

## **Negotiating the curriculum: Be careful what you wish for!**

Brenda Thomas

*Florida Gulf Coast University*

Making meaningful progress toward sustainable communities, those that enable a reasonable quality of life for all while respecting the earth's ecological limits, requires diverse stakeholder collaboration. In my nonmajors sustainability course, those stakeholders are my students, although those from outside the natural sciences often do not feel they belong in those conversations. An extra layer of resistance created by the course's status as a graduation requirement amplifies the challenge to get students to engage. Active learning strategies help but have not proven adequate in achieving the level of engagement I envision. In response, I have begun negotiating the curriculum with my students, a pedagogical approach that gives them decision-making authority over components of course curriculum (Bovill, 2020).

In my negotiated classroom, students choose the aspects of sustainability most relevant to their disciplines and career goals. I use the first few weeks of each semester to build a trusting classroom community, develop a shared understanding of sustainability, and model active learning. Then I turn decision-making over to students who, through dialogue with their peers, prioritize topics for the rest of the semester. In addition, I give them the opportunity to teach the topics they've chosen in place of writing a lengthy essay. Feedback from students indicates the practice has been wildly successful. Students express appreciation that I've heard their voices and respected their autonomy and identities. They feel included in crafting their learning journey rather than having the journey's direction imposed upon them. They identify the collaborative skills they develop, the broader and more inclusive perspectives they form, and the dismantling

of traditional classroom power structures. Together we have considered topics such as fast fashion, intergenerational responsibility, and cryptocurrency as they relate to the complexities of sustainability. Students come to class with greater engagement, enthusiasm, and energy, as do I.

In spring 2023 I eagerly launched into my well-established process of negotiation with a new group of students. On planning day, I was anxious to see what learning journey we would co-create as the buzz from groups warming to their task became palpable. I've worked hard to get students to think outside sustainability's green box, to think about caring for people in addition to the planet. This group did not disappoint; however, as the saying goes, be careful what you wish for. Giving students control of the learning journey necessitates being prepared to go where they lead.

In addition to health care access, corporate social responsibility, environmental psychology, sustainable food systems, and climate policy, the spring 2023 cohort identified white supremacy, intersectionality, and distributive justice as areas they wanted to explore. They were certainly thinking beyond the environment, and while I could easily connect each topic to the social side of sustainability, I also envisioned being called to the dean's office. In my state's current political climate, one in which DEI trainings and offices have been essentially banned, students who perceive bias or indoctrination from faculty are encouraged to lodge a formal complaint. My students saw my hesitation related to the topics they chose and understood its source, but I could hardly refuse them.

Instead, I worked closely with the groups who wanted to teach those topics to ensure the difficult subjects were handled respectfully. Of primary importance to this process was open and honest dialogue. Before each group began lesson planning, we talked about the power of language to help or to harm and the importance of recognizing the diversity of perspectives and experiences each student brings to these issues. We carefully reviewed their lesson plans to anticipate moments that could be troublesome and considered how we would respond if issues arose. The resulting dialogues were some of the most powerful I've experienced in a classroom.

The first tough dialogue followed my trepidation on planning day. My obvious response to their topic selection opened the door for me to engage students in conversation about inclusion and belonging. When asked why they thought we have arrived in this political place, one student responded, "Because those uneducated people feel threatened." I countered that perhaps 'those uneducated people' had reason. Perhaps rather than engaging individuals who think differently in dialogue, looking for commonalities while hunting assumptions together, the educated people pointed fingers and threw accusations. Although the conversations are difficult, inclusion and belonging must involve those who think differently, too.

From that starting point, we launched into the topics they had selected. When blanket statements were made about what is right or wrong, what should or should not be done, I was prepared to push them to explore more deeply by considering alternative perspectives. Often, I did not have to. My students come from a diversity of disciplinary, racial, ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, and political perspectives, and they shared those perspectives with each other in the community of learning we had created together. They were able to have really difficult conversations with each other in respectful and productive ways, listening to each other for understanding rather than to win an argument. Reflection from a student collected anonymously in the university's end of semester survey indicates the power of what we accomplished.

I learned to widen my lens... When I gather my thoughts and opinions on topics now, I have more to contemplate. This makes it more challenging to be confident in my outlook, but that's the point. There are no "easy" solutions, and there is a lot to consider in the realm of sustainability. This makes me a well-rounded person... I am more open-minded to others' perspective of sustainability, not just my own.

Experience has shown me that inviting students to co-create their learning is a powerful tool for enhancing inclusion and belonging, but it is important to recognize its challenges. For example, the level of negotiation I use is not feasible for every class. Indeed, because I will be teaching online and asynchronously next year, students will not be making these kinds of curriculum decisions, although they will have choices in other areas. In addition, because none

of my negotiated classes includes the same topics, each semester requires new course prep. Lastly, negotiation involves the risk of students taking you in directions you may not be comfortable going, as my students reminded me this spring.

I believe the approach is worth the risk. After all, it is our students who will be tackling the environmental and societal crises of the future. Including them in curriculum decisions now allows them to practice the dialogic collaboration they will need to employ as they work toward sustainable solutions.

### References

Bovill, C. (2020). Co-creation in learning and teaching: The case for a whole-class approach in higher education. *Higher Education*, 79(6), 1023–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00453-w>