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Social Justice and the US Food System: A critical course on the human dimensions of food

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In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science in Food Systems

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Background

Our world is made up of overlapping political, environmental, and economic spheres that engender social injustice and inequality. Though separate societal issues can seem divergent and unconnected, they are all linked together by one universal necessity: food. Because everyone eats, everyone is connected to—and dependent on—food and the systems that govern it. However, the impacts of our industrial food system are not felt equally among people who hold different positions of power within it.

Today's industrial food complex operates on the capitalist principle of profit accumulation through exploitation, commodification, and extraction. This set of relations is not defined by scale or location, but by the characterization of food as a commodity within the constraints of a capitalist society. Indeed, many local, organic, or other seemingly "alternative" food systems are often rife with the same social justice problems as those controlled by transnational corporations (Holt-Giménez, 2018). This industrial food regime is a microcosm that reflects the mechanisms by which systems of power operate in society writ large.

This master's project proposes an undergraduate course that leverages the combined power of food and education to study social justice through a food systems lens. It aims to demonstrate that education about food can a pivotal tool for understanding complex systems and addressing the social inequities that infuse not just the food system, but social structures more broadly. This course, titled "Social Justice and the US Food System," foregrounds a critical examination of the human dimensions of food. It explores the inequities embedded in how food is produced, distributed, and accessed, as well as the ways that people work to resist, disrupt, and transform systems of injustice.

Personal reflection

Working in both food systems and education has led me to find compelling connections between the two fields, which I explore in "Social Justice and the US Food System." This project reflects my belief that a critical, experiential, and interdisciplinary pedagogy holds powerful potential for transformational learning when applied to a food systems course that centers social justice. I have been influenced by theoretical frameworks from my work in both education and food systems in scaffolding this curriculum. The emerging field of critical food literacy has inspired me to pursue food education as a leverage point for social change. Theory and practice from my educational work in critical pedagogy, experiential and place-based education, and interdisciplinary inquiry also guide my work in designing this course.

Teaching influences

My experiences as a teacher have largely taken place in nontraditional settings. This particular background informs both the practical and philosophical qualities of "Social Justice and the US Food System." I gravitated towards education while working as an outdoor educator and guide, as I began to see a connection between experience-based learning and personal growth in my students that transcended the concrete skills they were acquiring. This realization—and my growing curiosity—led me to pursue experiential education more directly.

I was introduced to the foundations of experiential praxis while teaching for a hiking-based environmental education program. My goal as an educator was to build curriculum that allowed students to personally connect with their surroundings, and to explore the landscape as a place where scientific concepts could come to life. To many students, the wilderness environment in concert with physical challenges served to stretch their comfort zones personally as well as academically.

My work as a teacher for an experiential semester school challenged me to further refine and apply my teaching philosophy. The school's academically rigorous nature allowed me to cultivate a pedagogical practice while moving through a place-based curriculum with a small cohort of students. I explored a host of strategies to position students for deep critical inquiry into their social, political, and physical surroundings. In particular, I found that providing academic context through primary and secondary sources, assigning critical thinking projects, pairing practical experiences to ground and/or complicate dominant narratives, and including interdisciplinary perspectives on an issue or place coalesced into a powerful method for encouraging intellectual growth and social-emotional development.

More recently I have worked to translate these practices into classroom-based environments—first at an independent high school, and now at The University of Vermont. Despite a shift in setting and methodology, however, the core principles of my teaching philosophy remain unchanged. I aim to infuse the pedagogy, structure, and practices of "Social Justice and the US Food System" with elements from my background in alternative education models.

Guiding philosophy

This project reflects the ideology that education is an intrinsically political undertaking. While it has the power to interrupt systems of injustice, it also holds the power to reify and further entrench those systems. Education is complicit in oppression when it subscribes to a dominant narrative without examining what perspectives are missing or silenced (J. D. Anderson, 2015; Jervis, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Lardier et al., 2020). Often, the voices that are excluded represent oppressed and exploited peoples who have engaged in struggle throughout history. Education that omits this discourse erodes the legacy of organized social

movements, and separates would-be changemakers from histories of resistance (Scott, 2004; Yosso, 2005).

Understanding that it cannot be neutral, I situate "Social Justice and the US Food System" as aspiring to liberatory education through rigorous critical inquiry. Any attempt at objectivity places my curriculum in service of oppressive systems of power by default; rejecting that outcome requires an intentional embrace of the value-laden nature of transformative education. Indigenous scholar Sandy Grande (2010) captures this ideology:

> Insofar as the project for colonialist education has been deeply informed by the social, economic, and political policies of US imperialism, an education for decolonization must also make no claim to political neutrality and engage analysis and social inquiry that troubles the capitalist, imperialist aims of unfettered competition, accumulation, and exploitation. Toward such aims the principles of critical pedagogy are clearly relevant. In particular, its foregrounding of capitalist relations as the axis of exploitation helps to frame the history of the colonized as one of dispossession and not simply cultural oppression. (p. 202-203)

I am especially cognizant of Grande's challenge "to act as [an] agent of transgression, posing critical questions and engaging dangerous discourse" (p. 203) as curator of this course. Food systems are entrenched in—and serve to shape—the political-economic landscape, necessitating that this syllabus centers a critique of the capitalist mode of production and the human exploitation on which it depends.

I seek to amplify (without co-opting) the voices, actors, and narratives that expose systemic injustice through lived experience, and to facilitate connection between those realities and the contextual apparatus in which they exist. This means mapping individual stories onto a backdrop of the social histories, political constraints, and economic forces that help to shape those stories. In this way, I hope to engage students with the work that transgresses and transforms systems of power. I draw on a wealth of authors, rhetors, activists, practitioners, and changemakers whose works have contributed to my own critical education. The combined voices of these food

systems actors elevate the perspectives of those who are marginalized within the US industrial food complex.

This course pushes back against the idea that food is neutral, its systems of production inevitable, and its history apolitical. Rather, the US food system—like every human system—is steeped in a history of racism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, ableism, human exploitation, dispossession, and colonization. Through this guiding lens, a critically conscious understanding of the food system's human dimensions emerges—along with the possibility of imagining a radically different future.

Food systems framework

There is a growing body of research in the food systems field that suggests educational projects can be a pivotal tool for students to build understanding about complex issues and address challenges facing food systems today (Clark et al., 2013; Francis et al., 2011). Furthermore, this model of critical education holds the potential to spark transformative societal change beyond the food system alone (Lieblein & Francis, 2007; Parr et al., 2007; Sumner, 2013). These projects are compelling for their potential to create a paradigm shift in food education, and provide the foundation on which I aim to build the syllabus for "Social Justice and the US Food System."

However, despite the emergence of critical food literacy as a tool for transformative learning, mainstream food education models often shy away from this approach (Powell & Wittman, 2018; Yamashita & Robinson, 2016). Instead, many farm-to-school and classroom gardening initiatives turn to curriculum and ideology that focus on individual choice while advancing the neoliberal logic that more knowledge about food quality and cultivation leads to better nutritional choices, and therefore improved health- and education outcomes (Guthman, 2008; Meek & Tarlau, 2016; Rowat et al., 2019). By divorcing food curricula from the sociopolitical and economic contexts that shape existing food systems, however, schools implicitly preserve the power structures that create poor outcomes in the first place (Wever et al., 2015).

For example, teaching a student about the importance of a diet that includes fresh fruits and vegetables has little impact if that student's access to food is through a convenience store that does not sell produce. This individualized and apolitical model offers students few options for considering how personal choice may be constrained or shaped by structural forces (Galt et al., 2012; Guthman, 2008). Students are left with a paucity of tools to move the system closer to one

that operates on principles of equity, justice, and sustainability. Moreover, when critical analysis of the food system does occur in school settings, it often overlooks the human condition in favor of an emphasis on environmental and animal rights problems (Sumner, 2013; Sutter et al., 2019).

This construct illustrates a failure to capture the potential power of food education as a deep leverage point for transformative change (Meadows, 1999). Very little attention, for example, is given to the welfare of people who produce food. This is problematic given that food systems workers are among the most vulnerable populations in the US workforce (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2012; Holmes, 2019; Holt-Giménez, 2018). There exists a stark disconnect between the substandard conditions that many food systems workers—many of whom are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), undocumented, poor, or otherwise marginalized—in the US endure, and the vital role they play in the industrial food complex (Padilla et al., 2014).

I address this gap by exploring a model of education that critically examines how our dominant food systems—including the agro-industrial complex *and* many of the seemingly better options available—are enmeshed with social injustices (Born & Purcell, 2006; Gray, 2013; Guthman, 2008). This project also aims to highlight just alternatives that take up dual issues of food and society as two parts of one complex system.

The literature shows that many scholars and researchers recognize the potential in this values-based and critical approach. For example, in a study analyzing the politics of Japanese food literacy programs, researcher Aya Kimura (2011) argues that curriculum must highlight structural injustices tied to race, gender, and class in order to allow students to situate today's system in its historical context. At the University of Buffalo, John Burdick (2014) introduces the following framework based on a case study of his undergraduate class about soul food:

> We must fundamentally rewrite and reshape the very foundations of our food pedagogy to foreground the ways by which the food system is and always has been driven by the exploitation of bodies of color, the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their homelands, and the ways by which food access continues to be predicated on systems of power that perpetuate racial genocide. This must be accomplished…by fundamentally grounding our food curriculums in the racialized history of the American food system. (p. 24)

Scholars pursuing this work propose a theoretical foundation that weaves together disciplinary features of critical education and food studies. I argue that food education must shift its focus from personal blame towards a framework that analyzes current food landscapes and imagines better collective alternatives in order to address the overarching social crises that manifest in the dominant US food system (Guthman, 2008; Hilimire, 2016; Parr et al., 2007; Sumner, 2013).

Grounding pedagogies for food system education

In his seminal work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) theorizes that all education is a political project that either works to maintain or transform the status quo. He proposes a construct of critical pedagogy that works to make visible structures of power by interrogating multiple viewpoints, posing questions to build knowledge, and empowering students as actors able to challenge sociopolitical and material conditions.

In the context of food systems, scholars David Meek & Rebecca Tarlau (2015) use Freire's ideas to envision a "dialectical process of analyzing the reality of the local food system, linking this local reality to national and international structures that have coproduced this local reality, and helping students come up with creative solutions to transform these realities" (p. 134). The touchstone of this approach is a commitment to confronting systems on a structural level and leveraging social change through a critical examination of the food system in its wider context (Meek & Tarlau, 2016; Valley et al., 2018; Wever et al., 2015; Yamashita & Robinson, 2016).

Alternative food system paradigms

The agro-industrial food regime is entrenched in race-, gender- and class-based inequities that stem from a neoliberal capitalist apparatus; therefore, foregrounding alternatives such as food justice, food sovereignty, and agroecology is a powerful challenge to the status quo. Food justice imagines alternative food landscapes that recognize and disrupt oppressive conditions (Burdick, 2014; Sbicca, 2012), while food sovereignty movements explicitly center the right of peoples to hold autonomy over their own foodways—including cultivation, management, and access. Agroecology foregrounds local, indigenous, and embodied knowledge systems to enact practices of ecological science in service of food system transformation for sovereignty and justice (C. R. Anderson et al., 2021; Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology, 2015). These paradigms assert the right of communities to control the means of production, to define their own food choices, and to adopt ecologically sustainable methods (T. M. Mares, 2019; Sachs, 2013; Windfuhr & Jonsen, 2010).

Values-based learning

Challenging dominant paradigms requires a values-based approach to learning and teaching about food systems. The purported objectivity of scientific inquiry fails to acknowledge the "value-laden nature of agriculture and food systems generally" (Galt et al., 2012, p. 46), and so is inadequately equipped to prepare students to conceptualize and intervene in complex systems. Educators who withdraw from values-based conversations in favor of an "objective" approach must recognize that even scientific fields are defined by values (Lieblein & Francis, 2007).

As educators Ryan Galt et al. (2012) note in their discussion of undergraduate coursework, "many of us teaching within sustainable agriculture/food systems programs come from scientific traditions in which practitioners are largely silent about the values embodied in their decisions

and work because they have been trained to see science as a values-free activity" (pg. 44). However, even widely unquestioned constructs such as sustainability are built on ethical considerations of what is to be sustained (Allen & Sachs, 1991; R. Galt et al., 2012; Kimura, 2011). A values-based teaching approach allows for an examination not just of food systems as they exist, but what assumptions underlie those systems—and how they can be transformed (Clark et al., 2013; Rose & Paisley, 2012).

Critically reflective and participatory curricula

The pedagogical theory that makes up the field of critical food systems literacy emphasizes critical reflection, systems thinking, interdisciplinarity, and experiential and participatory learning (Hilimire et al., 2014; Wever et al., 2015). These methods encourage students to place themselves (and their values) within their realm of learning. Rather than fill "knowledge deficits" with static information that only the educator accesses, students are invited to co-produce knowledge through inquiry and action that connect theoretical constructs to lived realities (Dover, 2013; Freire, 1970; Sher & King, 2015; Shor, 2019). The use of case studies and other forms of participatory learning also challenge students to confront their beliefs and re-establish them in conversation with new insights gained through experience (Burdick, 2014; Francis et al., 2011; Hilimire et al., 2014; Lieblein & Francis, 2007; Yamashita & Robinson, 2016).

I have designed "Social Justice and the US Food System" as a critical food literacy course that employs collaborative, values-based, and experiential learning. I focus on applying pedagogical theory not only from the food systems field, but also from my own teaching experience and training in the education discipline.

Educational framework

This project draws on the theoretical traditions of experiential or place-based education (I use the terminology experiential education hereafter), critical pedagogy, and interdisciplinarity. I argue that these three schools of thought converge in their pedagogical goals, and rely on overlapping tools to achieve transformative education towards social justice (Breunig, 2005; Gruenewald, 2003). Through synthesis of these frameworks, I introduce key teaching practices that I have incorporated into the structure and praxis of "Social Justice and the US Food System." These practices center on using critical reflection and problem-posing to pursue essential questions, and collaborating to build knowledge by inviting learners' personal experiences and identities into the academic setting.

Figure 1 illustrates this convergence: critical pedagogy, experiential education, and interdisciplinarity use intersecting methodologies, outlined on the right side of the diagram, to

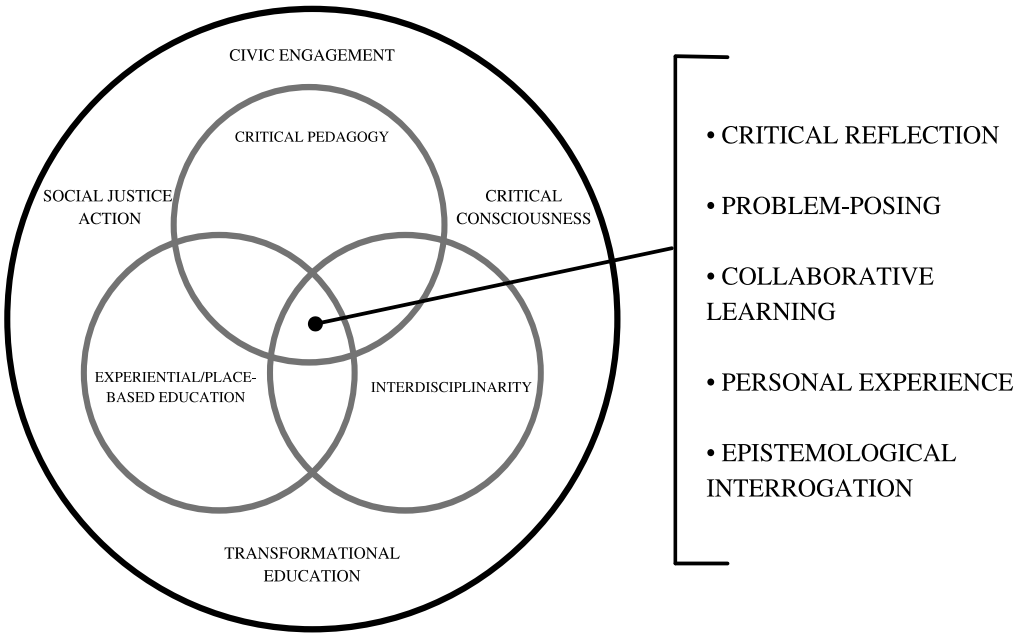

Figure 1. Converging practices and values within the traditions of experiential education, critical pedagogy, and interdisciplinarity

achieve the goals named within the encompassing circle of the learning experience. The foundational tenet of this concept model is that education represents a leverage point in struggles for justice and change (Hahn Tapper, 2013; Mayhew & Fernández, 2007; Peterson, 2002).

A growing body of research points to the potential for curriculum that is grounded in a critical pedagogy to raise students' critical consciousness and activate their potential as engaged members of the citizenry, as discussed in the previous section (Breunig, 2005; Storms, 2012). Experiential models of education in particular provide an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in learning environments that challenge, inspire self-reflection, and catalyze growth (Brookfield, 1996; Gruenewald, 2003; Peterson, 2002; Warren, 2019). The potential to leverage social change through an interdisciplinary praxis that combines experiential education models with critical theory has been widely documented in the academic sphere (Cermak et al., 2011; Choules, 2007; Gruenewald, 2003; Peterson, 2002; Warren, 2019).

My personal experiences as an educator echo these findings: I have observed instances of critical awakening in my students within educational environments that emphasize first-hand experience, critical inquiry, and personal reflection. In the following sections I highlight the principles of experiential education, interdisciplinarity, and critical theory on which I base "Social Justice and the US Food System," and discuss the compelling ways that these traditions support and complement one other.

Interdisciplinarity, critical theory, and experiential education in conversation

Introducing an interdisciplinary lens into the classroom can help facilitate social justice agendas in educational settings. Scholar Julie Klein (1990) notes that interdisciplinarity serves to create "a broader and more complete approach to understanding race and gender, developing alternative curricula, borrowing disciplinary methodologies, breaking down disciplinary

boundaries, providing community service, performing political work, and forging a body of knowledge based on a self-defined epistemology" (p. 183). In creating "Social Justice and the US Food System," I view an interdisciplinary approach not only as a tool for advancing social justice, but as a necessary foundation on which critical theory and experiential learning rely.

By complicating the process of generating and disseminating knowledge, interdisciplinarity forces those who practice it to acknowledge and grapple with the reality that power and context are always at play in knowledge production. Critical theory recognizes that knowledge is never neutral or inevitable (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Shor, 2019); interdisciplinarity offers us tools to uncover what forces shape how it is constructed, reified, and replicated (J. M. Collins, 1997; Storms, 2012).

When one ventures outside their disciplinary "home," it becomes possible to see more clearly what gives that home its unique character. In an article exploring the interdisciplinary research method, Rick Szostak (2013) claims that "disciplines take their strength from a shared perspective…[and] a shared set of epistemological assumptions regarding what can be known and how" (p. 2-3). Remaining inside the confines of one discipline—or even within the realm of academic knowledge entirely—makes it difficult to see those confines, as they are normalized to the point of becoming invisible. It is in this condition, when the scaffolding of a system goes uninterrogated and becomes the supposed default system of knowledge, that it is nearly impossible to picture what kinds of perspectives might exist outside of that discipline.

These are not solely questions of academic curiosity; when inequitable systems become entrenched in perceived inevitability, oppression is legitimated. One of the central tenets of critical pedagogy holds that education must be "the process by which people learn to recognize how unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices" (Brookfield,

2016, p. 6). By troubling these ideologies through interdisciplinary perspectives, it becomes possible to see how they "shape behavior and keep an unequal system intact by making it appear normal" (Brookfield, 2016, p. 6).

Examining complex social issues through an interdisciplinary lens helps to interrupts false claims to neutrality by pushing back against assumptions of knowledge as objectively constructed. In the words of scholar Sandra Harding (1995):

> Objectivism defends and legitimates the institutions and practices through which the distortions and their often-exploitative consequences are generated. It certifies as value-neutral, normal, natural, and therefore not political at all the policies and practices through which powerful groups can gain the information and explanations that they need to advance their priorities. (p. 337)

Studying the underlying mechanisms of how we construct knowledge and define boundaries of possibility creates an opportunity to explore realities or ways of thinking that fall outside those constraints. Harding calls on us to start from outside the conceptual apparatus that dictates dominant frameworks in order to facilitate critical examination. In this context, interdisciplinarity becomes a necessary tool for critical thought and changemaking.

The self in the learning process

Interdisciplinary interrogation of ideas aligns with critical theory in recognizing the subject as an integral part of knowledge production, rather than as an entity separated from objective truths. Seeking to understand the connections between personal experience and theoretical frameworks becomes a tool to "untangle" (Brookfield, 1996, p. 6) complex ideas and critically examine them. It is also a key component of experiential education as described by one of the tradition's founding practitioners. David Kolb (1984) writes that learning is successful when "the education process begins by bringing out the learner's beliefs and theories, examining and testing them, and then integrating the new, more refined ideas into the person's belief systems" (p. 28).

A focus on interdisciplinary practice reminds us that other legitimate claims to knowledge exist—and are created not just within academic boundaries, but beyond them as well. In this way, interdisciplinarity and experiential education answer critical theory's call to situate ourselves by demanding movement between competing worldviews.

In both critical pedagogy and experiential education, learning is seen as a collaborative undertaking by everyone involved, rather than a one-way dissemination of truth from teacher to student (Carver, 1996; hooks, 1994; Warren, 2019). All actors contribute their expertise to the epistemological process. In the words of bell hooks (1994), "education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor" (p. 14), underscoring the idea that both experiential and theoretical forms of knowledge are needed to achieve the transformational goals of liberatory education projects.

In her book *Black Feminist Thought,* Patricia Hill Collins (1992) calls for a shift to valuing ways of thinking that are often discounted in dominant academic spheres: "Emotion, ethics, and reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims. In this alternative epistemology, values lie at the heart of the knowledge validation process such that inquiry always has an ethical aim. Moreover, when these four dimensions become politicized and attached to a social justice project, they can form a framework" (p. 266) for action and transformation. Experiential education also subscribes to a framework that emphasizes this decentralized construction of knowledge.

Kolb's learning cycle (Figure 2) is widely considered to be the foundation for experiential educational practice, illustrating the overarching strategy used by practitioners to facilitate connection between concrete experience and abstract theory (1984). Within this model, learning material—i.e., the concrete experience of absorbing information—is only the first step in

creating knowledge. Learners are positioned to encounter new ideas, reflect on the experience, and form connections to supporting theories through abstract conceptualization. Finally, learners experiment with their new understanding by testing, applying, and situating it within the greater landscape of their knowledge.

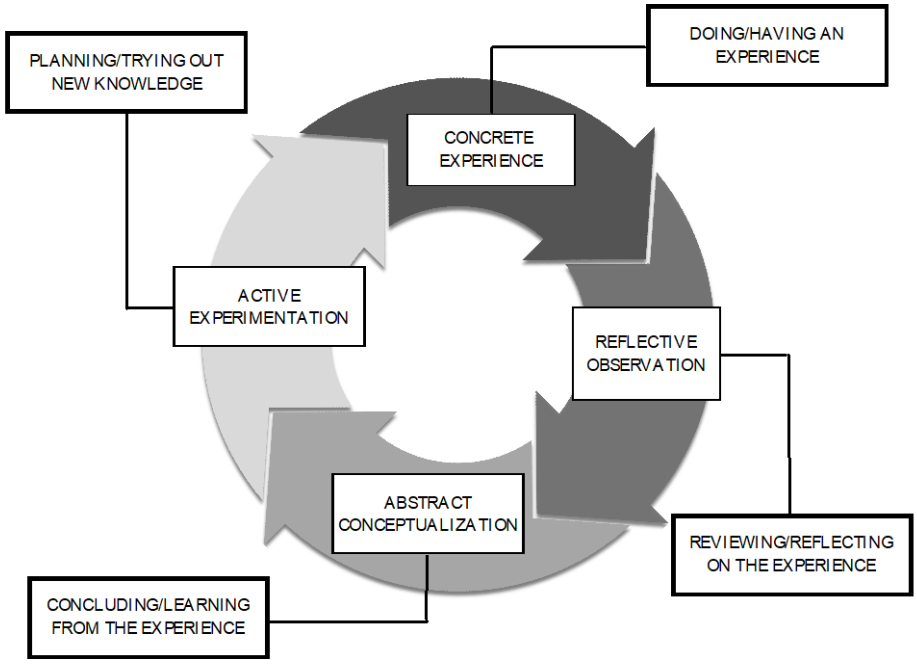

Figure 2. Kolb learning cycle

Grounding the learning process in experience provides "life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts," (Kolb, 1984, p. 21) which learners use as a concrete reference point as they create complex ideas throughout the learning process. Kolb's model illustrates Freire's assertion that "knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention" (1970, p. 58) in its understanding of learning as a process that is collaboratively negotiated. Kolb's process also aligns itself with the Freirean critique (1987) of the banking concept of education, wherein students are empty vessels to be filled with empirical knowledge by the teacher. Kolb (1984) puts forth a theory of education in which "knowledge is a transformation process, being

continuously created and recreated, not an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted" (p. 38).

While the Kolb learning cycle foregrounds the importance of first-hand experience, it also relies on critical reflection with which students synthesize that experience. Personal perspectives are situated in context, which is essential to constructing frames for new information. Examining first-hand experience can expose "the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as relationally constituted. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences" (Scott, 2004, p. 779). Even experience is not unfiltered truth; rather, it is shaped by context and requires interrogation. Only by considering the constraints of underlying ideology, power, and epistemology can we understand experiences through a critical lens and connect large to small, personal to societal, and material to theoretical.

Place-based education scholar David Gruenewald highlights the dual importance of personal experience and critical consciousness in developing a critical pedagogy of place. He encourages learning communities to "read the texts of our own lives and to ask constantly what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved" (2003, p. 10). Food systems education in particular presents an opportunity for students to insert themselves "into the fabric and narratives of contemporary society [and] facilitate their acquisition of social justice knowledge, skills, and behavior" (Mayhew & Fernández, 2007, p. 75), as each person brings deeply personal experience with food to the classroom.

By strengthening on this connection, educators can respond to students' justified expectations that the information they learn relate to and build upon their knowledge from life outside the classroom (hooks, 1994). In recognizing that every member of the learning community is a

resource, knowledge construction becomes a collaboration in which every person's ideas and perspectives are valuable assets to the learning process, and where individuals have agency within their own education (Carver, 1996; Warren, 2019).

Critical inquiry through reflection

In order to situate experience and translate it into an awareness of underlying epistemological assumptions, the educational process relies on critical reflection. Though it is sometimes assumed that reflection happens naturally in a learning environment, true critical reflection must be facilitated intentionally (Boud et al., 2013; Brookfield, 1996; Storms, 2012). Throughout the learning process, it is important to integrate what is new into the existing system of ideas through reflection. This negotiation allows students to discover underlying themes, ideology, and values as they triangulate their working knowledge within the broader discourse—and evolve their analysis of the discourse itself. This serves as a practice of critical pedagogy when it is "explicitly tied to promoting a particular conception of social justice and to uncovering and redressing power inequities" (Brookfield, 2016, p. 6).

Figure 3 depicts the reflective process as established by Dr. Gary Rolfe (2002). There are many overlaps between this model and Kolb's experiential education cycle, as both encourage

WHAT?	• Description of experience • New information gained
SO WHAT?	• New understandings • Synthesizing significance
NOW WHAT?	• Insights formed • Connection to future learning

Figure 3. Rolfe's stages of reflection

the reexamining of a concrete experience or information input through the lens of its broader significance. By facilitating connection between discrete points of learning and the "big picture," this reflective process challenges individuals to cross disciplinary boundaries and use critical thought to formulate (and reformulate) their thought models (Peterson, 2002; Storms, 2012).

A variety of methods serve to facilitate students' attention to these "so what?" questions. While open-ended reflective writing assignments are common in university courses, structured prompts can often guide learners towards more effective critical reflection. Dr. Stephen Brookfield at the University of St. Thomas uses a weekly "Critical Incident Questionnaire" that asks students to explore topics or moments from the previous week of class that were challenging, puzzling, engaging, or otherwise noteworthy (Brookfield, 1996). This regular practice works to encourage reflection on multiple scales: students process their own learning, and the professor solicits feedback in order to contribute more successfully to students' progress.

Reflective exercises provide students better tools with which to grapple with the uneasiness that can come with exposing injustice and power differentials in entrenched societal systems. Mayhew et al. (2007) argue that this discomfort is not a side effect of learning, but an integral part of the process:

> Learning occurs in the context of exposing individuals to challenging new ways of thinking about themselves and the society in which they live. Mechanisms for learning include creating opportunities for individuals to reflect, to form pluralistic worldviews through perspective taking, and to experience cognitive disequilibrium, either through pedagogies that facilitate active learning or by creating opportunities for students to interact with diverse peers. (p. 76)

The aspiration to transformational education demands both a cognitive and an emotional investment. Successful reflective practices embrace the affective dimension of learning in addition to the intellectual realm.

Sociologist Graham Gibbs' (1988) reflection cycle (Figure 4) intersects with Kolb's experiential learning model and Rolfe's key reflective questions, while exploring more directly the emotional process of integrating new (and often challenging) information into existing epistemology. Gibbs' cycle is often used to mediate interpersonal or social/emotional conflict. However, it is also applicable to the affective undertaking of critical inquiry that challenges dominant paradigms.

Gibbs' model combines the personal with the theoretical, encouraging learners to situate themselves, their beliefs, and their biases within the overarching structures that at once have systemic implications and real, individualized impacts (Breunig, 2005; Kolb, 1984). This form of reflection legitimizes the subjective self as an active contributor to the learning process: rather than divorcing individual experience from the conceptual frameworks under scrutiny, it welcomes multiple scales of knowledge as part of the adaptive educational practice.

Posing essential questions is another strategy that encourages a frequent return to the practice of reflection. Essential questions get to "the heart of the matter" (Elder & Paul, 2005, p. 1) by

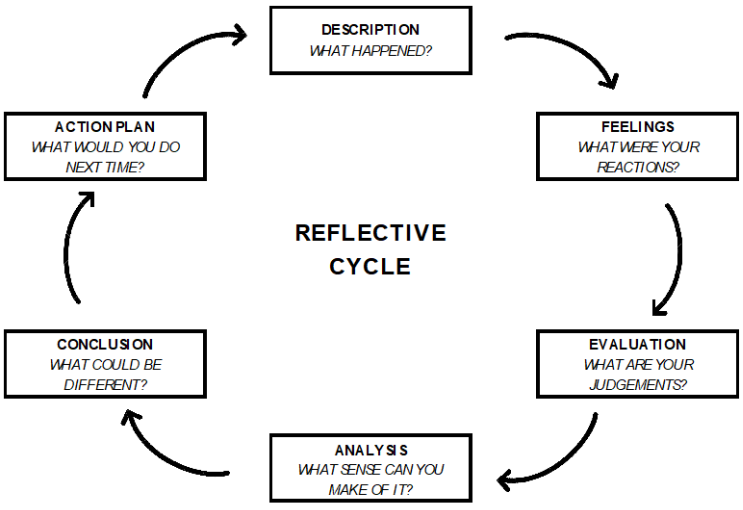

Figure 4. Gibbs' reflective cycle

challenging learners to consider the root causes of a complex issue. Often, these questions have no straightforward answers. Despite this paradox—or perhaps because of it—addressing them is an important skill that builds capacity for critical thinking and opens dialogue about divergent possibilities (Breunig, 2005; Mayhew & Fernández, 2007).

In their manual for asking essential questions, critical scholars Linda Elder and Richard Paul (2005) associate quality of thought to the ability to ask questions. This position asserts that questions are a far more valuable part of learning than answers. Whereas questions often take thinking forward to new, reformulated areas of learning, answers can "often signal a full stop in thought" (p. 3). In considering complex interdisciplinary questions, Elder and Paul propose a universal structure of thought that develops skills for scrutinizing a range of intellectual

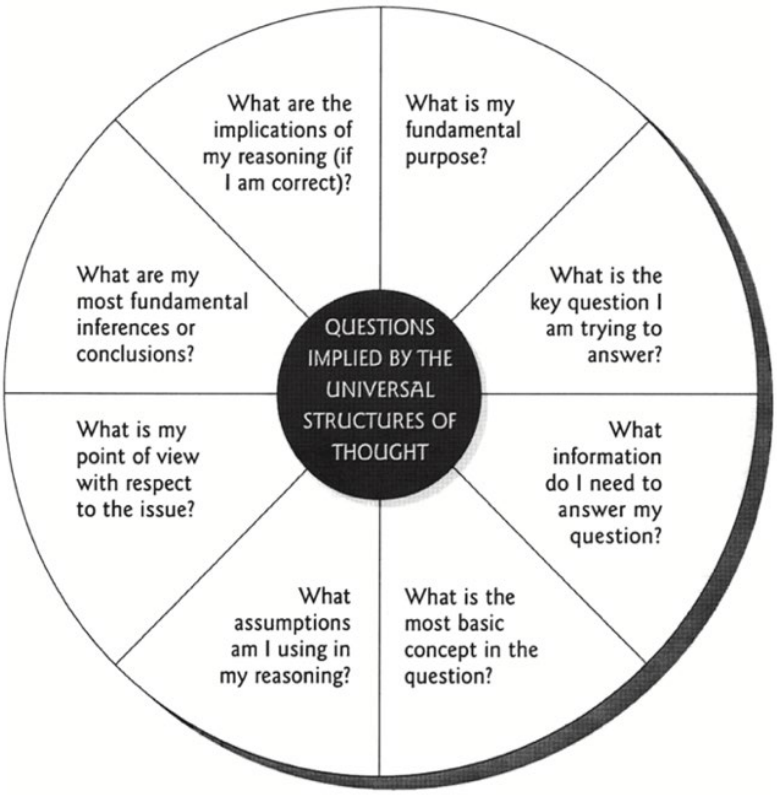

Figure 5. Questions implied by the universal structures of thought

circumstances (Figure 5). Many of these questions translate across academic silos and encourage critical, interdisciplinary inquiry.

Like the integration of experience into the classroom, problem-posing as a pedagogical practice rejects the banking model of education. Rather than disseminate knowledge in one direction from teacher to student, the act of asking questions sets the stage for all members of a learning community to engage in the collaborative process of knowledge production (Choules, 2007; Dewey, 1986; Fenwick, 2011).

Putting theory into practice

The intersecting theories of interdisciplinarity, experiential education, and critical pedagogy provide a wealth of opportunity to explore educational praxis that serves to expose and subvert power structures, raise critical consciousness, and pursue social justice goals. Critical thought provides a framework for challenging dominant systems by drawing on marginalized sources of knowledge to combat the singularity of established, oppressive, or normalized paradigms. Interdisciplinary inquiry furthers this agenda by providing a pathway to transcend siloed expertise and expand what is a legitimized claim to truth. Experiential education proposes a holistic model of learning that incorporates reflective practice and questions traditional educational formats while grounding the learning process in place and context. Together, these practices hold the potential to redistribute the knowledge monopoly away from historically exclusionary processes of construction, and instead bring students to the table as agents engaged in the negotiation of their own learning.

Critical food literacy courses in the university

Research review

There is compelling evidence that a critical food literacy framework can engage students as critical thinkers and social justice actors in a university setting. Dr. Will Valley and colleagues at four North American universities (2018) investigated common qualities among critical food literacy programs at each institution. The case study synthesized guiding principles and learning outcomes of sample courses by compiling data from syllabi, curriculum descriptions, and program documents. The authors conducted a curriculum review, identified key themes, and proposed a pedagogical approach that aligned observed teaching practices with the broader scholarship on food literacy. The authors found that sustainable food systems education led students to engage with historical and current injustices within the food system and make connections to wider issues of social injustice. Their findings also called for further research into the efficacy of similar courses in terms of student learning outcomes.

While teaching a critical food systems education course at UC Davis, Galt et al. (2013) explored the question of how "providing students critical, self-reflective learning experiences through student-centered inquiry contributed to their heightened critical consciousness about their personal, scholastic, and civic relationships to food, agriculture, and society" (p. 136). Their study found, through qualitative analysis of students' reflective essays, that a student-centered inquiry approach to critical food literacy yielded transformative experiences. Students confronted the "commodity fetish": how markets work to conceal social and geographic conditions that underpin common goods and services (Marx, 1867). Additionally, students reported repositioning their thinking and their own identities in relation to the food system, realizing the

complexities of problems that exist within the system, and feeling compelled to act differently based on the changes to their critical consciousnesses precipitated by the course.

At the University of Buffalo, Burdick (2014) explored the outcomes of his race-centered approach to teaching food education. In an undergraduate course that studied cultural politics of the US food system, the author examined critical food literacy's potential as a catalyst for radical change. He found that the interdisciplinary curriculum, which used an inquiry and case-based action approach to center race in the conversation about food, prompted profound shifts in students' perspectives. This framework also combatted the apolitical nature of existing food education rhetoric. Students were able to "see food justice not as emerging in a vacuum or problematically color-blind, but rather as radically anti-racist and positing a profound challenge to societally wide structures that limit access" by perpetuating a system predicated on racial hierarchy (Burdick, 2014, p. 27).

Syllabus review

I conducted a survey of food systems courses with an orientation towards social justice at other universities around the country. I reached out to professors who teach these courses; three agreed to share their syllabi with me and offered insights about their teaching methods in email exchanges, and another five directed me to their public-access syllabi online. Below I highlight pedagogical themes and practices from several syllabi that influenced my curriculum development for "Social Justice and the US Food System."

Tufts University

Dr. Julian Agyeman at Tufts University teaches a course called "Food Justice: critical approaches to policy and planning." Critical pedagogy and experiential learning ground the structure of the class. Dr. Agyeman frontloads a critical inquiry approach in the "Course

Description and Goals" section of his syllabus. He defines the course's foci as "building the theoretical lenses that bring justice to the forefront of the dialogue" and "combining our theoretical approaches and our growing knowledge…to tease apart the role of policy and planning in an organization or project and consider how social justice plays out in its work in policy and planning on the ground" (Agyeman, 2021, p.1). This structure asks students to grapple with theoretical concepts in the context of real-world case studies and matches classroom-based reading and discussion with hands-on learning.

Dr. Agyeman incorporates tools for critical reflection throughout the course. Students submit weekly posts that synthesize their "reflections on the week's readings/speakers, including [their] own thoughts (challenges, conflicts, agreements, disagreements)" (p. 3) on how they relate to the course materials. Furthermore, the class designates students to lead weekly discussions focused on the course materials and reflection posts. Dr. Agyeman introduces students to the touchstone lenses of critical race theory, gender, feminism, settler-colonialism, and white spaces by dividing the class materials among four small reading groups. He asks each group to summarize its assigned texts for the others and then to engage in discussion as a whole class. I adapted this method for "Social Justice and the US Food System" by splitting each week's resources between two small groups throughout the semester and including discussions that ask both groups to consider different materials and perspectives together. My hope is that this practice will challenge students to negotiate complexity and contradiction within an overarching issue and strengthen their critical thinking skills.

Rutgers University

"Community Food Justice and Advocacy," taught by Meredith Taylor of Rutgers University, is an interdisciplinary seminar-style course that focuses on "building students' knowledge and

skills in advocacy in order to help promote healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable food systems" (Taylor, 2017, p. 1). Taylor uses food justice and food sovereignty as central frameworks of the course, asking students to engage in a "team-driven food access or advocacy project" that works toward achieving the goals of these frameworks. Additionally, students "develop a concept map to outline issues related to the course using the concepts outlined in the Whole Measures Community Food Systems framework" (p. 1) which serves as the guiding tool with which students synthesize course materials throughout.

I also chose to scaffold "Social Justice and the US Food System" with guiding theories of change. I chose Donella Meadows' philosophy of leverage points as places to intervene in a system (1999) and Movement Generation's principles for a just transition (2016) as consistent foundations to which students return in their analysis of different issues. Like Taylor, I ask students to synthesize their evolving knowledge about the food system into a graphic organizer that they update throughout the course.

University of California Berkeley

"Transforming the Food System," taught by Dr. Lia Fernald, and "Social Problems of the Food Industry," taught by Dr. Jill Bakehorn, are courses offered in the Public Health and Sociology departments at UC Berkeley, respectively. Both illustrate an interdisciplinary approach to studying food systems issues by employing theory from agroecology, policy, law, public health, and business. The classes "explore strategies used by these disciplines…in working to improve food systems and apply their varied approaches to real-world case studies" (Fernald, 2021, p. 2).

A critical lens is central to both courses. Dr. Bakehorn's course description problematizes the assumptions often made about addressing food system problems: "When it comes to issues of

health and eating habits, many argue it is up to the individual to choose healthy foods and maintain good health… But in this class you find that matters of health are not as simple as individual choice. We will look at structural components of the food industry that constrain choice and actually impede good health" (Bakehorn, 2016, p. 1). This objective is supported by an assignment that asks students to present a visual representation of the food system ("based on [their] current understanding-- there is no right or wrong answer!" [p. 12]) to the class at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the semester. I drew inspiration from the interdisciplinary and critical pedagogy employed by these two courses, and from their use of ongoing projects as tools for exploring students' changing perspectives over the course of a semester.

University of California Davis

A class titled "Food Systems" is offered in the Community and Regional Development department at UC Davis. Instructor Kate Munden-Dixon poses essential questions about food in her course overview, priming students for critical inquiry into structural food systems issues. Within a longer list, Munden-Dixon asks, "Do you ever think about your food, where it comes from, and how it got to your plate? …Why are farmworkers an exploited segment of the population, what challenges exist in organizing for social justice, and where have there been successes? …Who benefits most and who and what is most harmed, by the current social and environmental arrangements that put food on our plates?" (Munden-Dixon, 2018, p. 1). In my own syllabus, I include weekly essential questions to guide students' inquiry as they connect assigned resources to overarching themes.

This course at UC Davis also emphasizes critical reflection and experiential learning, as explained in the student goals section of the syllabus. Munden-Dixon asks students to "build [their] own understanding of ideas and concepts by integrating them into [their] own experiences

and knowledge, and by using them to think and reason" (p. 2). She identifies developing critical thinking and evaluative skills, rather than simply learning the material, as the pivotal work of the course. I found this transparency in introducing course goals for both students and instructors to be compelling, and included parallel "goals for me" and "goals for you" sections in my syllabus.

College of the Atlantic

Dr. Kourtney Collum at the College of the Atlantic teaches a "Transforming Food Systems" course that "critically examines capitalist food systems with particular attention to the ways constructs such as race, class, gender, politics, and economics shape our interactions with food" (Collum, 2021, p. 1). In an email, Dr. Collum shared with me that she has continued to evolve her teaching methods in order to better facilitate this goal. She reflected that one of the most useful changes she has made in recent years is to assign readings "that contradict each other so that students can analyze them critically…and identify the ways in which arguments support or contradict one another." I sought to emulate this approach by dividing resources that showcase different perspectives between the small reading groups. I hope to facilitate students' critical thinking skills by structuring discussion in a way that encourages them to reconcile diverging views on our essential questions.

Application at The University of Vermont

My time as a student at the University of Vermont has also influenced my approach to creating "Social Justice and the US Food System." In the Food Systems master's program, I have explored the powerful nexus of food and social justice through coursework and teaching. However, I have also seen a gap in the existing courses offered at UVM that would be filled by a class that comprehensively connects food systems to social justice issues.

The university's principal mission declares a commitment to "prepar[ing] students to be accountable leaders who will bring to their work dedication to the global community, a grasp of complexity, effective problem-solving and communication skills, and an enduring commitment to learning and ethical conduct" (University of Vermont, 2022a). UVM also describes itself as a global leader in food systems education, emphasizing its graduates' capacity to "address some of the most challenging problems of contemporary food systems," including "equitable distribution and fair labor practices" (University of Vermont, 2022b).

Food Systems programs at UVM position students to examine social justice issues from a food-centric perspective in several of its core classes. For example, master's students in the graduate seminar titled "Food, Society, and Policy" analyze intersectional oppression in the food system, and study food justice and food sovereignty as alternatives to the dominant food regime (T. Mares, 2019). The Plant and Soil Science department offers "Agroecology, Food Sovereignty, and Social Movements" as a graduate course that explores social justice and food sovereignty topics through an agroecological lens. Undergraduates are also introduced to these subject areas, including gender-, racial-, and class-based discrimination—and efforts to combat these issues—in the introductory course Community Development and Applied Economics course "US Food: Social Equity and Development" (Burke & Brooks, 2022).

While these classes provide an important window into the overlapping social justice concerns that manifest within the food system, their broader subject areas do not allow for the depth of inquiry I propose in "Social Justice and the US Food System." A critical focus on questions of social justice as they intersect with the food system is the central work of this proposed class. Including such an undergraduate course in its offerings would represent an important step for the Food Systems program to fulfill its goals of developing "solutions to global food systems

challenges through world-class transdisciplinary research, teaching, and outreach dedicated to improving economic, ecological, and human wellbeing" (University of Vermont, 2022b).

My concept for this class is outlined in the syllabus that follows. I have organized "Social Justice and the US Food System" as a mid-level undergraduate course that meets two times per week for the purpose of this document. However, I intend for the course to be scalable both in its format and its intended audience; it can serve as an introductory course or an advanced seminar in the university setting. I also intend to make these course materials publicly available as an outline for a reading and discussion group. The tradition of popular education is important to critical pedagogy in general and this project in particular, and by disseminating this syllabus as an open-access book club guide I hope to honor that history. I hope to experiment with a mixed discussion format in the future, in which students taking "Social Justice and the US Food System" as a university course meet with members of a library book club version of the class to discuss the touchstone texts together.

The course materials for "Social Justice and the US Food System" also strive to reflect my commitment to accessibility outside of the university. Though there are a handful of peer-reviewed journal articles throughout the class, I rely more heavily on sources that are open-access or available through public libraries. These materials represent a wider cross-section of knowledge than the exclusionary claims to expertise recognized within the confines of academic publishing. In the instances where I do include a source that requires a subscription or is otherwise more difficult to access, I try to offer an alternative that introduces similar content without a paywall or institutional barrier.

I aim to ground the course's connection to place with site visits and guest speakers that embody course themes through cases studies in practice. This version of "Social Justice and the

US Food System" draws on resources and organizations that play a prominent role in Vermont's food landscapes. I set aside class periods for these activities in the syllabus as tentative plans to be finalized if and when "Social Justice and the US Food System" appears in the Schedule of Courses. The perspectives of food system actors in Vermont are invaluable to the project of connecting theory to practice; building relationships with the people and places actively involved in food system work is among the course's highest priorities. Experiential praxis also infuses the activities that take place within the classroom. Students work together frequently, collaborating to produce documents and visual media. In the process, they learn to value their peers as resources in the learning environment.

Each unit begins with an examination of existing problems within a dimension of the food system, followed by an exploration of ideas that show promise for creating change. This format is a response to my own undergraduate experience, during which I learned a great deal about monumental problems, and very little about how to use that knowledge to move forward with purpose. My goal is not to minimize the gravity of the challenges this class studies, but rather to pair students' understanding of problems with frameworks that demonstrate how people can and do reject defeat by manifesting principles of justice through action. I aim to be transparent in this and other organizational choices, assigning readings that present my pedagogical approach in the first unit of the class. I hope to engage students' agency in their own educational experiences by being forthcoming about my reasons behind the structure of the class.

I include an outline for an assessment schema based on writing assignments, class participation, student portfolios, and learning contracts. I aim to leave room for evaluation methods that prioritize feedback for student growth over reductive ranking systems. This approach takes inspiration from higher education scholar Jesse Stommel's work on un-grading as

a practice of critical pedagogy that "acknowledge[s] the background, context, and embodied experience that both teachers and students bring to the classroom" (Stommel, 2020). Conversations around grading that demystify the process and allow for student input can work to dismantle hierarchies in the classroom while encouraging students' sense of ownership in their learning (Kohn, 2011; Stommel, 2020). Recognizing that the mechanics of my evaluation systems will change to reflect class size, institutional requirements, and individual student groups, I hope to situate performance evaluation not as the end goal of a class, but as a means for igniting students' intrinsic motivation and valuing the complex individuality of the learning process.

Finally, I wish to recognize that this syllabus, like the ever-shifting landscape of social justice struggles, will never be a finished product. It represents a moment in time, and will continue to evolve as a reflection of my own learning about the food system and those who shape it.

Course syllabus

Course syllabus and teaching materials available upon request.
Please contact ali.brooks@uvm.edu.

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