

Developing a Placed-Based, Contextually Relevant Common Read Experience Across Campus

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Introduction

Background & Motivation

One practice that has the potential for impact on learning at institutions of higher education is the common reading program. These experiences engage people in reading the same book to “create a sense of community, encourage reading and critical thinking, provide a shared intellectual experience, and promote interactions between students and faculty from different departments” (Laufer, 2006). One website lists nearly ninety such common reading programs at campuses across the country (Fister, 2013). This inquiry examines a limited implementation of a common reading program uniquely deployed across the disciplines at California State University, Fresno.

The faculty members of the Interdisciplinary Water Cohort at Fresno State approached the Provost with a plan for implementing a common reading experience, focusing on inviting faculty and students to integrate reading from Charles Fishman’s book, *The Big Thirst* (2012) in coursework. The interdisciplinary collaboration began with recruitment to participate in a Faculty Learning Community during fall 2014. Throughout the fall, interested faculty read the book and designed learning experiences that incorporated reading from the book. Courses that integrated reading about water were taught in spring 2015. Data on student impact was collected in these classes.

There were two sets of participants in this study: faculty and students. Approximately 15 faculty participated in a Faculty Learning Community and 600 students participated as part of the courses taught by these faculty.

Institutional Context: California State University, Fresno

- Regional, primarily undergraduate institution drawing from the agriculturally-rich Central Valley of CA.
- Designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution and an Asian American and Native American Pacific-Islander Institution.
- Over 60% first generation college students

Faculty and Student Participants

Area	Classes	# Students	Reading Integration Approach
Agriculture	Geospatial Data	22	Class discussion & writing
Business	Business Ethics	113	Research paper comparing book story to Fresno story; water recommendations
Education	Intro to Curriculum & Instruction	190	Integrated water lesson plan
	Science Methods	15	Investigation of water misconceptions
Engineering	Geotechnical Design	47	In-class & online discussions
English	Literacy Seminar	17	Transformation of content into prose, visuals, and graphic novels
Geology	Intro Earth & Env Sciences	56	Class & online discussions, visual display creation
	Nat Disasters & Earth Resources	108	ePortfolio, visual display creation
Geography	Environmental Planning	10	Recommended reading
Linguistics	Discourse Analysis	10	Examine competing discourses of “recycled water”
Mass Communications	Online Media Design	24	Collaborative project on water in the valley
TOTAL		612	

Reading about Water

How did faculty employ reading about water as a way to engage students in problematizing issues of relevance to the community?

Discourse Analysis (Upper-division, Linguistics majors)

Students engaged in examining the discourse related to recycled water. All of the students in this course were linguistics majors. They read the chapter from *The Big Thirst* entitled, “The Yuck Factor,” which looked at people’s perceptions of the reuse of water after sanitation treatment. They then participated in developing competing discourses for “recycled water,” such as reused, sanitized, and potable recycled. Linguistics students developed a survey that they administered to students in other courses that examined the acceptability of recycled water, and determining which terminology was useful in minimizing negative perceptions.

Natural Disasters and Earth Resources (Lower-division, General Education, large enrollment)

In the introductory geology course, more than 100 students participated in reading, discussing, and reflecting on “The Secret Life of Water” chapter in the common read. In class, the students were assigned one of 5 reading roles: discussion leader, creative connector, devil’s advocate, recorder/reporter, and passage master. While reading the chapter, students interpreted the text based on their assigned ‘lens’. Students broke into groups including a representative of each role, and reported out their findings at the end of the discussion.

English Senior Seminar in Literature (Upper-division, English majors)

In this Senior Seminar students read the common text *The Big Thirst* alongside *Dark Rain*, a fictional graphic novel by Matt Johnson that explores differential class and race-based effects of Hurricane Katrina (too much water). This centered conversation on issues of environmental justice. Students worked on basic scientific “water literacy” – and the vocabulary and narratives that carry this information. They observed their own water habits, creating graphic “water logs.” Students then interviewed and told the stories of “water stakeholders” in the Central Valley in comics form, including a water board employee, farmers, a single mother whose water was cut off, an immigrant landscaper, and more. They shared their work with the campus community and Charles Fishman, the common read author through a month-long university library display.

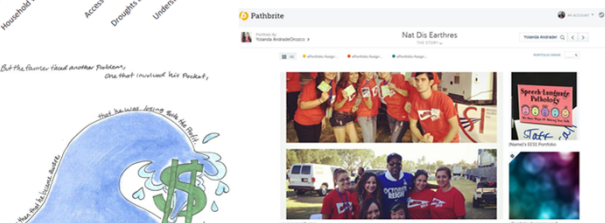
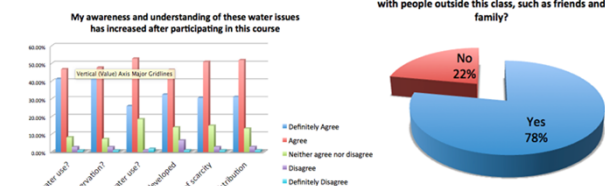
Student Engagement with the Author

A highlight of the Reading About Water initiative was the campus visit by the author of *The Big Thirst*, Charles Fishman, on April 9. Fishman’s visit coincided with the California State University Water Resources and Policy Initiatives Conference that also took place on the Fresno State campus. In addition, he visited classes and viewed student work on display in the library. The public book talk by the author took place in the evening to a standing-room-only crowd. Fishman’s entertaining address featured his experience in writing many of the stories in the book. These included the plight of girls in India, who spend most of their days walking many miles while carrying five gallons of water on their heads.



Results

How were students awareness and understanding of water issues intensified through reading about water in their courses?



Conclusions

Frequently, faculty may view the infusion of interdisciplinary content such as a common read as another layer of effort that may detract from their own disciplinary focus. We found faculty in this project took an approach that provided a locally-relevant set of issues in which students applied in-depth disciplinary learning. Additionally, faculty and students reported being motivated by their awareness of participation in a larger community of learning across the campus.

Students reported a heightened awareness of their own *personal* use of water, citing such daily practices as shorter showers, reduction in bottled water consumption, and recycling of water in the home. They also indicated greater understanding of the value and complexity related to community, industrial, and agricultural use of water.

The campus is continuing this initiative. We want to build on the reported sense of agency from students belonging to a larger community of learners by emphasizing more deliberate connections between courses, such as having students visit other courses and present their work.