Hixon Forest Trail Work:
A Hands On Approach to Environmental Philosophy

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Introduction

A hiking trail restoration project in PHL 341 Environmental Ethics (Fall 2013) was the first step of an ongoing interdisciplinary collaboration between the disciplines of environmental philosophy and outdoor recreation. Eight students from a course of 20 spent over two hours working with a trained trail builder from the Wisconsin Conservation Corps (WisCorps) re-vegetating a recently closed hiking trail in La Crosse’s Hixon Forest. The hypothesis was that linking environmental philosophy to a purposeful personal experience in the outdoors would heighten a student’s understanding and appreciation of the philosophical concepts in the philosophy course.

Evaluation Methods

Immediately following the work day, an extended facilitated discussion derived students’ initial impressions of the experience. A week later, the students who participated in the workday also wrote reflection papers on the potential connection between the work experience and the course content. In addition, these papers were evaluated by the lead instructor to ascertain reactions to the work experience and to any effects that the experience had on their view of the course.

Student Perceptions

Students expressed the following thoughts about the trail work experience:

• Provided better understanding of the diverse, complex, and fragile nature of ecosystems
• Furthered a relationship with nature that went beyond mere anthropocentric use
• Motivated professional interest in similar trail restoration activities
• Grounded abstract concepts in tangible experience (e.g., Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, Karen Warren’s eco-feminism, and Arne Naess’ deep ecology)
• Demonstrated how virtuous character is cultivated through engaged activities
• Instilled a sense of pride

References


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