Abstract

Garden Based Learning in the university setting offers students a unique opportunity to learn about environmental issues through hands-on work in the garden. In this project, we use critical pedagogy as a framework to help students move from theory to practice in the USF garden. Using ‘The Flower of Praxis’ (collabchange.org) as our guide, we engage students in a process that starts with their lived experience and results in real-world action. In order to apply this framework to the issue of climate change, instructors provide students with academic materials related to climate change in order to generate conversation about this topic. Students reflect and make connections with their own experiences, critically analyze the issue, and create opportunities for action. Because the class is based in the USF garden, students became interested in the role of agriculture and food waste in exacerbating the climate crisis. For their action project, students used vegetables grown in the USF garden to cook ‘waste free’ meals, which they served to fellow USF students and the greater San Francisco community. These meals were a way to provide free food to the community (enhancing food security) and to generate conversation about the relationship between food, agriculture and climate change. This community engagement project was an innovative way for the class to work in a hands-on, community-centered environment around the topic of climate change.

Methodology

Critical pedagogy is used in this project because of its ability to create action and agency amongst students. Within a critical pedagogy framework, students and teachers critique and problematize power and hierarchies within their lives and educational experiences. Students learn reflective, critical thinking with the purpose of challenging existing belief systems and raising critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2000). This process of learning helps students become critical thinkers who are empowered to take control of their experience and become agents of change through a ‘problem posing’ model of education wherein students engage in critique and action. Critical pedagogy is a practice where students and teachers are engaged in dialogue and relationship and work together to be critical change makers (Freire, 1970/2000). The Flower of Praxis, developed by Rosa Gonzales & Levana Saxon (collabchange.org) gives educators a model through which to practice critical pedagogy. For the purpose of Garden Based Learning, the Flower of Praxis is especially useful because the image reflects the garden. As such, students can both literally and figuratively ‘prepare the soil’ as they engage in work to address climate change. For a larger view follow this link.

Introduction

Garden Based Learning at a university can move students beyond the acquisition of gardening skills and be an important space in which students engage in dialogue about social and political issues related to food and farming and take real-world action. Here, I discuss our work in the garden at the University of San Francisco (USF), where we teach students not only how to grow food, but also engage students in critical thinking and capacity building around issues that emerge from our work in the garden. This poster looks at our use of ‘The Flower of Praxis’ (collabchange.org), as a tool that uses garden imagery to address the critical praxis cycle. This pedagogical practice starts with students' own experience, identifies patterns across student experience, connects these patterns to theories, identifies new information and student questions, helps generate ideas for action, works towards action and engages students in reflection. This approach can be particularly useful to generate knowledge and action around climate change. By working through the process in the garden, students learned about climate change and strategies for action from a hands-on approach wherein students build community, engage in theory and reflect on their own lives.

Results and Conclusions

In this critical Garden Based Learning course, students engaged in a curriculum that helped them draw connections between food, agriculture and the climate crisis. With knowledge generated in the course, students reflected specifically on food waste and urban gardens as ways to address climate change. As a class, we used the Flower of Praxis (collabchange.org) as we moved throughout the semester, starting with the personal and ending with action and reflection. For their action strategies, students grew, harvested and cooked food from the USF garden, and then served this food to the USF student population and greater San Francisco community. These meals generated little waste and used locally grown ingredients intentionally to show an alternative to large scale agriculture systems. In future iterations of this project, student suggested that we create written materials to distribute during the community meals as an additional educational component.

Citations

3. Photos of students in the USF garden.