

# Sustaining Writing Theory



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**Abstract:** This article examines ways in which the fundamentals of both writing studies and sustainability studies overlap and complement each other, ultimately moving toward a theory of writing that not only is sustainable, but that also sustains writing practice across a variety of areas. For example, in order to be sustainable, both writing and geographical communities must consider several elements in any decision or employed strategy. Both writing (the act and the teaching of it) and sustainability studies are localized, regionally specific. Key to the argument's theoretical positioning is the role of technology and technological innovation in both a community and a classroom in terms of inhibiting and facilitating sustainability and communication.

In his March 2009 Conference on College Composition and Communication address, Sidney Dobrin critiques the field of writing studies, and ecocomposition in particular, for focusing too much on students in the classroom and program management and not enough on writing itself. Indeed, much writing in the field today would fall under the category of “show and tell” or of quantitative studies of classroom behaviors and students’ end products. Dobrin notes that when he and Christian Weisser co-edited the book *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches* (published in 2001), they predicted ecocomposition would grow and move forward in dynamic ways. Yet the field’s development has not followed this projection. Dobrin maintains that, if the field of writing studies is to grow in dynamic and innovative ways, it will be through the development of new theoretical perspectives on writing itself; furthermore, he suggests that the point of this growth can and should come from the developing subfield of ecocomposition.

Ecocomposition has been defined in several ways; the most common definitions center around writing about place and writing in place—for some, this simply means nature writing; for others, this means covering environmental issues as content in the writing classroom. However, ecocomposition encompasses much more complexity and subtlety than these interpretations suggest, and its scope extends beyond the writing classroom. In his 2005 article “From Environmental Rhetoric to Ecocomposition and Ecopoetics: Finding a Place for Professional Communication,” M. Jimmie Killingsworth notes the limitations of reducing any kind of communication, discourse, or pedagogy to a slogan or bullet points (359). In his critique, Killingsworth aims to “guide a revived ecological pedagogy and research program” and, specifically, to both problematize and extend aspects of ecocomposition and its implications for technical communication (360). As Dobrin and Weisser note, “Ecocomposition must be about more than simply bringing nature writing texts to the writing classroom; it must be about the act of producing writing” (587). Drawing on Dobrin, Killingsworth suggests that “writing takes place” (364). I argue here that it takes more than that—to be effective, writing must consider the complete multidimensional context (sociohistorical, economic, etc.) that includes place at its core. Merging sustainability studies and writing studies has the potential to produce very nuanced theories of writing production and dissemination from which both administration and pedagogy can greatly benefit, in turn benefiting our students in first-year writing, in professional writing, and across the curriculum.

Here, I examine the ways in which the fundamentals of both writing studies and sustainability studies overlap and complement each other, in order to open discussion about a theory of writing that is sustainable and sustains writing practice across a variety of areas. To do so, I engage the history of ecocomposition, connect central elements of sustainability studies that parallel and are relevant to writing studies, and address the implications of sustainable writing theory for research, pedagogy, and our own writing practices.

## Engaging Ecocomposition: Expanding Specialties, Theorizing Practice

To engage the history of ecocomposition, it is helpful to review some of the main trends—their strengths and limitations. One of the important, yet limiting, developments in ecocomposition has been the approach most individuals take to focus on subjects and genres that could be classified as “environmental.” This trend reflects the focus of literature in environmental rhetoric, as well as an assumption that professional communicators need to be

concerned with environmental considerations only if they work in an environmental field (Killingsworth 360). Thus, as Killingsworth notes, “[t]he professionalization of the environment leaves us thinking that only certain groups are touched by ecological concerns and the interest in place” (361). This treatment of ecocomposition, by limiting the focus to the topical, also limits the sense of who is and should be thinking about the environment. Citing Kenneth Burke, Killingsworth notes that such a belief is problematic because the compartmentalization leads specialists—scientists and technical communicators—to believe “they can live in a constant state of denial about their responsibility for their research and their inventions” (362). I argue that the same is true of any professional communicator and of writing students: the sense that this is specialized or even an academic exercise excuses accountability beyond literature or the classroom. A sustainable writing theory must incorporate this accountability into the practice and teaching of writing.

In summarizing the ecocomposition approach that emerged with scholars Sidney Dobrin, Christian Weisser, and Derek Owens, Killingsworth remarks:

For them, ecology becomes something more than a set of themes that occupy the attention of a special group of authors and texts. Instead it appears as a component in every text—the writer’s realization of spatial limits and contexts, a concern with the place that any text occupies in the world. It also becomes a model for how authors and readers join in a web of discourse clearly anchored in the roots and soil of earthly life. The ecocompositionists want to know where as well as how and why writing works. (364)

An ecocomposition further informed by sustainability studies considers, as equally critical as ecology, the impact of economic considerations, social considerations, and even technological innovations on discourse and community.

As Killingsworth observes, “[e]cocomposition encourages us to start with the question of place: Is it really the same experience to use a computer in New York and in Beijing?” (365). No. But *why*? Not just for ecological and geographical reasons—social factors, economic factors, and both receptiveness to technological innovation and the use of different innovations all distinguish the experiences as well. Especially in a world where technological innovations allow us to operate in “sites” with no rootedness in place, it is easy to ignore ecological concerns and even the social concerns of our immediate, physical communities. Yet as Killingsworth notes, “[v]irtual reality fails when the roof leaks, the machine breaks, the network goes down, and real life intrudes. The mind wakes up and finds itself attached to a body, and the body is made of the earth’s own clay” (367). We need to be able to cope with challenges and crises in our immediate, physical communities in ways that aim to sustain those communities. In order to do so, we need to consider in our writing a balance between global and local thinking, and we need to be conscious not only that an audience exists for our writing but also of who that audience might be, what they value, and how their context relates to and differs from our own. Killingsworth observes, “[a]ny attempt to act globally probably entails an imposition of overextended local thinking. Thus it is essential that we understand the local elements of our own products and visions before we assume their universal applicability” (369). As teachers, we need to frame global and local considerations for audiences and contexts in ways that draw on and demonstrate implications beyond the classroom.

For professional communication classes, Killingsworth suggests developing a “place-conscious, ecopoetically informed pedagogy” (370). He notes that this does not require an ideological affiliation with an environmental position but rather a more comprehensive and sensitive perception of the role of place in writing and social engagement (370). While Killingsworth moves toward theory building, he ultimately ends in pedagogical advice by adapting Derek Owens’s work in ecocomposition to professional communication. Thus, his revised pedagogy is still practice-based, without articulating in clear terms the larger theoretical framework from which the pedagogical practices emerge—a framework that helps us understand how and why the practice supports and enhances the act and process of writing itself.

Such frameworks are suggested by Marilyn Cooper in her essay “The Ecology of Writing” and Margaret Syverson in her book *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition*. Cooper moves toward developing a theoretical framework at the intersection of sustainability and writing studies. She critiques the cognitive process model of writing, suggesting that it is problematic because it frames the writer as isolated from the communities within which she operates (366). To counter this, Cooper cites pedagogical approaches such as collaborative brainstorming, debates, and group work as pushing beyond this notion, arguing that there is “a growing awareness that language and texts are not simply the means by which individuals discover and communicate information, but are essentially social activities, dependent on social structures and processes not only in their interpretive but also in their constructive phases” (366). Thus, in her essay, she proposes an ecological writing model grounded in the belief that individuals, through writing, are continuously engaging webs of dynamic social systems (367).

Applying an ecologically informed approach to writing theory gives us one way to understand “how writers interact to

form systems: all the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the system” (368). While this model is an encouraging step forward that contributed to the evolution of ecocomposition in productive and innovative ways by suggesting the dynamic connections between systems, it does not address in depth the degrees of how and why these systems are connected. It does not adequately acknowledge, for example, that all parts in a system are different and rarely act the same or even the same way twice. Moreover, ecological science alone cannot provide all the explanations. While this model addresses engagement in and with the environment (broadly conceived), it does not address a sense of responsibility to engage, nor does it directly provide a way for addressing the specific social, economic, and technological factors within the larger environment or context.

Drawing on complex systems theory, Syverson argues that writers, their audiences, and their writing form complex systems, defined as “self-organizing, adaptive, and dynamic” (4-5). She sees composing as an ecological system and proposes “an ecology of composing” (2). Understanding the dimensions of complex systems and applying this kind of analysis to writing studies research may help us understand how and why people write what they do, but it does not tie the process back to its actual function within communities. For example, examining aspects of the psychological dimension of composing and reading in the writing studies complex system may reveal information about an individual or group of individuals that is crucial to bringing social equity to the classroom because it allows us to understand how our students learn, but a sustainable theory of writing actually requires us to take this step for the good of our students in the first place. While complex systems theory may provide the how, sustainability provides the why and the motivation. In addition, we can pay attention to the physical-material dimension of the complex system of composing, which helps us to recognize the physical and material factors impacting our production and reading of writing, but sustainability pushes us to question how these materials themselves facilitate or hinder not only the act of writing but also the cumulative effects of the words and their physical, material production. What quantitative study and knowledge of complex systems theory allows us to produce about the composing process is useful, but it does not directly contribute to a more sustainable society by itself because it is not tied to a particular ethical code of being in the world.

Citing Cooper and others, Dobrin and Weisser outline two branches of ecocomposition—ecological literacy and discursive ecology—and advocate theories and pedagogies that combine the two (581). While the former stresses raising ecological awareness among students, the latter “asks students to see writing as an ecological process, to explore writing and writing processes as systems of interaction, economy, and interconnectedness” (581). Ecocomposition informed by sustainability not only combines the two, but it also asks writers to consider in those systems and processes the equally critical dimensions of social equity, economic stability, and technological innovation, at the same time looking to the goals of sustainability as a way to understand and be effective in the engagement of writing itself.

## **Sustainability Studies in Context and Writing Studies in Theory**

In an effort to connect central elements of sustainability studies that parallel and are relevant to writing studies, I do not want to discuss what or how to teach as much as understanding the phenomenon of writing and communication itself in its full dimensional context, so that we can adapt our teaching and our writing to fit specific communities and purposes. While we draw on ecological concepts in modeling and examining the environment-culture relationship, sustainability breaks both environment and culture out into economy, social justice, politics, ideology, spirituality, ecology, place (natural, constructed, and imagined as Dobrin and Weisser define it), and technology. By raising awareness of the multiple contextual layers that inform and produce writing in a way that reflects our global and local contexts, a sustainability theory of writing has the potential to allow for not only a temporal and spatial move beyond crisis in and through writing but also an engagement with and an understanding of ways in which other problems and crises—genocide, political unrest, terrorism—are connected to ecological, social, economic, spiritual, and technological contexts. As Dobrin and Weisser point out, ecocomposition should extend beyond nature discourse to include “the relationships between discourse and any site where discourse exists” (573). Sustainability studies thus expands ecocomposition, allowing us to examine and apply the complexity of the whole writing situation, as it reflects the complexity of communities.

In order to be sustainable, both writing and geographical communities must consider several elements in any decision or employed strategy, from audience or community to historical and cultural context and the impact on both. Both writing (the act and the teaching of it) and sustainability studies are localized, regionally specific. Writing pedagogy, to be effective, must be student-specific—yet in a way that fits the larger classroom community. Workplace writing and disciplinary writing are no exception. In writing studies, then, we talk about rhetorical strategies, a consideration of situation or context, audience, and purpose or authorial intent. In sustainability studies,

the areas of ecological integrity, social equity, and economic stability, respectively, parallel the rhetorical situation in writing.

In order for a piece of writing to be successful, the writer must consider the situation or context—cultural and sociohistorical, for example—just as the community planner or business owner must consider the ecological integrity of a specific biological or bioregional community—its historical and contemporary identity—in order to create a sustainable community or business plan. Likewise, a writer must be concerned with audience in order to achieve the desired response—the writer must work toward common ground with her audience, just as the individual or group concerned with sustainability must consider what will best achieve or preserve social equity in a particular community. The writer must also be concerned with accessibility—how clear is the writing (in content and form) to a particular audience, and how available in terms of both media presentation and dissemination.<sup>{1}</sup> The writer's concern with purpose or intent parallels sustainability's concern with economic stability, for both involve making a connection between point A and point B: what the writer wants/needs, what the audience wants/needs, and what each side is willing to give or take to most effectively and—often, efficiently—achieve that common ground. Writing, as with the economy, involves selling or persuasion. Writers must also be concerned with the idea of usability, which falls within the realm of social equity but also economic stability because it is concerned with effectiveness, access, and efficiency. The concept of intellectual property, through its commodification of ideas and assignment of ownership, is an element of writing that can be considered in both social and economic terms as well.

To be socially equitable and effective in the writing classroom, teachers must consider students' learning needs, which requires a consideration of cultural background and learning style. Attention must also be given to marketability and effectiveness (in terms of writing skills) and to context in a specific way—for example, is the course online, face-to-face, or hybrid? Is it a first-year writing class or a graduate professional writing seminar? Is one teaching in a private liberal arts college or a community college? All of these things, just like the social, economic, and environmental considerations of sustainability, must be considered in writing, administration, and the teaching of writing in order to be sustainable.

Developing a theory of writing based on sustainability is a way to articulate what many of us already are doing, in many ways, in our classrooms and our own writing, and supports the ways in which a writer successfully adapts, functions, and innovates in a dynamic society by engaging critical thinking, judgment, and communication. However, there is one element that I believe needs to be added to the sustainability model that complements and reflects what is happening in writing theory as well: technology. One of the most widely cited models of sustainability is the three-legged stool model, which considers the balance of ecological integrity, social equity, and economic stability (Dawe and Ryan). This model is greatly contested, but nonetheless is the most commonly considered, especially in light of the often-quoted goal of sustainability from the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report: “meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED). Arguments have been made for other considerations, including education, futurity, public participation, and spirituality (Orr; Dawe and Ryan; Edwards; Palmer, Cooper, and van der Vorst). I would argue that technology, though often cited—and rightly so—as problematic with respect to sustainability, needs to be a distinct element of the model because the balance between tradition and technological innovation in any community, from the classroom to the corporation, is critical, determining the sustainability of any larger plan, process, or strategy.

Following Everett M. Rogers's definition, “an innovation is an idea, practice, or object that is *perceived* as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (11; emphasis added). The extent to which an innovation will be accepted by an individual or community and the amount of time and effort acceptance or adoption requires is determined by five factors: relative advantage the innovation holds over its predecessor; compatibility with the audience or user's values, needs, and experiences; complexity; trialability; and observability or visibility in terms of results (15-16). In terms of environment, society, or even a piece of writing, success depends not only on the ability to meet the economic, social, and ecological needs of that community or context; an innovation or text's sustainability will never be realized if it is not accepted by the individuals affected.

Technological traditions and innovations thus create a critical dynamic not only in physical communities but also with writing in physical and intellectual ways. Physically, new writing technologies must be diffused acceptably to be effective. Intellectually, writers often seek to communicate and diffuse innovations through their writing. According to Rogers, “Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system” and “[c]ommunication is a process in which participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding” (6). Thus, “[w]hen new ideas are invented, diffused, and are adopted or rejected, leading to certain consequences, social change occurs” (6). This connects well to Killingsworth's observation that writing “is not simply a way of thinking but more fundamentally a way of acting” (373). As our writing technologies develop and change—consider, for example, texting, social networking, and other new media and genres for writing—individuals' abilities to engage their communities and meet both their needs and

the needs of future generations are determined by their knowledge of and comfort with particular technologies.

In order to sustain the writing communities of our classrooms, we need to innovate. We need to understand how writing happens and how the engagement of different modes affects our students' instructional needs and our instructional possibilities and opportunities so that we all effectively engage our social worlds. At the same time that we are compelled to innovate, we cannot forget the needs and concerns of students for whom more traditional technologies and classroom spaces represent a comfort zone from which they will not willingly part. Yet the classroom is not the only place where this shift takes place. Richard Coe maintains, "[a]s long as we are socializing students to observe, think, and express themselves in particular modes, therefore, we may well choose modes which will be particularly useful in today's (and tomorrow's) world" (233). Such modes today include an increasing number of electronic and online genres; and therefore, what students learn and engage about writing must be connected to these evolving modes.

But writing in this world also means engaging moral as well as technical issues. In his book *Technology and the Contested Meanings of Sustainability*, Aidan Davison states, "current crises in ecological systems and in development strategies demand fundamental technological change" (ix). In addressing what sustainability means and how we get there, Davison believes we must engage both technical and moral questions, reflecting on "our moral experience and our technological practice" (ix). Thus, Davison seeks to "reconfigure the meanings of sustainability as prompts for open-ended questions that focus our attention on the nature of moral experience in our technological world" (5). How do we modify our pedagogy to become more sustainable? How do we help students to write sustainably? By asking questions (of what we read, what we write, and what and how we teach) that engage the intersection of ecological, economic, social, technological, and moral concerns.

## Specific Implications, Further Connections, and Professional Practices

Much of what we already do in our classrooms—innovations and directions of development over the years—contributes to the sustainability of both communities and our students' writing, including service and experiential learning, peer feedback, one-on-one conferences, and specific, localized writing assignments. Yet a theoretical merging of sustainability and writing studies provides a guiding framework, allowing us to build on previous developments in writing studies and other disciplines to adapt to new cultural and technological contexts. Just as I believe it is important to ask: "What will help my students learn?" I believe it is also important to ask: "What will help my students contribute to a sustainable world now and in the future?" As teachers of writing and administrators of writing programs, we have marked influence on our students' professional and social development, and therefore, the responsibility to direct (without imposing ideology) that influence in ways that benefit not only our students, but also their communities and ours.

Most of us have written a statement of our teaching, or perhaps administrative, philosophy at some point in our careers—many of us have written and re-written that philosophy, influenced by theory and practice. Why? They demonstrate our own pedagogical and administrative profiles, to be sure. They also provide a level of transparency, a way to assess if what we are doing in our classrooms and writing programs reflects what we profess to believe. The philosophy and the practice should dance together. When one strays from the other or neither suits the changing context, accommodations—innovations, even—must be made. If these philosophies truly guide our teaching and administration, then a consideration of how to connect what we do to sustainability should develop there and move outward even as it also generates in the classroom. Conscientiousness, awareness of the connection between philosophy and practice is important, just as conscientiousness about our beliefs on the environment, social justice, and so forth inform, or should inform, our citizenly actions. One does not profess to prioritize the health of the environment, for example, and then strew plastic bags and polystyrene across neighborhoods and landfills. One starts, perhaps, with buying energy efficient light bulbs, carrying reusable grocery bags. It is not changing the world in drastic ways—though that would be a fine thing—but it is practice connected to a philosophy, and the two should reinforce each other and coevolve.

So too with our philosophies and practices at both the classroom and program levels, and that is at the very core of a sustainable theory of writing: conscientious application and practice tied to beliefs and knowledge about how the world works, what facilitates communication in that world, and what might sustain that world in positive ways for the future. A theory of writing grounded in the tenets of sustainability recognizes that it is critical to know why we do what we do in our writing and in our daily and professional lives: to be able to trace practice back to its origins in order to move forward and adapt successfully to new situations, environments, crises, and technologies. For example, why do we encourage peer feedback in the classroom? Why do we allow students to submit more than one

draft of a piece of writing? Perhaps we want to raise students' awareness of audience as a real, tangible thing (which it is, as they will learn professionally). Perhaps we want them to broaden their perspectives by engaging the perspectives of others and negotiating those shared and disparate values, interpretations, and beliefs. Perhaps we want them to recognize the dynamic nature of communication as it plays out in the evolution of a written text so that they can harness what is useful in that engagement and apply it to later situations. Only in recognizing those origins can we then modify and adapt the practice to meet the needs of both students and communities.

To further connect sustainability and writing studies—that is, to move toward the beginnings of a sustainable writing theory—I draw on the works of Coe and Nedra Reynolds. In his 1975 article, Coe recognizes the need for not only a new way to teach writing, but a new rhetorical approach to communication. He critiques traditional rhetorical modes as “inadequate” to the complexities of contemporary discourse and issues because they “divide wholes into smaller units to be discussed individually or serially” (232). His critique is similar to Killingsworth's critique of how we study workplace situations, using a synecdochal versus holistic or comprehensive approach (372). Coe's 1975 observation is still true today: “many contemporary problems, especially our ecological difficulties, result in part from our using this [traditional Western] logic inappropriately” (232). Coe therefore proposes eco-logic, which, unlike traditional rhetoric, actually seeks to understand situations in their wholeness by following the ecological principle “that meaning is relative to context” (232-33).

It is important to note here that in using metaphors drawn from ecological concepts, we must do so in full awareness of their limitations and even distance from ecological science as practiced and theorized today. Dana Philips, in *The Truth of Ecology*, notes, for example, that the ideas of a connected web of life and holism have been found to be deeply problematic when it comes to ecology, neither recognizing the reductive ways in which ecological science often necessarily operates nor the complexity individual elements bring to any system (60-69, 75). Simply put, these concepts are limiting and just do not fit the complexity of the science. In his book *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard, like Philips, cautions against the appropriation by fields such as ecocriticism and ecocomposition of ecological terms “without any acknowledgment of change in use or qualification of meaning” (27). Though Philips does not address the field of writing studies or ecocomposition in his critique, it is important, when using ecological science and concepts to inform writing theory, to recognize, as Philips suggests, the difference between analogy and metaphor and to point out the limitations of outdated and current ecological concepts when applied to writing studies (76). Just as we cannot look at elements in isolation from the system, we cannot understand them as systems without also recognizing them as individual elements. With these qualifications in mind, I argue to expand rather than invalidate Coe's point.

Like Coe, Reynolds advocates a consideration of context in its complexity. Drawing on work in cultural geography, Reynolds notes, “[w]here the work of ecocomposition looks mostly to the natural world, cultural geography focuses on the interaction of the social and the built environment, but the idea of *inhabitanace* is crucial to both geographical or ecological theories of writing” (4). Like other ecocompositionists, Reynolds believes the idea of place is central to writing theory. Place can be understood on so many levels, from physical, concrete, and scientific to emotional, abstract, and philosophical. All of these perceptions impact communities. Thus, it can no more be overlooked in a discourse of writing studies than of sustainability studies.

Reynolds contends that the link between the act of composing and context, place, or environment is clear, explaining, “[M]emory and place, location and argument, walking and learning, are vitally and dramatically linked in our personal histories and personal geographies. Places evoke powerful human emotions because they become layered, like sediment or a palimpsest, with histories and stories and memories” (2). Maintaining ecological integrity is crucial to sustainability and requires an understanding of the history and dynamics of a place, just as helping our students to write effectively requires awareness of our contexts and theirs. As writers and audiences, we react, respond, and innovate from a grounding in some *place*. Reynolds argues that theories of writing (like theories of communication and literacy) and, I would add, theories of sustainability, need to demonstrate a keen, multi-layered conception of place or environment.

But there is another side to this, and that is that those of us who teach writing are also, ourselves, writers. When we reflect on our own writing, the path that leads us as individuals to negotiate written text, what philosophy or beliefs guide our writing practices? To what extent do we share that with our students? How close to or far from what we teach is what we do? How do we better align the two? Reynolds recognizes that students “are often transient residents of learning communities” (3). Thus, they differ from us markedly in the classroom environment where we often remain, watching them come and go each semester. And their writing practices, their individual paths and the contexts they bring not only to their writing but also to the classroom, are circumstantially different from ours.

Reynolds describes the phenomenon well when she asserts, “[f]inally, as teachers are faced with students from whom they feel distant, either by age or experience, race or languages, or different access to power, it's important to

find common ground, shared spaces of concern, and topics of interest. We share with students and colleagues the everyday realities of material conditions and physical spaces of campuses and towns, buildings and streets” (7). When we feel as if our students leave our classrooms having retained nothing they learned about formatting a paper, citing research, developing a thesis, or eliminating comma splices, we need to ask ourselves how we can teach writing in a way that sustains beyond the classroom—spatially and temporally—with this transient audience. Recognition of common ground is vital to productive discourse in sustainability studies because different stakeholders are often prioritizing different values. Solutions and compromises thus require common ground on which to build. The same is true for writing studies. What common ground do we share with our students in terms of place, experience, values? Where do we differ? Considering what we share and where we differ socially, economically, ecologically, and technologically can open up fruitful lines for discourse that lead to writing that reflects and affects the complex dynamics of the worlds in which we and our students actually live our daily lives.

On the other hand, recognition of differences and celebration of diversity are also important to fostering productive discourse and sustainability, whether the discourse takes place in the writing classroom or a stakeholder meeting. Coe explains that our communications usually occur “in the context of a set of expectations about ‘normal’ response” (235). We are not always aware of this, especially when we engage individuals or communities who come from similar social and/or cultural backgrounds and therefore “have been socialized to make the same choices that we ourselves make” (235). Thus, Coe emphasizes that meaning is contingent upon context, and this is as true in the world of sustainability discourse as it is in the world of the writing classroom. Maintaining diversity is key to sustaining healthy communities, and recognizing diversity is key to moving toward sustainable solutions. Helping our students to understand the ways we and they perceive relationships to individuals, communities, the ecological, social, economic, and technological world around them—consciously or unconsciously—is thus crucial to our engagement with them as writers. A writing theory informed by sustainability requires writers to recognize both pattern and difference and how they function in the context of particular communication situations at levels that begin locally and extend to the global.

In addition to recognizing patterns and differences, a sustainable theory of writing asks teachers and scholars to reflect on the social equity of writing practices and pedagogy, as well as the ways in which the writing practices and conventions we teach are exclusionary. As Reynolds notes, “[i]n composition studies, it’s important to understand the ways in which writers feel alienated from certain discourses or institutional practices, or why new forms of reading and writing are so difficult” (6). This issue is one with which we are all familiar: How do we reach particular individuals in our writing communities? How do we contribute to the sustainability of their own ability to navigate the discourses of our classrooms and their individual environments? By answering these questions, we can begin to address the implications of a sustainable writing theory for research, pedagogy, and our own writing practices.

We ask students to follow rules; we teach them conventions and genres. Yet, Reynolds warns, “[w]e are so intent on figuring out where the borders lie and who can cross them that we may be neglecting the places *constructed by* those borders” (6). If we consider our writing communities as geographic communities in which writing and communication are pivotal, we need to consider elements of what is socially equitable, what preserves the ecological (or contextual) integrity of that community, and what will promote economic stability as individuals and groups within that community operate locally and engage other communities. How, in turn, does the writing taking place, there, then extend to impact the sustainability of our individual geographic and cultural communities? In other words, how can we model in writing theory the frame of practice for our social, professional, political, and geographic environments?

Writing—the teaching and practice of it—exists in a complex system of theory and practice that engages a number of contexts (or environments) and entities (individuals, groups, audiences). Recognizing the ways in which each is connected to the others is crucial to moving toward more sophisticated, dynamic models of writing and theories of writing that fit the communication needs and problems of our current worlds. As we move toward increasing connectivity through technological innovation and globalization, we also contend with increasingly complex environmental, economic, and social challenges on a global scale that often require a kind of glocalization to be addressed sustainably. As technology develops and changes at increasingly faster intervals, as the geography of the world ceases to be a barrier and intercultural collaborations and clashes increase and lead to both benefits and tensions between the global and the local, we need to adapt as well, and we need to prepare our students to do so. While the concept of sustainability is vague and imperfect and its goals are perhaps vague and arguably unattainable, the pursuit of them follows a particular ethical and logical path that invokes a series of questions we can also ask about any communication situation. A writing theory informed by sustainability studies allows for a new level of complexity and variability in navigating the communication situations of our dynamic and increasingly globalized world.

I believe discourse at the nexus of sustainability and writing studies can lead to language that is effective in this and many other ways. Are there ways we can teach the personal narrative assignment that better prepare students to not

only engage that world but also contribute to the sustainability of the global and local communities to which they belong? Are there ways we can foreground peer review so that students recognize its implications and parallels to the professional and social world in which they will continue to evolve as writers? How can we frame the annotated bibliography so that it is more than an academic exercise for an academic genre? Many individuals, to be sure, are already doing these things. But not all. And if we cannot tell students the why, how can we expect them to be on board with the what and the how? They need to understand the system to be able to negotiate writing their ways into and through it. That understanding should include an understanding of certain elements as they relate to writing and global and local contexts, including rhetorical situation and socio/cultural/historical context and ecological integrity; audience and social equity; persuasion, intellectual property, and economic stability; and technology.

Reynolds suggests, and I agree, that our current age (into the foreseeable future) requires new metaphors for space and place that move beyond linear and bounded concepts to reflect emerging technologies and dynamic populations (5). Technological innovations have changed not only how we perceive and define places, but also how and with what we write. As an example of the inadequacies of current metaphors in practice, she discusses the idea of drafts in an age when most composing is done with computers. Indeed, most teachers of writing are familiar with the difficulty of having students show significant revision between drafts. This does not mean they are not revising—it means that revision is harder to snapshot because it takes place “on screen in a more fluid, spatial medium that doesn’t lend itself very well to ‘frozen’ representations” (6). How do we innovate metaphors and pedagogies to make the nuances of the act of writing more visible given these technological modes in order to raise our students’ awareness of the environments in which they write and to help us help them?

When we consider writing contexts in terms of the elements of sustainability as vital to a community’s success, we have an adaptable model on which to build pedagogy and practice. In order to help our students, it is productive to envision discourses as places with the same needs and elements vital to their sustainability as physical places and geographical communities. Writing theory informed by sustainability studies emphasizes what Coe describes as “systemic interrelations instead of analytic separations” (237). This kind of rhetoric is not only adaptable, guided more by principles than rules, but it also allows us to create meaningful discourse about the complex ecological, social, economic, and technological contexts in which we must act and write on a daily basis.

As technological innovations generate more varied modes of communication with different opportunities and limitations, we need a writing theory that can adapt with the modes without compromising the integrity and effectiveness of writing itself. Who is to say, for example, that our written language will not become more symbolic of rather than transcriptive of spoken language? What if texting becomes standardized and conventional for all nonverbal modes of communication? Writing may still be taught, but the ways in which we approach practice and pedagogy will have to adapt accordingly. We want to avoid both the extremes of Newspeak and Babel.

Writing pedagogy is not just about teaching our students models for good writing—it is about teaching them to think critically, to innovate ideas through the engagement of texts and the world, and to articulate them effectively following certain principles and using the available technological means for communication to the best effect, just as sustainable solutions in our physical environments require a merging of contextual knowledge, guiding principles, and innovation.

## Conclusion

I am not saying that a sustainability theory of writing or writing practice should preach ideology or particular political views—one need not be an environmentalist or liberal, nor encourage students to be such. But there is nothing one-sided about the very real concern that we are perpetuating a world that may not be able to sustain itself into the future, and that we are teaching writing—a tool for communicating, for effecting change and moving societies forward—in this world. Effective writing is successful because it engages these elements, just as a successful plan for the future of a community must engage the elements of ecological integrity, social equity, economic stability, and technological innovation.

So, what principles might guide a sustainable writing theory? Though I agree with Killingsworth in his assertion, quoted earlier in this essay, that a discourse should not be reduced to bullet points, for the sake of clarity, I will do just that. Thus, my position is that a sustainable writing theory should consider:

- ecological, economic, social, technological, and moral accountability in the practice, study, and teaching of writing;
- the impact of ecological, economic, social, and technological innovations on individuals’ writing and discourse communities generally in terms of both processes, development, and outcomes;



- the phenomenon of writing itself as grounded in place (defined broadly in its multidimensional complexity);
- classroom practice as continuously and directly connected to local and global communities, including real possibilities for student writing in writing classes and across disciplines to effect change within communities;
- ongoing adaptation of pedagogy and genres to the learning, cultural, and spatial needs and contexts of individuals and communities over time;
- accessibility and usability for a particular community in any piece of writing, which includes asking who has access and who is excluded and what factors (medium, content, etc.) enhance or impede access and use.

The challenge now for theorists of writing and sustainability is to develop all of these individual points so that a fully formed sustainable writing theory can emerge.

## Notes

1. In their book *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America*, Killingsworth and Palmer demonstrate the importance of accessibility of writing to social equity and empowerment, noting several ways accessibility is achieved in writing, “including informative headings; topic sentences; thumbnail essays and narratives; active-voice sentences and strong action verbs; concrete and familiar vocabulary; carefully selected, low-density tables and charts; and other graphical devices to enhance readability” (254). ([Return to text.](#))

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