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LEARNING TO BE IN SOLIDARITY WITH: VULNERABILITY AND EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

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Abstract

Pope Francis urges us to reject the throwaway culture and instead embrace a culture of solidarity. A primary virtue in Catholic social teaching, solidarity requires building relationships founded upon equal human dignity, experience and vulnerability are required. This creates certain challenges for teaching and learning about global solidarity within the confines of a classroom. In this article, I highlight three pedagogical tools I use to create space for experience and vulnerability. Without physically leaving Queens, NY, students begin learning to be in solidarity with others through digitally engaging multiple stories, online simulations, and academic service learning.

“This class has ruined shopping for me,” announced one student exasperated at the end of my spring 2014 Catholic social teaching course. He had been given a gift card to a trendy low-priced clothing store and found himself struggling with the knowledge that, on the other end of the bargain prices, are workers, often toiling in poverty and sometimes in unsafe and slave-like conditions. No longer able to claim the comfort of ignorance, my student purchased his clothes with strong feelings of unease, full of questions about poverty, labor conditions and supply chains. The thrill of the bargain evaporated with a close examination of modern slavery and forced labor. Instead of satisfaction, my student was left with questions, lots of questions and strong emotions of discomfort. Confronting the reality of complex structures of injustice and our own complicity in these systems is difficult and unsettling, as is the recognition that on our own, we are virtually powerless to change that reality. In recognizing and accepting that another person is equally human, my neighbor, my brother or sister, one cannot remain unaffected and indifferent. Thus, shopping becomes uncomfortable and I propose it is in learning to practice and feel this discomfort that solidarity begins to become possible. For this reason, it cannot be learned without entering into another person’s reality, even if that experience is imperfect, limited, and sometimes merely virtual. In this article, I highlight three pedagogical tools I use to create space for experience and vulnerability. Without physically leaving Queens, NY, students begin learning to be in solidarity with others through digitally engaging multiple stories, online simulations, and academic service learning.

Background: Solidarity in Catholic Social Thought

True solidarity begins with the recognition that my humanity is bound up in yours; that we are first and foremost equally human and human together. It is a gift and a responsibility that must be lived out in the practices of Catholic social teaching, for “the principle of solidarity requires that men and women of our day cultivate a greater awareness that they are debtors of the society of which they have become a part,” one marked by the reality of interdependence and globalization. Solidarity, as John Paul II explained, “is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people both, near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.” It is the opposite of the globalization of indifference that Pope Francis so frequently decries. In a 2013 visit to refugees on the island of Lampedusa, he stated, “the culture of well being that makes us think of ourselves, that makes us live in soap bubbles that are beautiful but are nothing ... we have fallen into a globalization of indifference. We are accustomed to the suffering of others, it does not concern us, it is none of our business.”

This globalization of indifference operates alongside the rhetoric of human rights; thus, theoretically, “our age makes higher demands of solidarity and benevolence on people today than ever before. Never before have people been asked to stretch out so far, so consistently, so systematically, so as a matter of course, to the stranger outside the gates,” notes Charles Taylor. And yet, the motivation and strength of these demands of solidarity are incredibly fragile. According to Pope Francis, part of the problem is that, “This word solidarity is too often forgotten or silenced, because it is uncomfortable, it almost seems

like a bad word... solidarity."6 For Catholic social teaching, solidarity is an inescapable call of the one human family. In *Populum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples)*, Paul VI asserted rather clearly and directly, "There can be no progress towards the complete development of the human person without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity."7 Equal human dignity and the one human family are necessary starting points for any education for justice and solidarity.

Education for solidarity and justice "demands a renewal of heart, a renewal based on the recognition of sin in its individual and social manifestations... it will likewise awaken a critical sense, which will lead us to reflect on the society in which we live and on its values."8 Learning and practicing solidarity, then, requires more than intellectual assent, it requires experience, vulnerability, and risk. Opening oneself to vulnerability and uncomfortable experiences always involve risk. The vulnerability required is not sacrificing one's life or safety but of opening oneself to our shared humanity. In relationship, my humanity and self-understanding must be on the table, your pain, suffering, and injustices must prompt me to critically engage your context as well as my own. My humanity is bound up in yours and my human dignity tied to yours. This makes possible compassion, accompaniment, and ultimately solidarity. Compassion, accompaniment and solidarity are impossible if I am protected from feeling your pain and my own life remains unchallenged.

Experience pops our soap bubbles and therefore is a crucial component in learning solidarity. As Roger Bergman notes, "we learn solidarity not through ideas, theories, analyses or statistics about the real world (not that those aren't crucial in a later step), but by personal engagement and encounter with it."9 Personal experiences can spark and motivate concern for social justice in powerful ways; however, without context or content, they can also reinforce problematic stereotypes and erect further walls between persons. For this reason education for solidarity, and not merely experiences for solidarity, is central to the mission of Catholic higher education and Catholic social teaching more broadly.

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Pedagogy for Solidarity: Creating Space for Experience and Vulnerability

The challenge in teaching Catholic social teaching and about injustices like modern slavery or global food insecurity/hunger is a persistent disconnect between knowledge, moral judgment and lived experience. I have never encountered a student who thinks that slavery is morally acceptable. My classes are universally horrified that twenty-one million people currently live in modern day slavery. They are collectively and uniformly outraged that 1 in 5 American children do not know where their next meal is coming from. However, this does not automatically challenge their cultural assumptions about poverty or alter their consumption of products made in slave conditions. The move from knowledge to sustained engagement or action is quite difficult; often persons are quite comfortable remaining in a state of uninvestigated cognitive dissonance. Seeking to engage my students where they are, I structure course discussions and assignments using a mixture of digital resources and in person experiences in order to scaffold critical thinking that is personal and structural, local and global. In particular, I teach the virtue of solidarity using: 1. diverse narrative and partnership with Catholic relief services, 2. free online simulations on poverty and modern slavery, and 3. traditional academic service learning.

1. Many Narratives: Digitally Crossing Borders

Pedagogically, Catholic social teaching needs to incorporate narrative or it will seem quite dry and abstract; however, using narratives in teaching solidarity requires always presenting multiple stories. Through social media, we are ceaselessly inundated with stories and images. The constant barrage of images frames our perception of global communities, cultures, and social problems often without our even realizing it. In her TEDtalk, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie focuses on the dangers of a single story in which Africa is portrayed as a place of “beautiful landscapes” and “incomprehensible people” who “need saving from a kind white foreigner.” This single story operates on our consciousness whether we realize it or not. Within the American context of global power and socialization, the dangers of a single story in trying to teach social justice or solidarity are great. Culturally, the explosion of poverty porn and other images in which persons in poverty are depicted without agency, as merely in need of our generosity, creates a powerful narrative designed to elicit pity. While pity is an effective emotional trigger for raising funds, it does not elicit solidarity. Instead, it objectifies and disempowers persons in poverty.

Combating this powerful narrative is my starting point in the classroom, thus I highlight and prioritize including stories that have to come from within the community being examined trying to find personal narratives, videos, art, and podcasts from people in whatever context we are examining. One way for students to listen to and engage marginalized persons, local activists and scholars on the ground fighting injustices like modern slavery is through digital resources. Videos like Adichie’s speech allow for divergent voices and experiences in class but the engagement is limited, as we cannot ask Adichie questions. Engaging multiple narratives is most effective pedagogically when it can be interactive. When examining wage theft, I invite speakers from Don Bosco Workers, a local organization to come and present to the class on their campaign and the challenges faced by day laborers in New York. This is the best scenario; however, this level of interaction is difficult to replicate when examining national and international cases and multiple voices requires reliance on technology.

One comprehensive and cost-free tool for interactive academic and narrative engagement is Catholic Relief Services University program - CRS Global Learning Commons. Each semester, CRS chooses a broad theme (Food Labor, Food Security, Information and Communication Technologies for Development) and then creates four 2-week modules easily incorporated as resources within existing courses. The GSN provides faculty and students with current information and on-the-ground analysis from CRS experts working directly on the most pressing social justice issues. The program always highlights multiple narratives and facilitates interactive engagement from the students. Through videos and readings, students hear directly from community members the perspectives of local communities, are given on the ground analysis from CRS experts, and have the opportunity to discuss the cases with students

at other institutions, as well as with the experts themselves through interactive podcasts.

In my “Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching” course, students participate in one of the two-week segments inserted within a four-week course unit and a related major course project. Through CRS University’s program on forced labor, my students at St. John’s University read case studies and watched videos on many aspects of forced labor in Brazil and discussed them in online discussion forums with students from the University of Scranton and Villanova University. In course evaluations and in unprompted personal conversations, many students highlighted the cross-university discussion boards as a benefit of the program. Peer-learning enhanced the depth and diversity of the student conversations. At the end of the unit, my class also participated in an online podcast where experts and scholars answered questions that students around the country submitted. The combination of specific case studies from Brazil, online discussions with other classes, and class discussions facilitated deeper engagement with the complex and often hidden reality of modern slavery. Similarly, my fall 2014 course participated in the “unpacking food security” unit in which we wove together online engagement with students from two other universities, participation in the live podcast, and in class pivoting from global food security to domestic food security through the documentary A Place at the Table.

Engaging multiple narratives is most effective when it is interactive. The online interaction detailed above is one way of interactive engagement with multiple narratives. Another important pedagogical tool is collaborative projects in which students research and teach each other about multifaceted ethical challenges. In conjunction with regular course content and the CRS program as a springboard, students work in groups to create poster presentations which ask them to take the next step researching and disseminating information on other cases. For forced labor, students took the knowledge they gained looking at Brazil and created posters on forced labor in other countries. Unpacking food security, students took the knowledge gained about global food systems and Burkina Faso and researched food insecurity in different states. The posters are both collaborative student research and peer-education, presented in class for discussion as well as displayed at on campus social justice events, allowing students the opportunity to educate their fellow students and campus community beyond the confines of the classroom. The incorporation of peer-feedback as well as student-presentation helps close the loop of student learning, to use assessment language. The presentation component facilitates student ownership of the material and by extension the issue itself – as they literally raise their voices in symphony with the multiple voices from around the globe they engaged through the CRS online program.

2. Online Simulations: Can the Virtual be Personal?

Breaking through preconceived notions in teaching about poverty and injustice is a challenge. As mentioned above, moving from knowing about injustice to personally engaging the reality of another’s struggles does not always happen. A crucial aspect of this is facilitating self-critique and personal reflection within the context of the course. In navigating the complexities of local context and global realities, it is a challenge to examine poverty, hunger, forced labor and other overwhelmingly complex social realities. And in an individualistic culture, Catholic social teaching’s emphasis on social structures, social sin, and moral complicity is counter cultural. Social sin is the theological term for “human-made structures when they offend human dignity by causing people to suffer oppression, exploitation or marginalization. These include educational systems, housing policies, tax structures, immigration policies, health-care systems, employment policies, a market economy.”

In my experience, students struggle with two elements of social sin. First, social sin recognizes the social constraints and limitations on our actions; our freedom is not only socially conditioned by often severely limited for those living in situations of injustice. And second, am I morally complicit in social structures of sin through my consumer purchasing habits? Both of these require significant self reflection and dismantling borders between persons. In response, I use free online simulations to engage students to think critically and personally about each of these challenges. First, to address the limitations and constraints social sin places upon a person’s free choices, I use Urban Ministries of Durham’s website www.PlaySpent.org, which simulates the daily struggle for those living in poverty; and second, to address moral complicity and our identity as consumer; Made in a Free World’s www.SlaveryFootprint.org which asks each of us to take a long look in our closets and offers hard facts about modern slavery. Each simulation assignment includes at least three components: completing the simulation, a writing assignment analyzing it through course materials on Catholic social teaching and classroom discussion of the experience, analysis, and further connections. Through class discussions and written assignments, many students demonstrated that they effectively internalized their experience in the game such that they were able to literally feel the frustration of those on the margins or

19. Assignment details can be found in Appendix
critically look in the mirror at their own unwitting participation in horrific injustice.

a. Urban Ministries of Durham's PlaySpent

Within the United States, one of the greatest barriers to addressing poverty and marginalization is the propensity to blame the poor for their situation. Behind the inability to be bothered by the poor is a deep current of American culture in which the poor are characterized as lazy or otherwise responsible for their misfortunes. Thus, the poor get separated into two categories – the deserving and the undeserving poor. Victims of natural disasters, for example, become the deserving poor, who cannot be blamed for their situation and are distinguished from the undeserving, such as the long term unemployed. Once this narrative enters into consciousness, those that begin as deserving our compassion quickly become the undeserving who should have pulled themselves up by now. In addition to limiting those for whom one “feels responsible,” this mindset also lets the privileged claim credit for their own successes. The result is the illusion of compassion rooted in one's own judgment of who are the poor “deserving” help cannot motivate shared action nor can it lead to justice or solidarity. A culture which begins by asking for proof you that deserve compassion or to enjoy basic human rights can never cultivate solidarity. It can, however, solidify privilege, lower structural violence and make it easy to avoid psychic discomfort in the face of poverty. Data and even individual narratives are often not enough to dismantle preconceived notions about American poverty and the persons suffering.

Thus, PlaySpent (www.playspent.org) simulates for students personal experience making choices within the confines of poverty. This forces students to seriously consider “what if there are no good options available?,” as well as, the limits of assistance available to those in need. Each student is challenged to virtually survive a month at the poverty line.

Created by Urban Ministries of Durham, PlaySpent begins by challenging the assumption that you would never need help and asks the player to prove it. Imagine that you are unemployed and down to your last $1,000, can you make it through the month? Now click find a job or exit (leaving the simulation). The advantage of this program is that personal activity and reflection by the student – each student must make their own choices within the confines of poverty. Choosing between warehouse second shift, restaurant work, or temporary


officew help (if you choose administrative temp, you must pass a sixty second typing test), the challenge begins. Integrating simulation questions with data on unemployment, poverty, and hunger in the United States, students are drawn in and the program explains the realities and consequences of each choice. In both their written assignments and in class, many of my students expressed shock at the choices they were forced to make – there were often no good options. When you are down to your last $1,000 and trying to maintain an apartment on a nine dollars an hour job, supporting a child, and forced to decide whether to pay the electric or the gas bill this month because you do not have enough money for both. And yet, there are dire consequences to having one’s gas, lights, or heat shut off.

For those well versed in social justice, PlaySpent is fairly routine – we know the data and expect it to play out as it does. When testing it out as a teaching tool, I knew as soon as I clicked “go to the dentist” that it meant I would not make it through the month. My undergraduate students, however, do not go into the simulation aware of this. Generally, my students fall into one of two groups. Either they are familiar with the reality of poverty because they themselves live at the poverty line, or they are unfamiliar with the scope of American poverty. For those who live at the poverty line, in most cases, their written reflections reveal that they benefit not from the challenge of making it thirty days but from the broader context and facts. The experience of poverty can be isolating and thus the PlaySpent simulation offers a sense of the big picture and just how widespread the problem is.

For those who do not have personal experience living near the poverty line, if they honestly engage the assignment the reactions are profound. Through both class discussions and written blogs, several recurring themes of conscientization emerge. Some are shocked that they could not pass the typing test and thus had to take a restaurant job relying on the fickleness of customer tips for survival. After weeks of studying Catholic social teaching, many choose to organize and find they lose their jobs because of the attempt to form a union – they come to class angry. Yet, the data provided in the simulation, witness of Don Bosco workers in class confirm this reality. Before the simulation, they learned about economic justice and threats against workers, however, through the simulation questions of labor and economic justice are no longer just about people elsewhere. A shift happens when I make a decision to better my situation by joining together to form a union, even virtually, and face unemployment as a result.

The most profound transformations and internalizations came from the more

22. See Appendix A for assignment details.
intimate familial choices the game forces you to make, demonstrating their self-critique and examination of identity. Students are distraught at how difficult it is to try prioritizing the flourishing of children — having to miss one’s child’s class play because of work, unable to pay for extra help or a school field trip, and so on. This is one area where previous assumptions are challenged. They think back on their own perceptions of their own childhood and begin to think more deeply about sacrifice, survival and flourishing. This past semester two students came to class distraught — one had to miss his fake-grandfather’s funeral because with two strikes against him at work, he could not afford to risk getting fired by taking the day off. The other student had to put her dog to sleep because she couldn’t afford the medicine, and simply letting the dog suffer, was too cruel. They agonized because the simulation successfully prompted them to imagine that that were in fact forced to make such decisions. In class discussion, students often recount naming the child or pet. Even if they made it through the month, the vast majority comment on “survival” as primary and in class distinguish minimal survival from human flourishing in Catholic social thought. This is a sign of genuine engagement on behalf of most students and pedagogically, if the student’s engage the simulation project is effective. This is the first level of vulnerability required for developing solidarity — the ability to imagine from another person’s perspective such that the starting point is our shared humanity and I can envision myself in your shoes.

b. Made in a Free World’s Slavery Footprint

The victims of forced labor generate about $150 billion in illegal profits, according to International Labor Organization’s estimates. In 2014, there is no corner of the world free from slavery and the real numbers likely far surpass the estimates. And it is unlikely that there are any in my classroom, or reading this article, who have not unwittingly contributed to this industry through our purchases of items from clothing to cell phones. As Pope Francis notes, “each meaningful economic decision made in one part of the world has repercussions everywhere else.” Moral complicity in systems of oppression through our consumer choices seems abstract and difficult to face, particularly because our individual participation seems so minor in comparison to massive transnational economic realities. Personally, most of us unequivocally believe forced labor and unfair labor conditions are morally abhorrent and yet still desire the lower prices these conditions provide. Seeing the people at the other end of those prices is difficult when the whole issue seems distant and opaque. Once again, an online program provides a helpful structure within which to critically examine our own identity and participation in modern slavery. This assignment has four parts. First, students complete the simulation recording their results. Second, they then select an item from their closet or kitchen to research. After researching, the third component is an essay and finally, we conclude with student class discussion.

How many slaves work for you? This is not a question any of us want to engage. Made in a Free World’s Slavery footprint simulation (www.slaveryfootprint.org) asks individuals to take account of their closets, kitchen, and personal behaviors. How many pairs of shoes do you own? Do you have a smart phone? Laptop? As you end each section, the simulation gives you context and data on how clothing, shoes, travel, electronics, food, etc. are involved in various forms of forced labor. In their recorded results and essays, students reported discovering a likely 25 to 170 slaves work for them, supporting their lifestyle. Shock, anger, frustration, and horror universally described my students’ reactions to slavery footprint.

Shock and horror is not enough, as Paolo Freire notes in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. “Discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed.”

When faced with the discomfort of moral complicity in forms of slavery, many students retreated. The second half of the assignment asked students to choose a favorite item, like coffee, tablet, cell phone, or Forever21 shirt to investigate. For the written component, students conducted research on labor conditions for a particular company and country connected to their chosen good. While most students identified with the struggles of the poor in Play Spent, the response to Slavery Footprint was more mixed. Some students dove into the project examining sources and looking for verification of claims. However, a significant percentage of students who showed fierce horror at their slavery footprint result at the same time were quick to accept corporate policies at face value as evidence of a slavery-free or conflict-free supply chain. Deflection and compartmentalizing are common ways to avoid engaging the deeper challenges of complex sinful structures.

Examining modern forced labor challenges students to delve into social sin or structural violence. They require them to identify the forces conspiring to promote

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25. See Appendix B