RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Web 2.0 and Critical Globalization Studies

(*RADICAL TEACHER* NO.87, 2010

by Mark Graham

IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

I asked all of my students this year to raise their hands if they knew which country their shoes, trousers, or shirts came from. Very few hands came up. I then asked if any of them had ever been to a farm that produces food that they regularly eat. Again, only one or two hands were raised. Finally, I asked the students if any of them had ever been to a factory that produces a commodity that they have purchased. Only one hand was raised in the air.

A central paradox of contemporary capitalism is the fact that while the production of commodities has been globalized at a staggering pace, our knowledge about the production of those same commodities has shrunk. Consumers are usually only able to see commodities in the here and now of time and space, and rarely have any opportunities to gaze backwards through the chains of production in order to gain knowledge about the sites of production, transformation, and distribution.

While the opacity of commodity chains is deeply troubling, it does present university-level geography students with interesting hands-on opportunities to test out their research skills. In the introductory human geography course that I taught at Trinity College Dublin, I asked groups of students to research and then represent a global commodity chain from the points of production in the Global South to the points of consumption in the Global North.

The assignments were graded in traditional paper form. However, all students were then encouraged to upload their work to a wiki website that I created (wikichains.com). The purpose of the website is twofold. First, as a wiki, it enables their represented knowledge to take on a fluid and changeable form. Second, it allows the students to share their findings with the rest of the world and thus, through their research, actively shape patterns of consumption and production.

Students were tasked with not just finding out where all of the elements that make up any one commodity come from, but also the environmental, economic, cultural, and political effects of the chain. They would ask questions like, "What are the pay levels at the headquarters versus at the sites of production?" "What are the environmental effects of the production processes?" and "Has the shape of the commodity chain shifted over time (and if so, why)?" I wanted students to represent their chain with not only published secondary textual sources, but also primary interviews, photographs, and sounds.

It was initially difficult to encourage the students to move beyond easily accessible sources of information. The first drafts inevitably contained far too many references to corporate websites and press releases. Indeed, the companies that control global commodity chains, in many ways, rely on being able to selectively make available information that presents their activities in a positive light. However, after much hard work, telephone calls, emails, and even site visits, every one of the student groups was able to uncover facts about a commodity chain that did not correspond to the corporate representations of those same chains.

Although this has been a time-consuming and difficult exercise (for both students and teacher), I will not hesitate to run it again in future classes. Students benefit by being able to reflect on the complexities of global connections, by engaging in practical hands-on research, and above all by thinking critically about the sources of seemingly mundane knowledge. By uploading their results to the Internet, the students are having effects outside of the classroom and are enabling consumers to make informed economic decisions and be more aware of their economic, social, political, and environmental impacts.