



CCA 3101/4101 Environmental Humanities: The History of a Unit Through an Ecopedagogical Lens*

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In 2011 the author taught, for the first time, the well-established unit CCA3101/4101 Environmental Humanities in the School of Communications and Arts at ECU (Edith Cowan University) in Western Australia. The unit has a 20-year history through associate professor Rod Giblett and parallels the development of the environmental humanities as a field in Australia, advanced since the 1990s by environmental scholars Deborah Bird Rose, Val Plumwood, Libby Robin, and Rod Giblett. The interdisciplinary field represents growing scholarly interest in the ecological aspects of humanities disciplines—including literature, visual arts, theology, philosophy, and cultural studies—and the development of humanities-based approaches for addressing environmental problems. In this paper, the author argues that the CCA3101/4101 unit is a key ecopedagogical resource, particularly with regard to ECU's recent development of sustainability as a core institutional value. The ecopedagogical principle of critical environmental awareness through radical political theory is a point of intersection with CCA3101/4101. The unit challenges students to analyze the political underpinnings of nature and its representations in the media. The author argues for the complementarity between the environmental humanities and ecopedagogy through the following themes found in the unit: (1) nature as a contested political construction; (2) bioregional and place-based awareness; and (3) equity focus, particularly through aboriginal Australian perspectives on the environment.

Keywords: ecopedagogy, environmental humanities, Paulo Freire, Australian university

The Anatomy of CCA3101/4101 Environmental Humanities

Whilst the focus of scientific research and media coverage, the imperiled state of the environment has also become an area of interest in the humanities, particularly since the 1990s (Mulvaney, 1991). The environmental humanities is an interdisciplinary field broadly concerning the ecological dimensions of humanities disciplines—including literature, art, politics, sociology, and gender studies. In Australia, for example, the Environmental Humanities Group at the University of Sydney consists of a diverse range of scholars “researching environmental dimensions of cultural and urban history, English literature, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, politics, gender and women’s studies” (The University of Sydney, 2012, para. 1). The group’s collective aim is “to focus this diffuse work into an integrated, interdisciplinary and socially relevant new field of ‘environmental humanities’” which they further describe as an “emergent and portentous field” (The University of Sydney, 2012, para. 1). The environmental humanities movement in Australia has gained

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further traction with the recent establishment of the journal *Environmental Humanities*, aiming to feature “outstanding scholarship that draws humanities disciplines into conversation with each other, and with the natural and social sciences” (*Environmental Humanities*, 2012, para. 1).

Australian Environmental Humanities Scholarship has gained theoretical grounding as “the ecological humanities” by a group of researchers originally based at the ANU (Australian National University), most notably anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose, historian Libby Robin, and philosopher Val Plumwood (Plumwood, 2002; Rose & Robin, 2004). In addition to these three Eastern Australian scholars, cultural theorist Rod Giblett has theoretically contributed to the ecological humanities in Australia, but from a different conceptual perspective and regional affiliation (Giblett, 1996; 2009). At a fundamental level, the ecological humanities seek to redress the arts and sciences gulf towards practicable environmental sustainability by ameliorating “two cultures” thinking. According to theorists, ecological issues are “situated across the nature/culture divide” (Rose & Robin, 2004, “Introductory Section”, para. 2). A proposed remedy is an “ontology of connectivity” synthesising Aboriginal, embodied and postmodern feminist knowledges, and cross-cutting the sciences and arts binary towards ethical intersections between humans and non-humans. Griffiths (2007) noted three humanities techniques that can contribute to the study of environments and ecological issues are: (1) scales of space and time; (2) storytelling; and (3) science as subject. The humanities broaden the scale at which science commonly operates towards “human-scale geographies” and uses narrative forms to create human reflexivity in environmental practices and paradigms (Griffiths, 2007, “Scales of Space and Time”, para. 2).

The Edith Cowan University unit, CCA3101/4101 Environmental Humanities, grew out of (and continues to evolve out of) these intellectual developments. An early version of the unit began at Curtin University in 1992 in which associate professor Rod Giblett (then, a lecturer at Curtin) taught his research interests—particularly cultural studies and political ecologies of wetlands—in conjunction with researching and writing the book *Postmodern Wetlands* (Giblett, 1996). At the time, Alexander Wilson’s landmark work on American landscapes, *Culture of Nature*, was the set text for the Curtin unit taught by Giblett (Wilson, 1991). In 1997, Giblett took up a position at Edith Cowan University teaching media studies, and eventually developed the unit case studies in communications in which he and colleagues could teach their research specializations. Giblett set his *Postmodern Wetlands* and Wilson’s *Culture of Nature* as texts for the case studies unit. CCA3101/4101 developed into its current form the mid-2000s while Giblett researched and wrote the book *Landscapes of Nature and Culture* (2009). On the synergy between teaching and research that marks the history of the environmental humanities unit, Giblett commented that “during this journey there has been a very strong nexus between research and teaching... This is a kind of ecology of teaching and researching in which both have been mutually beneficial for each other and symbiotic with each other” (Giblett, 2012, Personal communication). One of Giblett’s areas of expertise is the work of Raymond Williams, the founder of cultural studies, a progenitor of ecocriticism and a major influence of the development of the environmental humanities field.

During Semester 2 of 2011, associate professor Giblett was on research leave in Canada. Having studied the unit’s set texts as part of the author’s Ph.D. course (2008–2011), he was offered the opportunity to teach the unit for the first time. In reflecting now, the author realizes that the aims of the environmental humanities field and, specifically, the unit CCA3101/4101 intersected with ecopedagogical principles. In fact, these two kindred movements can be mutually supportive and co-constructive when theorised in conjunction with one another. Such dialogue between ecopedagogy and ecological theory/practice advances the socio-political

project of the environmental humanities through a complementary framework for teaching critical ecological awareness skills. The opening sentence of the unit outline declares CCA3101/4101's grounding in the global environmental crisis: "Many environmental issues confronting the world today from climate change to drought, flood, salinity and water shortages have a human dimension involving people's relationship with the Earth" (Giblett, 2011a, p. 1).

Ecopedagogy

The ecopedagogy movement gained impetus from the radical political writings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921–1997) and evolved out of discussions surrounding the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 (Kahn, 2010, p. 18). Freire, who focused on questions of social exploitation and domination in the context of his homeland Brazil, was exiled for over 15 years during which he served as visiting professor at Harvard University. Originally published in English in 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996) "became a watershed for radical educators within schools, communities, and labor organizations that were struggling to bring about social change to public health, welfare, and educational institutions", especially in the United States (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 5). Hence, Freire's critical pedagogy—drawing from the Frankfurt School's political theory and practice—is one of the foundations for ecopedagogy as forwarded by contemporary educational scholars. As writers point out, Freire's posthumous *Pedagogy of Indignation* exhibits his later evolution towards an ecopedagogical paradigm: "It is urgent that we assume the duty of fighting for the fundamental ethical principles, like respect for the life of human beings, the life of other animals, the life of birds, the life of rivers and forests" (as cited in Kahn, 2010, p. 20).

Ecopedagogy is a recent evolution of environmental education (Stapp et al., 1969), ecoliteracy (Klemow, 1991; Orr, 1992), and sustainability education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010; Warburton, 2003). However, it is distinguished from these three educational models for its radical socio-political aims, critical pedagogical foundation and potential to catalyse the next wave of educational changes during an era of widespread environmental degradation. Kahn (2010) linked the political aims of ecopedagogy to the development of environmental ethics:

Ecopedagogy seeks to interpolate quintessentially Freirian aims of the humanization of experience and the achievement of a just and free world with a future-oriented ecological politics that militantly opposes the globalization of neoliberalism and imperialism, on the one hand, and attempts to foment collective ecoliteracy and realize culturally relevant forms of knowledge grounded in normative concepts such as sustainability, planetarity, and biophilia, on the other. (p. 18)

Since its formal inception in the 1960s and 1970s, environmental education has aimed to integrate content about biophysical environments broadly into educational programs and to develop environmental problem-solving strategies with regard to air and water pollution, pesticide effects on human and non-human health and deteriorating ecosystems (Stapp et al., 1969, p. 33). Moreover, as termed by the educator David Orr in the 1990s, ecoliteracy focuses on developing ecological knowledge in order to inculcate understanding of science and environmental issues amongst the general population (Klemow, 1991). However, ecopedagogy, as theorised by Kahn (2010, p. 6), advocated a more radical form of ecoliteracy: "Such ecological issues, requiring critical knowledge of the dialectical relationship between mainstream lifestyle and the dominant social structure, require a much more radical and more complex form of ecoliteracy than is presently possessed by the population at large". In the context of Western Australia, Lummis (2002, "Building", para. 2) argued for a

“partnership ethic” for ecopedagogy which “attempts to reach a balance between the homocentric social interest ethic and the deeper ecocentric environmental ethic”. A partnership ethic, as Lummis’ envisions, it would encompass key post-structuralist ecopedagogical precepts—equity, morality, respect, and inclusion—but expanded to consider traditionally marginalised human and non-human populations. In sum, practitioners and teachers of a partnership ethic would be “self-critical of a range of anthropocentric motives” (Lummis, 2002, “Building”, para. 2).

CCA3101/4101 as an Ecopedagogical Tool

Kahn and Lummis built upon well-worn precedents in environmental education and ecoliteracy towards a critical pedagogy of ecology, advancing Freire’s radical political and ethical theory in an ecological context. Although not explicit in the unit content, CCA3101/4101 is forwards ecopedagogy. The unit’s emphasis on building “self-critical” (Lummis, 2002, “Building”, para. 2) skills in relation to contemporary environmental issues distinguishes it from the more scientifically orientated movements of environmental education and ecoliteracy. Moreover, the location of CCA3101/4101 in the critical-theory-heavy disciplines of communications and cultural studies—and within the School of Communications and Arts at ECU—provides a basis for furthering the political ideals of ecopedagogy. The outcome of CCA3101/4101 is a movement from Freire’s anthropocentric “humanization of experience” to Lummis’ more equitable “partnership ethic”. The author will base his rationale for CCA3101/4101 as an ecopedagogical resource through three themes within the unit: (1) nature as a contested political construction; (2) bioregional and place-based awareness; and (3) equity focus, particularly through incorporating aboriginal Australian perspectives into the unit content.

Environmental Humanities students have been mostly the second- or third- year students from the disciplines of geography, media and cultural studies, and mass communication (Giblett, 2012, Personal communication). When the author taught the unit in 2011, several students were studying photomedia and keenly interested in Australian landscape photography (weeks 3 and 4). The unit’s five learning outcomes in 2011 were:

- (1) to discuss a range of environmental issues; (2) to examine the history of nature as a cultural construction; (3) to analyse the role landscape aesthetics plays in representations of nature; (4) to critique the cultural history of conservation landscapes, such as national parks and wilderness areas; and (5) to discuss and apply the concept of environmental sustainability. (Giblett, 2011a, p. 1)

The week 1 tutorial exercise developed critical awareness of the term “nature” and its representations (see Figure 1). Most students understood nature as a moniker for conservation areas, such as national parks; hence, nature is something we go to outside of the city—as a refuge, a place for rejuvenation and an antidote to urban malaise. Weeks 2–4 addressed environmental aesthetics, weeks 5–6 wilderness and national parks, weeks 7–9 cities and swamps and, in closing, weeks 10–12 Aboriginal Australian environmental knowledge, all from ecopedagogical perspectives.

The immediate focus on nature as a contested political construction engendered in the students’ deeper humanities-based understanding of environmental issues. The tutorial exercise prepared students for Assignment 1, a 2,500-word essay on media representations of nature. For this assignment, the author asked students to collect appearances of the word “nature” (or natural, sustainable, ecological, organic, etc.) in print-based and digital magazines, newspapers, and advertisements, and then to analyse “the politics of nature and ecology that explicitly or implicitly inform this usage” (Giblett, 2011a, p. 2). Many students framed their

media analyses around Giblett's model of the "Five Cultures of Nature" (Giblett, 2011b, p. 23), for example, recognising the use of agricultural or pastoral imagery by advertisers to convey the wholesomeness of milk or breakfast cereals. In further, the students' abilities to engage with the complexities of the idea of nature, week 6's tutorial exercise focused on critically reading national parks management plans and identifying implicit assumptions about human-non-human relationships in these policy documents. Through the post-structuralist tools offered in the unit's set texts, the students engaged with the plans through three discourses of nature as aestheticised, preserved, and/or commodified (see Figure 2). The author suggested that these critical readings of national parks management plans enhanced their learning of the unit's challenging theoretical content. For example, some students grew up adjacent to John Forrest and Yanchep national parks, so could explore discourse theory in relation to personal experiences or community debates.

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Exercise 1

'What is nature?' is the core question of this unit. The readings address this question in critical terms.

In groups of 4-5 students, please discuss the concept of 'nature'. How is the word 'nature' used in conversation, advertising, music, television, etc.? When is something *nature* and when is it not *nature*? What are some other words for 'nature'?

Based on your discussion, list five qualities or characteristics of nature (or synonyms for nature) and present them to the class. This is meant to be a warm-up exercise. There are no right or wrong answers!

Figure 1. The week 1 tutorial exercise focused on raising critical awareness of the term "nature" and its popular representations.

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Week 6, Exercise 3, National Parks

On page 160 of *People and places of nature and culture*, Giblett suggests that there are at least three competing discourses of nature:

- nature *aestheticized* (as monuments through the sublime experience of mountains, waterfalls and geysers)
- nature *preserved* (as flora, fauna and habitats)
- nature *commodified* (as natural or cultural resources, raw materials or tourist packages)

In this exercise, we will assess whether these discourses of nature at work in the management plans of five Western Australian national parks: John Forrest, Yanchep, Walpole-Nornalup, Fitzgerald River, and Stirling Range.

Step 1. In groups of 2-3 *students*, you will be given the first ten pages of the management plan of one of these five national parks.

Step 2. Read the excerpt from the management plan. Underline or highlight any words or sentences that suggest nature aestheticized, preserved or commodified. Write these below.

Figure 2. The week 6 tutorial exercise aimed to develop analytical skills in reading the discourses surrounding national parks.

Furthermore, critical awareness of bioregions and places is integral to both CCA3101/4101 and ecopedagogy. For assignment 2, a 3,000-word case study of an environmental issue and its media representation, the author asked students to situate their discussions in biogeographic places, e.g., ecosystems, islands, or watersheds. For instance, many students chose to focus on recent tourism developments on Rottnest Island. The students tended to describe feelings of emotional connection to the Island—having gone there on family holidays—as their reason for selecting it. The author also had students complete the bioregional quiz in week 1 (see Figure 3). Geography students completed the task with confidence, whereas students in communications, cultural studies, and media tended to require more guidance, some of which could be received from more bioregionally knowledgeable students in the tutorial. In advancing critical place consciousness, since 2010, fieldwork trips have been introduced to key biodiversity locations in the metropolitan area (such as Anstey-Keane Damplands and Forrestdale Lake in the southern Perth suburbs) and more recently to Northbridge where Ph.D. candidate Nandi Chinna introduces 2012 environmental humanities students to the “reclaimed” wetland system of the city (Giblett, 2012, personal communication). Citing D. A. Gruenewald’s “A Foucauldian Analysis of Environmental Education”, Kahn advocated the transformation of the human relationship to place in bioregional terms “from a life formed through naïve inhabitation to one based in ‘decolonisation and reinhabitation’ of the planetary commons” (Kahn, 2010, p. 80).

BIOREGIONAL QUIZ

This is a self-scoring test of basic environmental perception and understanding of place. Scoring is done on the honour system, but the test can be done collaboratively. The quiz is culture-bound, favouring those people who live, or have lived, in the countryside over city dwellers. You can answer the questions in relation to your usual place of residence, if it is not here. Give yourself one point for each question answered correctly.

- (1). Point north.
- (2). Where does the water you drink come from (*besides the tap*)? Trace its path from precipitation to tap.
- (3). What was the total approximate rainfall for the last year for the area in which you live?
- (4). What are the names of the major soil types in your area?
- (5). What primary ecological event or process affected the landform where you live?
- (6). What were the primary sustenance techniques of the Aboriginal people who lived in your area before you?
- (7). Name five plants that are native to the region in which you live. Are they edible?
- (8). Where does your food come from? Name the places that grew last night’s dinner.
- (9). What is a growing season? How long is the growing season in your area?
- (10). From what direction do winter storms usually come in your area?

Figure 3. The author used the bioregional quiz to promote place awareness in the ecopedagogical context of the environmental humanities.

Finally, CCA3101/4101’s equity focus, especially through its inclusion of indigenous perspectives, further synchronises the unit’s aims to ecopedagogy. In 2011, the author arranged two guest lectures on aboriginal environmental knowledge. Jason Barrow, an Education Officer at ECU’s Kurongkurl Katitjin Centre, instructed students on the traditional uses of indigenous plants and demonstrated tool-making techniques using Balga

resin and local woods (see Figure 4). Additionally, Traditional Owner Len Collard presented the week 11 lecture “Whadjuck Nyungar Boodjar: A Sense of Place” in which he discussed the origins of South-West Australian place names, instilling in students an appreciation for the fact that suburbs like Balga are Nyoongar words for plants. About half of the student feedback reports for CCA3101/4101 commented positively on the addition of the weeks 11 and 12 lectures from Aboriginal teachers. The guest lectures and fieldwork trips made tangible core environmental humanities concepts of aboriginal country, bioregionalism, livelihood, and symbiosis presented during week 12. This aspect of the unit reflects ecopedagogy’s valuation of TEK (traditional ecological knowledge) as “situated in the present age as a living knowledge tradition engaged in and providing for sustainable cultural interactions” (Kahn, 2010, pp. 103-123).



Figure 4. Students learnt traditional uses of South-West Western Australian plants from Jason Barrow at the Kurongkurl Katitjin gardens.

As ECU’s education for sustainability initiatives, a values-based rethinking of human-non-human relationships—afforded by the CCA3101/4101 ecopedagogical model—will need to inform techno-scientific approaches to ecological problems. Hence, the environmental humanities unit is a key institutional ecopedagogical resource. The ecological humanities signify a growing interest in contemporary environmental issues, and the agency and integrity of the natural world itself (Mulvaney, 1991; Plumwood, 2002; Rose & Robin, 2004). This field has never been more apposite to understanding the current ecological crisis. Its relevance is indicated by the CHCI (Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes) meeting, “Anthropocene Humanities”, which convened in 2012 to discuss the role of the humanities in understanding, representing, and resolving trans-regional environmental urgencies. The meeting asked “What, in sum, is the calling of climate on the humanities, and of the humanities on climate change?” (CHCI, 2012, para. 2), a question of the environmental humanities and moreover an ecopedagogical question.

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