Club,” a charity that finds part-time employment for men who are homeless, to guide a different group of students through the Belltown section of the city and interpret their experiences in their own words. This year none are available.

Our instructional walk is guided by questions: Observe what you observe. That may sound trite. However, most of us do not see a lot when walking city streets. We encourage students to change their focus...how would a small child navigate this street? What would someone in a wheelchair or on crutches be looking at? How would you describe the Belltown neighborhood from the perspective of wildlife? What do you think has changed over the past 10 years? What evidence of past “eras” remains? How has the increase in private residential property influenced the shape of the streets? And more.... at the end of our exploration, reflective essays reveal things that have never been considered before. Here is an example of one reflection:

*On Vine Street in the Belltown neighborhood, a community group living in the new upscale high-rise apartment complex has transformed the city block into an urban watershed oasis. The intention is admirable; to slow the flow of storm water into the Puget Sound. The new resident group has been influential in shrinking two lanes of traffic on the north side of the building into one in order to accommodate a new bio-swale gardens. This is an environmentalist’s dream! The “Cistern Steps” is a series of terraced plantings designed to clean rain-water as it travels through the city. It is an oasis for several reasons. One is aesthetic. Amidst the heavily built environment of Belltown, these green terraced plantings echo an English countryside garden and has changed the pattern of traffic to a trickle. Street noise is diminished. Greenery is abundant and leads into a protected community garden full of food and flowers. I was immediately impressed by the beauty and function of the Cistern Steps, until I noticed on very odd feature of the design. The Cistern Steps are **steps**...meaning that people in wheelchairs, parents pushing strollers and the disabled, cannot use this city block. It got me wondering about the line between public and private. One block uphill from the “steps” is another stretch of plantings that used to be a wide sidewalk. A “No Trespassing” sign sits planted amongst ferns, shrubs, and storm-water pools surrounded by a spiky metal fence to discourage sitting, loitering, sleeping. A “No Trespassing” sign on a public city street should make us all start thinking: what kind of influence, power, and position allows for this line to exist between public and private in a city, who gets the right to control accessibility to a public walkway? (Melani Baker, UEE Alum, 2019)*

Of course, the discussion following this activity ends up very passionate as the relationship between social justice and environmental reveals itself. One observation indicates that as the “environment” becomes greener and cleaner, “unsavory” people are moved out. This lesson provides an example of how those with power, privilege, and money can initiate “environmental improvements” that speed up the attraction of this area to developers. What of the displaced? Was there any effort put into soliciting input from the original tenants? Might their ideas have created a way to coexist in this place? How might an educator engage community in thinking through an inclusive lens to improve a neighborhood? Discussions following

“lessons” like this one lead to students unpacking the swirling undercurrents of racism, class issues, power, money, and privilege in urban planning. Once the relationships between environmental change and social justice are unveiled from this concrete experience on the street, the faculty can build the bridges to the role educators might play as community advocates, change agents, interpreters, and facilitators.

Race, Equity, Inclusion, and Environment

The focus on race, equity, and inclusion in relationship to environmental issues is what makes our program different from others. The diversity of the student body creates a microcosm mirroring the challenge of engaging people in hard conversations. Students spend 30 weeks in three courses that study the relationship between race, equity, and environmental issues. Multicultural education and strategic leadership follow the foundation class. Faculty work to peel back layers of history, life experiences, and identity in order to facilitate learning that builds skills in community engagement and collective impact. The following reflective essay captures an awareness gained in class that changed a career. The transformative awareness from this activity was volcanic. Josh became, after graduation, an educational leader facilitating Race, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives for public schools. This new awareness shaped his UEE research, which exposed the difficulty of making public lands accessible to people of color when the interpretive narratives exclude multicultural perspectives.

*One strong memory that I carry is trying out an activity that had us fill out a racial privilege survey. 12 students out of 18 in the UEE cohort were people of color. The activity positioned us around the room according to our answers. I'm sure that it was designed to enlighten the white people present. It set a tone for acknowledging that we are not all experiencing the "environment" in the same way, that we have **not** all been treated equally, that equity is a huge issue in the environmental field (define environment any way you like here). There are historical impacts on each of our relationships with "environment." We are each living a legacy that shapes our understanding of how things are, who we are in them and who has the power to act. It caused me to pause. Here I was, beginning to bond with a new group, as a "white" man in a diverse group of fellow colleagues. I had to acknowledge that I didn't experience "environment" in the same way that everyone else did. My assumptions crumbled. I had been wrong in my assumptions as an educator previously. I began to realize that what had been missing from conversations about environmental issues was the impact of oppression and white supremacy in the environmental field. It's one thing to have faculty of color and another to work with peers who are coming from a huge range of identities, experiences and backgrounds that differ significantly from your own. We began sharing personal and professional experiences, identities, emotions and vulnerabilities in the safe place that was provided by the program. Hearing honest and clear representations of each other's journey and how racial identity influenced each person's work in the field was profound. And it was bounded by classes where theorists and writers like Bell Hooks and Paulo Freire held us up and provided the words to underwrite and translate this difficult topic into a reality to use in our work. (Josh Parker, UEE alum, 2018)*

The Practicum

The practicum is at the heart of our academic program. Early on, Sue Byers, the current director, and I decided that the traditional short dips into community organizations (that most graduate programs design) would not work for us. Our students spend 30 weeks with one community-based organization in a paid contracted position. “Nothing About Us Without Us Is For Us” guides research, the creation of educational events, the organization of civic engagement, and the facilitation collective action. Paulo Friere and Bell Hooks are in our back pockets:

Education is a mechanism for social change... it becomes the “practice of freedom”, the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Gramsci, Freire, and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative Action, by Peter Mayo, Macmillan, 1999)

The UEE program prides itself on the quality and number of practicum partnerships that have been created and nurtured over the last 5 years. Our students engage in collaborative research and community engagement projects within communities all over the city...governmental, national, service-oriented, health advocacy, food access, housing, etc. They are actively engaged in organizational life while wearing the “hat” of a participatory action researcher, all the while supported by weekly classes and supervisory oversight from UEE faculty. Our students are managing projects within The National Park Service, Seattle Parks and Recreation, The National Forest Service, Brightwater Treatment Plant for King County, Seattle Public Schools, Beacon Hill Food Forest, El Centro de la Raza (The Center for People of All Races), White Center Development Association, and so many more. Issues raised in classes are heightened and practiced in practicum settings. Sylvia, a woman of color, wrote this reflection after a meeting with Seattle Parks and Recreation supported her learning:

A few weeks ago, I went out to the beautiful Cedar River Watershed Outdoor Education Center with my practicum supervisor. My practicum title is Green Jobs Research Assistant at Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) and SPR environmental learning unit. We were a team of naturalists and environmental educators given the task of planning 2018’s approach to environmental education. The day began with some discussion on where diversity is lacking and what needed to be done to improve. It quickly became apparent, like it usually does, that diversity was professional vernacular for race. The environmental educators noticed that most of their students were middle or upper middle-class white students. They wanted to bring more youth of color, immigrants, youth from other economic backgrounds into the environmental learning centers.

*This was a timely opportunity for me to have a chance to apply what we have been discussing in our UEE classes. I began to think about a book we had been reading in Participatory Action Research class: Paulo Freire’s *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In Freire’s theory, the leaders of a group and the students must work together to learn from each other in loving humility. There cannot be a sense of us vs. them. There is only the we, who work together toward a common goal, in this case, environmental justice and equity. To me, it seems like the goal of inclusion of “othered” populations, the environmental educators would first need to start by “un-othering” them in their minds, that is, deconstructing the us vs. them mentality. Othering, by definition, is the act of a dominant group mentally classifying another group as “not one of us.”*

Back to the meeting. As I was about to comment on these reflections, one of the other UEE grads took the thoughts right out of my mind. "How are we involving the community to understand what they need and how we can best serve them?" she asked. I qualified her statement, commenting that "at times in meetings like this I find that I am a part of the "them" that is being talked about rather than the "us" who may be doing the planning." The other UEE alum then posited, "I wonder if that is how the people we want to serve feel...?"

The room was silent for a few moments. Heads began nodding. What I learned was that there already was a sense that the community needed to be involved in environmental program planning, but that day there was a greater awareness to the radical idea of "we," instead of "us and them." I left the meeting very excited to see the theory that I learned in the classroom put into practice in a real-world situation with real implications in the city that I call home. (Sylvia Hadnot, UEE Alum, 2018)

The relationship between social justice, city life, and environmental conditions is complex and it all becomes very real in the practicum placements. Here are some of the recent Legacy project titles:

- Cultivating equitable youth leadership within a wilderness society
- Increasing access to outdoor adventure programming to youth of color
- Bringing communities of color and neighbors into neighborhood green-spaces on their own terms
- Including counter narratives and indigenous perspectives in National Forest interpretation
- Digital storytelling as a method to advance the focus of youth on environmental issues
- Implementing inclusive community input into the development of NPS interpretive signage
- Increasing racial and gender equity in STEM-based girls programming

The Urban Environmental Education Master's program at Antioch University Seattle intentionally embeds our students within urban communities to learn first-hand about the threads that hold a place together and the forces that make living conditions and environmental realities what they are. Each practicum leads to a Legacy project that stems from research and practice. Legacy projects provide the information necessary for organizations to move forward on changes and improvements in educational and programmatic design.

Our students find employment after graduation because they have studied, researched, and practiced the integration of social justice and environmental leadership. Eighty-five percent of our graduates are actively working in the field. They rely on each other for support. The cohorts continue as learning communities long after graduation. Here is a final reflection from a graduate, seeking solace from her UEE cohort:

Sometimes, the skyline in Seattle uncannily reflects our inner landscape. Election day, November 8th, 2016, was gray and cloudy. Politics had brought its own darkness to the future for many of us. Suddenly, the sun seemed so much farther from reach. The shift in the political climate rocked the emotions of our UEE cohort, a group of women and men of many colors, homelands and passions, who all care deeply about the health of people and our planet. All of whom were afraid of the racism and environmental abuse that might flow from this election. Some of us were shocked, some of us not as much. All of us concerned

about the future of the environmental landscape, our professional field in light of the transition of power.

We entered an academic map at the cutting edge of Urban Environmental Education. We are drawing the edges of this discipline as we push them. We seek to be a new kind of pioneer, a kind that draws on old and honored knowledge which has ridden the undercurrents for centuries, and on fresh new knowledge sparked from the minds of a truly diverse cohort of learners. We strive to set the table with welcoming places for all communities to speak their mind. We envision a society built on systems that support and regenerate life where all humans flourish because our ecosystems do. And here we are. Front and center in a time when the progress to halt climate change is threatened and the humanity of millions of people is being disregarded.

As a cohort, we are more determined than ever to continue our mission. We come to this work for many reasons. All of us believe that Urban communities deserve access to culturally relevant, educational experiences that connect them to their ecological identity and sense of place. We seek to empower groups of people who have traditionally been left out of the mainstream environmental movement, yet who have often been the most impacted by the reasons the field exists. We know that knowledge is power; that cities are diverse and complicated and that that makes them as interesting and important as any rainforest, savannah or coral reef. We come together with the communities and leaders with whom we practice our ideals. Our study and work confirms our commitment supporting the rights of people and their access to healthy vibrant environments. This solidarity is the light we need to keep going. (Annalise Ritter, UEE Alum, 2017)