Living Poverty: A Real World Economics & Social Policy Education Exercise

The undergraduate course activity begins with a classroom Power Point presentation (attached to this application). "Honest Work" by Todd Rundgren (1985) is played in the room. Images I collected portraying homelessness, poverty, and hunger follow along with the lyrics. At the song's end, current prevalence for homelessness, poverty, and hunger in Florida, the United States and the world are presented one fact at a time in silence. Some factors and theories are presented and discussed. The presentation ends with a call to action. Two short videos "Living Below the Line," and "First World Problems" are coupled with information.

A challenge is then given to the entire class to experience poverty themselves at global, national and personal levels. We then commit to a start date. For all five days, we abandon at least one first world amenity or find another way to experience poverty on a personal level. Behavioral changes range from walking everywhere to giving up all electronics. Additionally, everyone without special dietary or medical needs, begins eating below the global poverty line; spending a maximum of $1.50 per day on food for the first two days. During this time, students take an online Survival Quiz that simulates decisions of a parent living below the global poverty line. For the next three days, we all get to live as if Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Plan (SNAP, formerly Food Stamp) funding has come through! Therefore, we are allowed to eat at $4.58 per person per day (the most current average individual benefit for Florida recipients). The students are required to write a daily log of meals, behavioral changes, thoughts, and feelings. They are encouraged to share their journal on social media to raise awareness. It is also highly recommended that students use any money saved to donate to or volunteer at a local food bank. Many have chosen the Florida State University Food Pantry.

National response to the exercise:
In 2013, the Association of Baccalaureate Social work Program Directors (BPD) list-serve had a request for poverty-related exercises. I was asked to write up the exercise. My subsequent write up was distributed to the entire BPD membership nationally and internationally.

A BSW program director/professor using the exercise at West Texas University Response:
"It's very helpful; I am using it in my Children & Families class... I'm excited! I've developed two options for them, and can't wait to see how it goes. I used your idea of finding a way to experience poverty for those students who cannot do the [food-based] assignment. I'd love your feedback on my guidelines...
Have you ever presented on this assignment at BPD or CSWE? I think you should!"

Representative Student Quotes about the exercise:

"This was important to me because it reminded me to never forget the value of a dollar."

"What was most scary about the whole thing was the fear. Pairing the quiz and the below the line exercise really made me appreciative...And then to add children to it, the fear is powerful and overwhelming."

"Poverty is not just living with less. It is something that affects every aspect of a person's life and has the ability to turn small obstacles into major crises."

"There was a very real moment of desperation that I experienced as a friend of mine was throwing away the ends of her sandwich and before I knew it I was consuming the scraps literally like my life depended on it."

"While I was eating that last meal, I thought about how horrible I would feel if dry cereal was all that I had to offer my kids and how I would willingly give up my portion for them, knowing that I would go to bed hungry. I really am thankful for what I have and am glad that I had a chance to participate."

"[My interest in] the way we view poverty and the recourses that we have for the impoverished has been set aflame. On a small scale I can begin to volunteer my time and money at local organizations that work to alleviate the effects of poverty but the real change that we need to see will have to be done on a large scale."

"I decided to give the money my parents and I would have spent on food and donate it to the food bank. Those days will permanently remind me of the constant hunger that is in this world. The dramatic effect this has had on me, will most definitely impact me as a social worker."

"People at work thought I was crazy...This challenge was physically and emotionally exhausting...I even looked at my dog in envy as he ate better than me for a week...there is no way someone can live off a $1.50 and get all the nutrients, proteins, and vitamins they need to survive, or live without deficiencies."

"Not eating as much as food was really a challenge for me, because I work as a waitress...so being around food for eight hours was difficult. Doing this challenge made me think of poverty in a whole another light."

"I decided to sleep on my tile floor with no blanket for three nights...It is hard to perform well and be attentive throughout the day when you are tired because you did not get adequate rest. I felt irritated and not myself. I tried to begin to think about what it would be like to be sleeping in those conditions on a cold winter night in Tallahassee."

"...my biggest challenge was a total first world problem. I have found myself with an addiction to high fructose corn syrup... I was ashamed of how hard that was."

"I get being fiscally responsible, and encouraging people to stand on their own feet, but I believe you need to feed a man some fish while you teach him to fish, not just throw a rod at him and call him lazy."

Living Poverty is a challenge to live below the extreme global poverty line $1.50 per person/ per day for two or three days, and then move to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Florida line, $4.58 per day for a total of *five* days in a row. Additionally, choose *at least* one luxury to give up for five days. This will allow you to connect with those living in extreme global poverty and then, compare it to the experience of living on food stamps (SNAP).

Required Guidelines:
- All food you eat should be included in your daily budget. Do not use past food already in your home unless it is deducted from your budget. You may buy food with others and/or count only the food you consume pro rata.
- SNAP does not allow you to purchase food that is already cooked. So you must prepare your SNAP food yourself.
- Implement at least *one* other means of experiencing extreme poverty such as biking/walking everywhere, giving up all non-essential toiletries, giving up electronics, turning off heating/air conditioning, sleeping on the floor, taking tepid showers, etc.
- If you have expensive dietary allergy or medical needs, or if you must currently train for athletics do not restrict your food intake. Instead, choose at least *two* additional behavioral ways (in addition to the one required for a total of three) to connect with those living in extreme poverty.
- A daily journal of your experience is required. It must include: a) an accounting of your food and behavioral changes and b) a reflection on the SNAP program or other food/poverty assistance program.
- Do not do anything that would harm you in any way. For example, remember to see doctors, take medicines & vitamins as needed, etc.
- While you are participating, take this global poverty survival challenge. In it, you will make extreme decisions about food, safety, education and family: http://www.live58.org/survive125/. Include your survival experience in your journal.

Highly Recommended:
- Copy your journal experience and/or photos on a social networking site each day to raise awareness and to give yourself support.
- If you have saved money by participating, consider donating the saved money and/or volunteering your time to a local food bank or other poverty outreach.

If you have personally experienced homelessness and/or hunger you may choose to write up your experiences or tell your story to the class in place of this assignment.