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THINKING ECOLOGY IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

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Lately I have attempted in some of my Composition II courses to merge in a pedagogically appropriate manner my profession of teaching writing with my personal concerns about ecology and the environment. As a citizen who appreciates the beauty and mystery of the natural world, I have become increasingly alarmed at the short-sighted, willfully ignorant attitudes and practices toward our environment. This frustration more and more has seeped into my teaching, where I find myself increasingly referring to examples of the destruction of our natural ecosystems all sanctioned under the dubious umbrella of progress and economic stability. So one day the idea occurred to me to use an entire course in freshman composition as a course in ecology and nature writing. By that, I mean, the readings and research areas of the course would be exclusively focused on various issues in ecology and nature writing. The course was advertised as having an ecology theme so that wary students could choose something else if they desired.

I suppose we all, on occasion, have used select articles from composition readers referring to environmental issues; they tend to work well when teaching argumentation, for instance. But to commit sixteen weeks to focused readings and research on this area for first-year writers in college was new to me, and to my department, at our university. In other words, was this a course in ecological readings, or was it to be a freshman writing course? Certainly I was obligated to fulfill our department's norms and outcomes for first-year composition, but I was personally motivated to encourage students to begin thinking ecologically, as they have been taught for so long to think economically, practically, and culturally. Among other readings, I used the anthology *A Forest of Voices: Conversations in Ecology*, edited by Chris Anderson and Lex Runciman. I chose this text because I like the editors' dialogical, conversational attitude toward learning and social issues. Their text opens with the following claim:

Environmental questions are like a forest: complicated, interrelated, mutually dependant...What undermines us are the slogans, the easy oppositions. We can't seem to talk about the issues without squaring off into silly, debilitating distinctions like spotted owls versus loggers, environmentalists versus developers, as if an issue so rooted and layered could ever be reduced to dualities and bumperstickers...What we need is the humane and reasoned thinking of our best writers, voices old and new. What we need, further, is both humility and finesse. (v-vi)

Once I made the decision to offer this type of course, three prominent issues arose that I would have to negotiate:

- 1) How to talk about the environment without overtly politicizing the discussion and alienating students whose political stances might be different than mine.
- 2) How to be credible and authoritative when I am not an expert in many of the areas the class would be investigating.
- 3) How to inspire students to a deeper level of knowledge and thinking, and how to translate that new awareness into better writing, while maintaining their focus for the entire term.

To the first issue, politicizing the classroom, I honestly told the students that the issues we would explore during the semester were complex and controversial, and that the politicizing of ecology is often ineffective and only leads to paralysis and further damage to the environment. I gave them examples of specific contexts in which both Republicans and Democrats continually fail to uphold wise ecological practices, how members of both parties routinely favor economic development and their political careers rather than truly listening to the science and aesthetics integral to the issues. I emphasized that ultimately, conserving the environment is a matter of individual conscience, and that it is really a local concern more than a broad plank on a national party platform. I showed them examples of how local issues were already immediately affecting their quality of life. For example, several of my students have children who were not allowed to swim in waters within the Chickasaw National Park last summer due to increased levels of pollution. [1] This had troubled them at the time, and they brought this latent interest with them to the classroom. In another example at the time of these two classes, public debate was occurring concerning the Simpson Aquifer and the water quality in the Arbuckle system. Almost all of the students were aware, at least in some superficial way, of the selling Oklahoma water to Texas controversy. The class gave them opportunity to become knowledgeable in very specific ways about this issue. In yet another example, many of the young men in the two classes were quail hunters, and so they were well aware of the declining numbers of this wild bird in our state due to several factors. So they had a vested interest to at least listen to the discussions and research ways of protecting the habitat. Other examples could be provided. In short, I was very pleased to discover that 100% of the students seemed to genuinely care about some special place that they had known about since childhood. The course gave them an opportunity to think critically about the issues related to those diminishing places.

To the second issue, that of credibility, I simply offered myself as one citizen who has legitimate reasons to be concerned. I brought them into my world of outdoor activity. I invited them to see places where the deterioration over time can easily be observed. I encouraged them to focus on the histories of their own families, and to consider how

negative changes have occurred within the property of their own family and community. I focused their attention on their favorite wild places, lakes, rivers, parks and wilderness areas that are meaningful to them and encouraged them to research how those places have changed significantly for the worse even in the short time span of an 18-year-old beginning college student.

We looked at local, state and federal government publications. We went on a field trip where experts showed us intricate and marvelous things we overlook on a daily basis. We met state and federal agents. Most of all, we read. We read Abbey, Leopold, Muir, Lopez, Bass, Dillard et al. The voices of these writers are very compelling for several reasons. Their passion about the places in their writing is contagious, and for a writing class, their essays provide superior examples of voice, style and integration of research into various rhetorical situations. Their writings are accessible models for the students' composition process.

I did not present myself as something other than what I am, a tax-paying citizen who loves the mysteries of the outdoors, one who is disturbed because our natural places are diminishing, and one who is learning on a regular basis the accompanying science that verifies the fragile nature of the ecosystems that shape our existence. I particularly think that the emphasis of the teacher as a fellow learner along with the students can be very motivating to students. Indeed, I learned much from the students' research.

To the third point raised above, concerning the quality of writing, I cannot prove, on the whole, that the writing of the students in this type of class was superior to other classes taught in the usual rhetorical frames. It is impossible to measure this without asking those very same students to retake freshman composition so the results of their writing could be compared.

I do know that several have often communicated with me, however, about ecological issues over the several months since taking the course. This ongoing, voluntary dialogue is a unique experience in my seventeen years of teaching first-year and advanced college composition. I know that many of these students truly became convinced of the necessity of thinking ecologically, and that this course affected them in meaningful ways. Several volunteered comments to me on a follow-up survey.

For example, when asked ♦What effect the course readings in ecology and nature have on you,♦ students responded with the following:

- 1) ♦It gave me an awareness of what my actions do to nature.♦
- 2) ♦It made me start thinking about ecology on a different level.♦
- 3) ♦It made me realize that all people should be more aware of our environment ... and should be involved more.♦

Another survey question asked the students to rate their level of interest and awareness concerning ecological issues *before* taking the class. The answers were divided, ranging from ♦Very interested and relatively quite aware♦ to ♦Very interested but basically unaware♦ to finally ♦Neutral interest and limited awareness.♦ I find these varied responses significant for a couple of reasons. One, at least five of the 35 students took the course as advertised because they felt it would be commensurate with their declared majors in biology and environmental science. A few of the remaining students evidently did not pay attention to the pre-course advertising since they claimed to not be aware that the course was exclusively devoted to readings in ecology. Yet none of them dropped out to switch to another section once they learned of the course content, and many expressed appreciation for the course though they apparently did not understand what type of course they had initially registered for. The remainder, the majority, were aware that the course would consist of ecology issues, and though they had no specific or immediate goals or motivation, such as a declared major, nonetheless they felt the topic was worthy of consideration.

When I consider the above two questions along with a third question concerning their level of activity or thinking about the issues *since* the course, it becomes clear to me that researching and writing about these areas can be life-changing. Consider their responses:

- 1) ♦There were many times before this class that I would do something as simple as wash my hair, and wouldn't think anything of it. But ever since I had this class, there have been many times that I did something different as a result of what I had learned.♦
- 2) ♦When the subject of ecology comes up I listen and react.♦
- 3) ♦I now teach my children about the different issues, stories that were involved or discussed in the course.♦
- 4) ♦I have been far more concerned about water issues and Bird's Mill Spring-I never really gave it much thought before. I find myself reading articles and watching local news to hear about updates.♦

Concerning the composition issues, several students claimed the focus of the class encouraged them to be more diligent in their writing and researching efforts. I asked two particular questions regarding their writing. One had to do with the writing of personal-voiced essays, the second with research projects. Concerning the personal-voiced essays, students said:

- 1) ♦I realized that I'm not the only one who cares. I think [the course readings] allowed me a little more freedom to express feelings I have toward ecology.♦
- 2) ♦[The readings] gave me so many different examples to look at and to take ideas from.♦
- 3) ♦I realized my own personal voice can be displayed in numerous ways. It helped to see the different authors' styles of writing.♦

Concerning research components of the course, students claimed:

- 1) ♦I had more respect and appreciation for those who were and still are passionate about the environment.♦
- 2) ♦Most of the material ignited anger in me, but after reading and responding I realized that you can't get angry. You have to stay poised and practice and let your passion lead you to knowledge.♦
- 3) ♦I was able to learn how to incorporate those things correctly into my papers to give me a much better research paper.♦

These responses are typical of the two classes. I realize that the responses cannot really be verified in a truly scientific

way, and I also realize that these are the types of outcomes that we all routinely expect in any type of composition course. Nonetheless, I believe that several students who normally would not have stayed interested in writing and researching did so in these classes because they were able to discover material that related directly to places and activities that they are passionate about. I am not arguing that teaching a theme-based ecology course in composition is intrinsically superior to other approaches to teaching composition, but I am confident that the focused readings of the course did influence students to positively consider their own responsibility to the environment, and I am also confident that the course content helped some of the marginal students focus their research and get to a deeper level than they otherwise might have. I am relieved to say that the ecology content of the course did not interfere or prevent the composition skills from being realized. In other words, I was able to present concerns as one citizen to others in a credible way, and through a discovery process, the students, our fellow citizens, were able to make all kinds of meaningful connections. It strikes me that this process is at the idealistic and historical foundations of liberal arts education, that the academic community should be involved in the formation of citizenship, and that an informed citizenry is essential to the quality of life in a given community.

It is increasingly common to have nature writing courses in advanced composition curricula, and I think this fact alone suggests some of the values implied in the composition process when nature writing and/or eco-composition is directly linked with first-year writing. Jack Ryan, in a paper presented at CCCC in 1997, demonstrated how he also uses the first-year writing class at Gettysburg College to combine nature writing, field experience and, in his words, the fundamental trappings of any composition class (1). He characterizes his class as integrative, holistic and freewheeling (1). Ryan uses quite a bit of field experience in conjunction with the writing, and I think this type of course could lend itself very nicely to ethnographic approaches to writing that emphasize participation/observation exercises in the field before and during the writing processes. Concerning the political nature of the issues involved in a writing class, Ryan argues, like Anderson and Runciman, that our students are surrounded by mixed messages about the environment, and that those information sources ... inadvertently trivialize the environmental movement (2). This, he says, provides all the more reason for these type of topics to be addressed in academic settings, even first-year writing courses. He claims:

Only after investigating their own connection to the physical world can students begin to understand how they can contribute to the protection of the environment or the perpetuation of existing environmental problems ... By examining environmental issues both personally and rhetorically students can take more interest in their writing, because they will be confronting issues that will make a difference in their own lives. (2-3)

William Greenway is another teacher who links nature writing with first-year composition courses. Greenway likes to teach a composition course that is grounded in traditional modes of discourse yet still is flexible enough in subject to be timely and creative, a course that incorporates literature and also encourages students to call upon specific experience and memories a course that shows students that their pasts have relevance to topical issues and requires direct observation and description" (189). Like Ryan, Greenway sees the possibility of introducing students to the vast amount of undervalued literature associated with environmental studies. He too sees nature writing as excellent sources that students may emulate in their essay writing as well as for incorporation into research. He goes a step further to incorporate poetry and creativity into his course. Concerning the science of the course, he argues:

That one can be poetic and factual in the same essay is a revelation to students, especially when they see that a more literary style does not detract from the scientific integrity of an essay but enhances it. They learn that the best way to tell readers how fast a grizzly runs is not to give the mph, but tell them, as McPhee does, that the grizzly is "no slower than a race horse and half again as fast as the fastest human." (191)

Greenway suggests that nature writing offers a more balanced view of a liberal arts education (191). He sees nature writing as a pedagogically satisfying balance between a literature-based composition course and a non-content, rhetorical-model composition course.

I am comfortable with this balance as well. I have never thought that composition courses should be totally non-content or purely rhetorical, but I agree that personal discovery and self-expression, which tends to be highly valued in first-year writing courses, are worthy goals. Locating the student's personal history within specific places and critically connecting it with the science and aesthetics of that history and place allows for a much more significant response and meaningful student involvement in the process.

Such a balance naturally lends itself to the so-called constructivist classroom where students start with what they know of their world and move to the larger world, connecting from the known to the unknown, but the unknown is necessary and affects what students know, whether they realize it or not. Literacy (by that I mean reading and writing) is not merely a decoding of language; rather it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context (Freire and Macedo 29). All students have the ability to perceive, and I think linking composition and nature writing promotes a shared interest of community that can make for meaningful dialogue.

As Freire and Macedo claim, Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world (35). Such an approach invites students to validate their own experiences, and in the process, confirm their experiences with the greater body of literature available concerning their kinds of experience. Without this type of validation, too often they do not really affirm the importance of those larger issues outside themselves. This dialogical approach mirrors what Postman and Weingartner refer to as meaning making in the classroom, in which teachers focus on the individuality and the uniqueness of the meaning maker rather than assuming the sameness in all learners (91).

A recent study by Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz confirms much of my experience with ecology-based composition classes. Their longitudinal study conducted with over 400 first-year writers at Harvard focuses on the paradoxical identity of a first-year writer as both novice and expert. Their substantial findings suggest that students' depth of knowledge on a subject is linked to success in the writing process. They say that first-year writers need to see themselves as novices in a world that demands something more and deeper from their writing than high school (134). This need, however, involves much uncertainty since the first-year writers who see themselves as novices feel inadequate in their knowledge base. Nevertheless, students who are able to see themselves as novices find that they may be changed by what they learn and find themselves having new ideas and understanding what the teacher wants (134). Such a disposition clearly contrasts with those who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice, and therefore, have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing (134).

Sommers and Saltz argue that students need to ♦immerse themselves in the material♦ (134), that students who only write to ♦understand their personal experiences,♦ and whose expertise is limited by ♦their personal connection with the material,♦ or who ♦see the personal and academic as opposites♦ eventually ♦lose interest in academic writing♦ (146). Novice writers ♦build authority not by writing *from* a position of expertise but by writing *into* expertise♦ (134). A significant part of the study's findings is that students need to see that ♦something is at stake in their work, that their writing is not simply ♦academic♦ (137). Students must learn to see ♦writing as a transaction, an exchange in which they can ♦get and give,♦ thus recognizing a ♦larger purpose♦ in their writing (139). Such a transactional approach to writing fits very nicely in a course such as mine where the professor and students are all involved in learning about new material in continuously relevant, though changing, contexts. In this type of environment, both student and teacher ♦get and give.♦

Merging ecological issues with composition courses offers other interesting pedagogical possibilities, such as collaborative learning experiences, for example, between science and English faculty. The collaboration of science and writing evolve nicely into author-editor relationships between members of the classes (see Gessell and Kukkala). Similar dialogical and transactional relationships could be developed among any number of disciplines. Also, an ecology composition class could work nicely in areas of service learning or community service (see Herzberg), which has been a growing emphasis in many universities over the past decade.

There are voices of caution, to be sure. In his article, ♦Radicalizing the College Classroom,♦ Peter Shaw attempts to demonstrate the counterproductive outcomes when left-leaning faculty impose their political views on their captive audiences. He points out that too often faculty view students who disagree with them politically as resistant or in denial of truth while the faculty remain quite confident that they themselves have been open-minded. A similar warning comes from Mona Scheuermann, who claims that too often teaching freshman composition can degenerate into ♦a very sloppy introduction to political science, sociology, psychology, and environmental science.♦ Ouch!

These warnings notwithstanding, I hope to offer a balanced view between personal bias and community issues. For me, the understanding that students write better when they are engaged in real discovery with real audience and motivation outweighs the potential political manipulation that Shaw and Scheuermann warn against. I'm opposed to manipulation of any kind, and a dialogical, transactional discovery process can in fact be liberating. If students conclude that the quality of water in the Chickasaw Forest is not a problem, then I have to live with it (as do they). What I want is for my students to access as much of the science as they can while learning to analyze the rhetoric that any group may put forth.

Finally, I rely on the well-established notion that classroom writing tends to be artificial, that students are not naturally motivated to write within our sterile, cinder block rooms. As James Heap points out, too often we mistakenly assume that ♦classroom writing *is* writing,♦ when of course real writing demands an audience, an ♦other♦ that is responsive to the dialogue (148, 152). ♦To become fluent writers,♦ he argues, ♦students must learn to separate the circumstances of classroom writing, the constraints of normative encapsulation, from the requirements of writing per se. This winnowing is a joint sociocultural accomplishment of (at least) teachers and students♦ (152).

Linking students to their own histories of place and leading them to discover the ecological underpinnings of those places can be a significant step toward real writing. It can be a liberating movement away from merely satisfying the disconnected requirements imposed by an authoritative teacher in a mandated course conducted in an artificial setting.

Notes

These references are to local natural sites in Oklahoma, though the class did have students who had close associations with places such as the Everglades and beaches across the nation. As a class, we began with local concerns and then connected to national and international places where similar issues have arisen. [\[return to text\]](#)

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