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Dr. Kim Scipes: Building a Network of Compassion in a World Waiting to Be United

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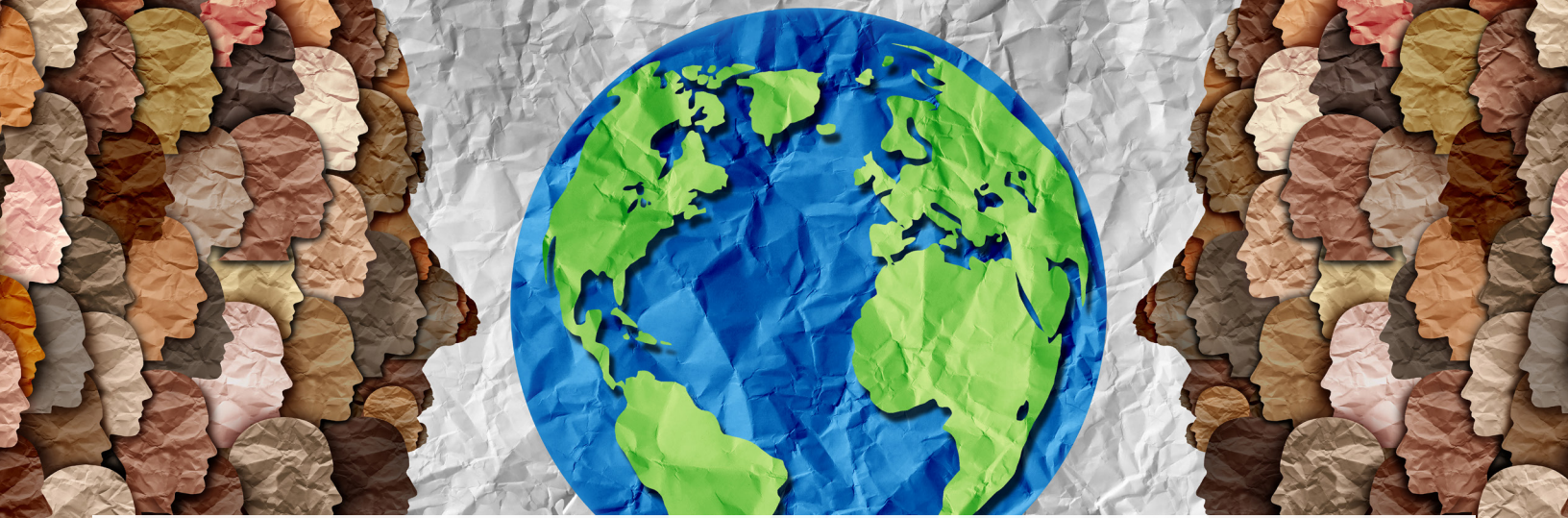
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DR. KIM SCIPES:

Building a Network of Compassion in a World Waiting to Be United

Kayla Vasilko (*Communication and Creative Arts*)

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Kayla Vasilko is a graduate student at Purdue University Northwest pursuing a master’s degree in communication. She is passionate about engaging with the world, and has recently launched the Indiana Pandemic Poetry Project with the Indiana Legacy Foundation. Kayla has also written grants for Laini Fluellen Charities, the Porter County Veteran’s Treatment Court, the Precious Plastics Initiative, and the Independent Cat Society. After earning her master’s degree, she plans to pursue a PhD in sociology. In this article, she describes the professional engagement, teaching philosophy, and community impact of PNW sociology professor Dr. Kim Scipes.

FACULTY BIOGRAPHY



Figure 1. Dr. Kim Scipes.

Through all of his work, Dr. Kim Scipes strives to get others to consider a global view, emphasizing the importance of using a “both/and” lens and rejecting a dichotomous world view of “either/or.” At the very start of our interview, Dr. Scipes stated: “It is impossible for me to not think of all the people of the world in all that I do.” Through that statement, he summarized the foundation of what he would later describe to be his views about service-learning; his approach to promoting service-learning is holistic and centers on teaching the power of solidarity for positive change (Scipes, 2022).

Some of his approach was informed by his experiences in education and scholarship. Dr. Scipes got his master’s degree at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague—where he studied with students and staff from over 120 countries—and then his PhD in sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). He has taught at Purdue University Northwest (PNW) since 2004 and is currently a professor of sociology in the Behavioral Sciences

Department in the College of Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences. He has taught eight different sociology courses at PNW, including over 50 sections of SOC 310: Racial & Ethnic Diversity, which he feels is one of the most important courses a student can take. He’s published four books and over 240 articles and book reviews, most while teaching four courses a semester, and served as the 2021–2022 chair of PNW’s Faculty Senate while simultaneously serving on the Advisory Board of the PNW Center for Global Studies (Purdue University Northwest, 2021; Scipes, 2022). These experiences have made it possible for him to learn from a myriad of perspectives, including those of his students, expanding the both/and lens even further.

But beyond this influence, Dr. Scipes learned the importance of engagement and service-learning long before teaching at PNW, back when he was in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1969 to 1973. In reference to that time, Dr. Scipes shared that he first believed the political messaging of the necessity for the military actions in Vietnam, and that his work in the Marines would “make the world a better place for all” (Scipes, 2022). But while on active duty, he had a unique service-learning opportunity that changed his life. He worked alongside three black Marines as a race relations counselor challenging institutional and personal racism for 18 months. Through his experiences working with them and reading what they encouraged him to read, he began to think critically about what he had been told about the military and realized that he had not been given the full picture before. This inspired him to *apply* what he learned and become an activist. Dr. Scipes said that the Pentagon Papers came out around this time too, and that this, coupled with his experiences as a race relations counselor, motivated him to join the antiwar movement inside the U.S. military (Scipes, 2022).

Since then, he has dedicated his life to enabling those around him to gain access to the full story, and to develop the tools they need to think critically to find the worldview that works for them. He said that he is still working to reach this goal through engagement, which he demonstrates comes in many forms: his writing, informed by research on six of the world’s continents; his activism, made possible by a myriad of organizations and perspectives; and his teaching, where the ideal that it is possible to make the world a better place for everyone is the foundation of every course he teaches. When asked about the importance of service-learning, Dr. Scipes said that “engaging in social change is like driving a car: you can read all you want about it, but until you *engage* directly in it, you can’t understand it. I want people to engage in social change so they can understand how to interact with people, and get others to get engaged in social change that improves the lives of others” (Scipes, 2022). Ultimately, he encourages his students to engage in the struggle for participatory democracy.

Dr. Scipes said that his life’s philosophy is that engagement and collective action are the only ways to achieve positive change. He quoted Alice Walker, who once said, “Activism is my rent for living on the planet.” In light of this, he has naturally integrated a call for engagement into all of his curriculum and through the interview for this article, he has provided a roadmap to expanding such efforts, specifically those he began in his SOC 404: Environment and Social Justice course (Scipes, 2022).

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

In SOC 404, Dr. Scipes requires engagement from his students in multiple ways. One of Dr. Scipes’s main objectives in this course is broad, and is an objective mirrored in all of his courses. He organizes the curriculum to help students realize that “we all have a unique understanding of the world,” and that they must develop critical thinking skills that allow them to choose the model of society that makes sense for them while also working to understand what models others have chosen. He wants them to realize that it is more than just their race, their corner of the environment, and their society that comprises the world. To do this, Dr. Scipes introduces three models of society in the second week of the course: structural functionalism, structural conflict, and polyconflictualism, the latter being a new model that he’s working to get published. Students are to consider those frameworks as they read three books throughout the course: the fifth edition of *Environment and Society: Human Perspectives on Environmental Issues* by Charles Harper; *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* by Vandana Shiva; and *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* by Naomi Klein (Scipes, 2022).

While they navigate the readings, Dr. Scipes draws out concepts like environmental justice, the portrayal of environmentalism in the media, climate change, the theory of “peak oil,” the use of depleted uranium in warfare, urban sprawl, and more, with a special look into environmental issues that concern northwest Indiana. Students’ first written assignment is a book review due the fifth week (they must have had a book proposal for this assignment approved by the second week); they must choose a current book on an environmental issue of interest to them, read it, identify three main claims, and evaluate the claims based on the evidence provided by the author. Between the weeks of the proposal and the assignment due date, Dr. Scipes spends time teaching students how to evaluate research and perform critical reading. This assignment is meant to teach students how to assess research and perform analyses that they’ll need to prepare them for the remaining assignments of the course, inform action in response to the environmental issues identified, and strengthen critical thinking (Scipes, 2022).

From here, students write two papers that build upon each other. For the first, students must choose an environmental issue that is present in northwest Indiana and

detail a literature review on both the issue and the “state of the art thinking” concerning responses to the issue. Students must include an annotated bibliography with this assignment. For the second paper, students must look further into the issue they chose by taking a hands-on approach in the community such as by visiting the archives of local newspapers or conducting interviews with politicians/policymakers, researchers, journalists, and environmentalists. They then must create an innovative suggestion about how this particular environmental problem can be addressed. Dr. Scipes encourages students to offer more than just a technical remedy such as by including ideas for an educational program for the public, or a mobilization process to get public officials to address the issue (Scipes, 2022).

Dr. Scipes realized early in his fall 2016 course that he wanted to broaden his students’ engagement further; he motivated them to put their research together in a public panel on themes of energy, population and consumption, deforestation, and climate change (Maddux, 2016;

Scipes, 2022). Students were prepared for this service-learning aspect through the other writing assignments referenced, two examinations, and Dr. Scipes’s focus on community engagement throughout the course. They worked collectively on their chosen research efforts, bringing their own unique backgrounds and experiences; worked as a team to conduct the panel; and were graded accordingly based on their writing, research, and participation.

In addition to his defining experience in the Marines, Dr. Scipes was inspired to take this approach by his research experience around the world. He’s completed nine research trips in the Philippines alone and taught for two summers at Ton Duc Thang University (TDTU) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, while also presenting at universities in Canada, Germany, and South Africa, and serving on the Scientific Committee of the 2019 International Conference on Innovations in the Social Sciences and Humanities at TDTU (Purdue University Northwest, 2021; Scipes, 2022). For him, these



Figure 2. “Five Men and a Boy on a Tricycle with Wings,” taken near Trento, Agusan del Sur, Mindanao, Philippines, in 2015, as pictured in *Building Global Labor Solidarity: Lessons from the Philippines, South Africa, Northwestern Europe, and the United States* (Scipes, 2021).

Students tell of profits' environmental costs

Stan Maddux Times Correspondent Dec 7, 2016 Updated Dec 7, 2016



Purdue University Northwest students in an Environment and Social Justice class lead a public panel Tuesday at the University's Westville campus.

Jonathan Miano, The Times

Figure 3. Students on the Public Environmental Panel listening to another student present his group's report, as shown by the *Northwest Indiana Times* (Maddux, 2016).



Figure 4. The 2019 International Conference on Innovations in the Social Sciences and Humanities at Ton Duc Thang University. The largest foreign delegation at the conference came from PNW.

experiences reinforced why it is important to take a hands-on approach and include the perspectives of those in the communities of interest to the research. This also showed him the value of taking scholarship beyond writing by actively speaking about it in the world.

Dr. Scipes does not think of his courses as occurring strictly in the classroom; he motivates his students to spread the information to others outside the course and to get active, make change, and start organizations, which all plays into how he measures the outcomes of his courses (Scipes, 2017, 2022). Students benefited from the panel and the papers authored on Indiana environmental issues, as they were able to understand needs in the context of their regions, and then see firsthand the value of what they had been learning in the course through exercising their power to inspire change. Through the panel, which was well received by students, faculty, and community members and covered by the *Northwest Indiana Times*, they were able to see how service-learning in the form of scholarship, research, and application via the creation of solutions and then public presentation can create a chain reaction of student action and community response (Maddux, 2016; Scipes, 2022).

Since students have great individual freedom in choosing what local environmental issue they focus on and what solutions they create, the community benefits are varied and expansive, looking different in each section of the course. Having students research to understand the environmental issues in their community, in turn stimulating a connection to the issue and then a true passion for impacting it (by having students come up with their own solutions), is one of the most imperative steps in Dr. Scipes's service-learning process.

Many students have faced barriers to success due to being underprepared for college, specifically college-level writing, which is why Dr. Scipes feels his written assignments are so important. To help students overcome these challenges, he takes extra care to give extensive feedback on the first paper and extra time to work with students one on one throughout the semester. He measures the outcome of this by evaluating how their writing improves through the next papers. Other challenges involve getting students hesitant to explore perspectives outside their own to do so, specifically with topics of race, environment, and social justice, which propels Dr. Scipes to work harder to get his students to look beyond the color line, explore different models of society, think critically from more than one point of view, and then embrace what works for them (Scipes, 2022). He is able to evaluate how their perspectives expand through class discussions

and responses to the papers and exams. The latter presents a unique opportunity for evaluation; because Dr. Scipes allows his students to disagree with him on exams, he is able to see how they themselves apply the concepts and use critical thinking.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Because Dr. Scipes is able to stimulate connections between his students and community issues, many seek outlets beyond the local research and panel presentations to spark change. Dr. Scipes brings many personal examples of engagement into class discussions; through this, he has connected his students to various community partners, such as OUR MC (Organized and United Residents of Michigan City) and PARC (Politics, Art, Roots, and Culture) most prominently.

OUR MC was created to unite community members to improve Michigan City, Indiana. When it was first started, government leaders were not doing all that they could to take care of residents and the community; approximately 50% of Michigan City residents live paycheck to paycheck, and many places in the community need improvements. Among many initiatives, OUR MC stopped construction on part of the Indiana Dunes and mobilized the community to accomplish lead testing in the local parks (Scipes, 2022).

PARC is a unique community partner, as it was created by former PNW students Vince Emanuele and Sergio Kochergin, after Dr. Scipes's influence, to create a space for individuals in northwest Indiana to come together, read, share culture, and showcase political speakers and films (Dr. Scipes and other PNW faculty have even spoken at PARC multiple times). Emanuele and Kochergin are both former Marines and Iraq War veterans, who were helped by and connected greatly to Dr. Scipes's personal experiences; they each took three of Dr. Scipes's courses and took those service-learning experiences further by using the tools they gained to create their own organization. In building PARC, it was important to them that people of all races and backgrounds felt comfortable. Their overarching goal was to facilitate a place where people could learn about the importance of activism and be inspired to get involved (Scipes, 2022). Dr. Scipes has gotten his current students involved by having Emanuele and Kochergin speak to his students in class, and he has also organized class trips to PARC to initiate connections.

Dr. Scipes feels that community partner connections are crucial for his students, as he emphasizes to them that learning is about much more than getting a degree, and

TOP STORY

PARC celebrates first year of activism

By KELLEY SMITH - Staff Writer Jun 3, 2018 Updated Jun 3, 2018 0



Photo by Kelley Smith The PARC Community Center celebrated one year of community organizing and activism Saturday with live music, food and craft brews.

MICHIGAN CITY – The Politics Arts Roots Culture (PARC) Community Center, 1713 Franklin St., celebrated their first year of community organizing and activism during an anniversary bash at the center Saturday night.

Figure 5. PARC's one-year anniversary, as shown by the *Herald Dispatch* (Smith, 2018).

that taking the courses needed to graduate is not enough. Instead, they must understand that with the knowledge they are privileged to access, they have the tools they need to be educators and community leaders. Just as Dr. Scipes took what he learned as a race relations counselor in the Marines and used it to shape all of his contributions to the world going forward, the value of a college degree is demonstrated in its application, making service-learning in college crucial (Scipes, 2022).

Dr. Scipes said that motivating others to act was one of the most challenging barriers faced by these community partners. He said individuals have been trained to be

passive and not to think critically, which once again emphasizes the importance of teaching philosophies like his.

STUDENT AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

Dr. Scipes considers SOC 404 a success based on student progress in the course (such as through the growth of their writing and the improvement of their grades as described earlier). He also measures success through the content of their written responses and discussions, as the key objective of the course is to build a more informed, engaged, and inclusive community. Through PARC,



Figure 6. PARC building (Kochergin, left, and Emanuele) and merchandise as posted by PARC on Instagram (@PARC, 2022).

OUR MC, and the design of SOC 404, it's evident that Dr. Scipes is accomplishing these goals with his students and the community. Though tangible as the progress of graded evaluations, the solutions students create for the community are a broader form of the success of this course, as students' projects take many shapes and the actions that they spark have limitless possibilities.

Dr. Scipes has taught eight sections of SOC 404 to date, averaging approximately 15 students per section and helping over 120 students unlock the tools they need to engage with community change. Because of his encouragement that students share what they take from the course with family, friends, and community members, in addition to student outreach via panel discussions and community partnerships, the impact of SOC 404 is exponential.

Dr. Scipes highlighted that the core of this impact lies in raising awareness and starting the conversation. He spoke of supporting groups fighting against the implementation of a solid waste processing facility across the street from the Steel City Academy, a school in Gary, Indiana, and how this issue is connected to environmental racism in northwest Indiana (80% of landfills in the Lake County are north of I-80, disproportionately affecting African Americans and impoverished people of all colors), a real-world example he often shares with SOC 404. He wrote an article about this movement,

stating the importance of spreading the word by saying: "If there isn't anyone out there writing about it, the movement gets lost" (Scipes, 2018, 2022). In other words, without the knowledge of an issue and its importance, people will not be motivated to unite.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Dr. Scipes feels that reciprocity can be enhanced between students and community partners through recognizing that while college typically lasts only four years, community partnerships don't have to stop at graduation; students can continue the work they began while in college and further their connections, values, ideas, and impact. He said this is very important, as communities are exposed to new ideas from established scholars, but few scholars are connected to their communities in the ways students are. Engaged students are able to share new ideas in ways that help communities address issues and are in turn exposed to perspectives beyond those in their college, which allows students to continue to expand their thinking.

Dr. Scipes encourages students considering courses that implement service-learning to believe in themselves and the unique perspectives only they can bring. He urges faculty to present important issues that will stimulate critical thinking and be willing to stay and talk with their

students after class. He challenges them to promote the shift from an educational system that calls for passivity to one that inspires a higher sense of self-confidence and greater collective action. With these actions, connections that create networks of compassion in the world truly can be forged to produce incredible results. In the words of Dr. Scipes: “With experiences and possibilities like this, how can you not be excited about the world?”

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