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“Building Together”: City as Text™, Intersectionality, and Urban Farming during COVID-19

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Abstract: This essay considers various challenges to honors educational practice in a post-pandemic context and against the backdrop of Black Lives Matter. The City as Text™ course, Multicultural Toledo, cultivates student knowledge about intersectionality in light of public health and social justice emergencies in the United States. The author describes course content, curricular objectives, and teaching strategies toward helping students understand the dynamic interplay (intersection and interaction) of ableism, sexism, elitism, homophobia, and racism relative to the accession and acquisition of land. The course espouses a post-pandemic vision: an intersectional lens that fosters knowledge about power relationships and diverse lived experiences in order to lead change and create movement on some of our nation’s most pressing social issues. Moreover, the collaboration between honors students and an urban farming community connects underrepresented children in local neighborhoods with the collegiate honors experience.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; student-centered learning; community engagement; study and teaching of racism; University of Toledo (OH)–Jesup Scott Honors College

Citation: *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2021, 22(2):37–44

INTRODUCTION

Multicultural Toledo, an honors course at the University of Toledo Main Campus, blooms from the NCHC’s signature program City as Text™, an active learning pedagogy in which small student teams are sent to various

ethnic neighborhoods and cultural sites to investigate diversity and equity issues (Pryor, 2019). During the summer session in 2021, the emphasis on urban farming was fertile as many public health advocates were encouraging gardening and outdoor exploration, and the topic is especially relevant at our college, which draws students from rural and agricultural communities. Teaching intersectionality is an entry point to describe how six honors students enrolled in the course built a raised garden bed, a description that includes techniques that encourage openness; the course organization; the intersectional authors who motivate students to take intellectual risks; how the course introduces the community to the honors experience; and my positionality as a black female professor of honors. Intersectionality intertwines and overlaps with various identity locations and oppressions that affect how they are presented in the course. The course content honors Black Lives Matter with a critique of power relationships, multiple contexts, and methods that excite students to build a raised garden bed for an urban farm. This teaching methodology unearths how honors core values respond to a public health and social justice emergency.

MULTICULTURAL TOLEDO

Multicultural Toledo is an interdisciplinary investigation into the Toledo area's multicultural, historical, and socioeconomic development. The course culminates in a public presentation to extend the dialogue between students and the broader community (Pryor, 2019). Unfortunately, the declining enrollment numbers and consequent budget shortfall due to the COVID-19 pandemic suspended student travel opportunities. As Long (2010) notes, active learning in a virtual format cannot replace actual City as Text explorations, but during the summer of 2021, the course had to be offered as distance learning (DL). Student enrollment filled up quickly, and the course was waitlisted as usual. City as Text was achieved safely by allowing students to explore in small student teams, mirroring the walkabouts of Digby and Thiesen-Reily's exploration of urban parks (Digby, 2016). There were physically distant walkabouts for observing green spaces and interpreting environmental concerns in their hometowns, but six students remained in Toledo, and they were split into two teams. For these six students, some green spaces were within walking distance of their residences.

The pedagogical strategy of the course was intersectionality, a theoretical tool that was named by a Black feminist legal scholar, Crenshaw (2015), and that unpacks the material conditions of social identity, discrimination, and

exclusion. Intersectionality unearths the interactions among identity locations such as (dis)ability, gender, sexual orientation, class, and race, and it shows how ideas like equal opportunity and merit lead to constrained choices or obstacles for urban farmers. For instance, in the course we dialogued about migrant farmworkers, the plight of Black farmers, and the agricultural industry's influence on land ownership, wealth building, food access, and climate change. As students of agricultural backgrounds practiced using intersectionality, they reflected on ways they are victims of capitalist exploitation. Given the growing food insecurities resulting from the economic impact of COVID-19, the students developed a shared sense of responsibility to improve land and food justice in a local Black community.

TEACHING INTERSECTIONALITY IN RESPONSE TO BLACK LIVES MATTER AND THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

The first day of Multicultural Toledo was vital because of its student-centered framework. First, the tone of the syllabus was important. I was influenced by Barry's (2019) book *Syllabus: Notes From an Accidental Professor* to create a colorful, whimsical course syllabus to create a welcoming learning experience. Next, we played Kahoot games with images and words that encourage respectful dialogue and that challenge and uproot taken-for-granted attitudes and beliefs. Finally, I announce the modules in the course and their respective walkabouts. An analysis of oppression based on physical appearance and mental ability laid the groundwork for understanding more critical issues like white privilege and colorblind racism. After each walkabout, the students logged onto the virtual classroom to share their findings. Each module required a walkabout and a 500-word reflection paper.

(Dis)ability

Students explored the outdoor (dis)ability accommodations within walking distance of their residence, paying close attention to green spaces. They examined the height and width of an area, the stability of the walkways, and the height of gardening beds. They explored plant diversity for sensory opportunities. They also analyzed harmful stereotypes that get perpetuated in the media. The students read parts of Nario-Redmond's (2019) *Ableism: The Causes and Consequences of Disability Prejudices* to challenge the prevailing myths about public accommodations. They read Smith's (1996) "Earning Power," which exposes the harmful impact of ableism.

Gender Expectations and Sexual Orientation

Students traveled to Uptown, a Black and LGBTQA+ community known for its public art, murals, and community gardens. Students were introduced to Blair's (2016) essay, "Boystown: Gay Neighborhoods, Social Media, and the (Re)production of Racism," which facilitated a class discussion about gentrification while noting that green spaces are safe spaces for the LGBTQA+ community. This module also explored gender stereotypes in the public sphere through advertisements. We viewed the film *Still Killing Us Softly IV*, which delivers a lecture by Kilbourne (Lazarus et al., 2010) interrogating gender oppression in advertising. Students searched for gender socialization in public spaces such as billboards, benches, murals, and monuments on an additional walkabout. We invited a guest speaker on Zoom to talk about the growing number of community gardens in the area.

Race, Gender, and Land

Students visited urban farms and community gardens in predominantly Black neighborhoods while actively probing how dominant discourses sanitize slavery, sharecropping, land loss, and Black farmers' contributions to the U.S. agricultural sector. First, we read Ball's (1936) description of slave gardens and growing food as an act of freedom. Next, in Gilbert and Eli's (2000) *Homecoming: The Story of African-American Farmers*, students learned about the marginalization of Black farmers through legislation, unfair lending practices, and individual prejudices that perpetuate land loss. Next, we read Black intellectual experts on rural Black American life and farming scholars like Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and George Washington Carver, who advanced topics and methods in growing food for economic independence, self-sufficiency, and resistance (White, 2018). Finally, students read *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* by Walker (1983) to highlight ecowomanism and the significance of Black women's creativity through intercropping: planting fruits, vegetables, and colorful flowers in a small space. Coupled with the academic readings, students debunked myths of Black communities as food deserts by reading about local women of color who are urban farmers and how their intersectional work embodies the complicated struggle for land, food, and economic justice. This module included a guest speaker on Zoom to discuss how urban farming practices interface with larger cultural, sociopolitical, and economic issues within the Black community.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

For their final walkabout, the students chose to do volunteer work for a common goal: to explore Tatum Park and to build a raised bed. Tatum Park honors the famous jazz musician Art Tatum, who was born in Toledo. Next to his childhood home, Tatum Park comprises a few formerly vacant lots transformed into an urban farm. Intersectionality inspired the students to see how their participation was part of a larger context: investigating issues of land justice and food equity while challenging racism, sexism, and other forms of inequities. The spontaneous learning opportunity stemmed from my farming work outside the academy. I build raised garden beds for people who use wheelchairs and those who have trouble standing. I volunteered to make a waist-level raised garden bed, and I invited students to tag along. Students did not receive extra credit for attendance, but their presence counted as a walkabout since they were not required to build the raised bed with me. Most of the students grew up on farms and in rural communities, and they were excited to help.

I started unloading the lumber from my SUV, and the students greeted me. We ran into a few problems, but a community of primarily women farmers worked together to solve problems. First, there was no access to electricity to power the miter saw. A farmer offered to use her car to connect the saw for electricity. Ten minutes later, a gas-powered generator arrived, and a neighbor brought a gas can with gasoline to fill it. Second, there were not enough power tools to go around, but we split the tasks. While one student cut the wooden planks, another student began to drill and screw the wooden planks together. Another student smoothed the rough parts of the lumber with a sander. They are all engineers, and they thrived in an organized chaos that felt like improvisational aspects of jazz. A different student gathered children from the neighborhood and began to teach them tool safety. Although the children from the area ranged in grade levels, the honors students took the opportunity to discuss the honors college and how to apply. The students in the community were rising scholars from underprivileged backgrounds and were included in the honors experience.

Despite the sun beating down on their heads, the students told me that building the raised garden was a memorable honors experience. In their final public presentations, they critically examined their positionality and privilege, describing how they felt compelled to be change agents and how intersectionality had positive impacts on their thinking and daily lives.

MY POSITIONALITY ON CITY AS TEXT DURING A PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE EMERGENCY

I am a Black woman who appreciates gardening, I am a facilitator of City as Text from an intersectional lens, and I teach in a predominantly white institution (PWI). Much of this background has caused me to engage in what hooks (1994) calls “move out beyond the desk” (p. 138), a method of teaching that deconstructs power relationships in the classroom and allows professors to be closer to the students. As a facilitator of City as Text, I am beyond the desk, but I felt wonderfully uncomfortable on this walkabout. The students used power tools such as drills and saws more effortlessly than I did. I felt awkward about the improvisation yet efficiency of community work while teaching. This experience in building a community allowed me to grow and expand as a teacher.

Multicultural Toledo through an intersectional lens used City as Text to confront complex social issues during stringent COVID-19 public health measures. We also found that working with urban farms unearthed recruitment opportunities to attract rising scholars left out of the honors experience, thus addressing the concerns of the National Collegiate Honors Council Task Force’s (2020) “Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion” report. Given our social justice and public health emergency, the students took on a shared sense of responsibility to help alleviate land and food injustice in the local Black community. Honors colleges and programs across the country can emphasize intersectionality and green spaces to maintain physical distancing while pruning assumptions about Black Lives Matter.

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