Honors Think Tank Project Published in Sustainability Education Journal

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"Seedfolks" was performed collaboratively by USU Honors Think Tank participants and local fourth-graders at Hillcrest Elementary.

Honors professor Dr. Joyce Kinkead co-authored an essay in the February 2018 issue of The Journal of Sustainability Education with Undergraduate Teaching Fellow Olivia Webb and local teacher Andrea Melnick, highlighting their work in the first-ever Utah State University Honors Think Tank. The Honors Think Tanks bring professors and students together across disciplines to study a shared topic from different perspectives. Current Think Tanks are team-taught by two professors from different disciplines, but this pilot class consisted of three sections focusing separately, but collaboratively, on science, social science, and the humanities. Dr. Kinkead, (English), worked with Dr. Kynda Curtis (Applied Economics) and Dr. Ryan Dupont (Civil and Environmental Engineering) in this Think Tank pilot.

The inaugural Spring 2016 Think Tank focused on the topic of sustainability, and Dr. Kinkead’s humanities section not only curated a “Growing West: Art, Agriculture, and Land” exhibit at the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, but also collaborated with a fourth-grade class at Hillcrest Elementary. The article describes how honors students worked with these fourth-graders to study and perform the play Seedfolks, by Paul Fleischman. Dr. Kinkead and Ms. Melnick, the fourth-grade teacher, chose Seedfolks because it describes a diverse community that comes together to create a garden in a vacant lot, much like the garden at the school. After a month spent studying the play, the USU students read the script while the fourth-graders acted out the production for an audience of teachers and parents.

The experience embodied the idea of high-impact learning, allowing students to work in a cross-generation collaboration that emphasized sustainability principles and mirrored the community partnership in Seedfolks. One particularly interesting outcome was that when the honors students learned that some of the fourth-graders did not aspire to pursue a college education, they suggested a pen-pal initiative to their professor. This connection allowed the honors students to continue encouraging and inspiring the younger students even after their class project ended. Many of the fourth-graders expressed their gratitude and enthusiasm for the Seedfolks project in their letters.

Recent Honors Think Tanks have built upon the community-engaged focus of this pilot course. All of the Think Tanks focus on applying course concepts in meaningful ways within the local community, with topics ranging from scientific communication to national park preservation to art in public space. For a full list of current Honors Think Tanks, please see the University Honors Program website.