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Approaches and Practices for Infusing Sustainability into a Writing Programme

LINDA ROWLAND, JESSE MILLNER, NATHAN HILL, AMY TOWNE and A. JAMES WOHLPART

In his seminal work connecting composition studies and sustainability, Derek Owens (2001: 8,6) notes that ‘learning how to live sustainably ought to be our primary cultural concern and, as such, must play a central role in our curricula’. Within composition studies, Owens suggests that sustainability might begin with the study of our environment, including not just the natural environment but also the built environment, ‘so that students might explore how their identities have been composed by such places and vice versa’. From this foundation, composition classes can then engage sustainability as ‘an intergenerational concept that means adjusting our current behavior so that it causes the least amount of harm to future generations’ (Owens 2001: xi), what Owens calls an ‘inherently holistic’ approach that makes ‘connections transcending disciplinary borders’ (Owens 2001: xv).

As described earlier, Florida Gulf Coast University’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) proposed the creation of a developmental curriculum for sustainability, which allowed for the inclusion of this concept into the first semester of our required composition sequence. Faculty from the English Department, and especially those involved in the first-year Writing Programme, convened to devise a process for gathering, reviewing and selecting readings for our first-semester composition course that would introduce students to an ecological perspective. Initially, a call was sent out to all faculty members for suggested readings and they responded with nearly 60 titles.

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A task force was created to review these readings and narrow them to a manageable number for a review group. The review group selected 15 readings to pilot in courses to determine which would foster the development of an ecological perspective in first-year students. After using the essays in their own courses, these professors met to discuss the effectiveness of each essay in the classroom setting.

The process to locate, review and analyse possible readings was inclusive, allowing all members of the programme to participate. The faculty involved in the review presented their work as it unfolded to the English programme and published the essays in a public folder for input from the wider community. A consensus was reached to include the following four essays as required reading in all Composition I classes: Wendell Berry, ‘The Whole Horse’; Annie Dillard, ‘The Snake’; Richard Louv, ‘Leave No Child Inside’; and E.B. White, ‘Once More to the Lake’. In addition, faculty would select two to three additional essays from the following list: Tim Appenzeller, ‘The Big Thaw’; Wendell Berry, ‘Christianity and the Survival of Creation’; Richard Conniff, ‘Counting Carbons’; Aldo Leopold, ‘Thinking Like a Mountain’; Corrie Pieterson, *Invasive Exotic Species in South Florida: Melaleuca quinquenervia* and *Homo sapiens*; Scott Russell Sanders, ‘Defending Our Common Wealth. Community or Commodities: Which Makes Us Happier?’ Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*. Finally, the group recommended viewing a film relating to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals titled *The Girl in the Café*. These readings are now being used in all sections of Composition I.

Several faculty members have developed assignments designed to help students engage with the idea of sustainability and begin the development of their own ecological perspective. A few are offered here as examples. One instructor noticed that while students were composing a written response to *Leave No Child Inside*, several were text messaging, which to him seemed sad and ironic. As a result, he asked his students to write an essay that begins with a fearless chronicling of their relationships with technology: computers, cell-phones, video games, TV and the like. Many students were surprised by the number of hours they spend online and several were stunned to realise that the only time they were not technologically engaged was when they were sleeping. Students were then asked to consider their relationship with technology in light of Louv’s thesis that children who don’t spend time outside climbing trees and building forts develop ‘nature deficit disorder.’ The instructor asked the students to reflect upon their own experiences and how cell-phones and computer use might have influenced their relationship (or lack of relationship) with nature as they grew up. Students were asked to conclude their essays by examining how their relationships with technology may have affected their attitudes towards the natural world and the consequences of these attitudes for environmental issues. Some students arrived at the stark realisation that because they have had virtually no experience with the natural world, issues of land preservation and sustainability, as well as the larger issue of climate change, have little or no meaning to them. The instructor found that this assignment not only encouraged critical thinking and reflection about relationships with nature brought on by the heavy use of technology, but it also forced students to confront the implications of their attitudes. For many of them, it was the first time they had looked at their own lives and the potential effects of their choices on the environment.
In another classroom, many students, even those who did not consider themselves ‘environmental types,’ found that they believed there was value in preserving green spaces, maintaining local ecosystems and avoiding sprawl. Students in this class read E.B. White’s *Once More to the Lake* and Aldo Leopold’s *Thinking Like a Mountain* and responded with essays of their own. After discussing the texts in class, students were asked to write two rough drafts that mimicked each of the authors. In mimicking White’s essay, they were to describe the important places of their past and in mimicking Leopold’s, their encounters with the natural world. They then chose one of these topics to develop into a full paper.

Students following White’s example examined important places and how those places have changed over time. Many students—especially those from Florida communities that had undergone incredible growth and development in the past few decades—described parks, beaches and grassy lots that no longer existed as they once did. They wrote essays about forests that had been lost, swamps that had been drained, beaches that became more crowded and wooded fields that had been turned into condominiums or office parks. By examining these changes, they also examined their relationship with their communities and acknowledged their own impact on their environment.

Students following Leopold’s example wrote about important moments from their past when they learned something about the natural world. A student from the Florida Keys, for example, wrote about how she would climb into the canals next to her house to pet the manatees that occasionally wandered in. Another student described a life-changing family vacation to Alaska. Another described his first encounter with a coral reef. Another remembered the awe he felt when he was caught by a severe thunderstorm while fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. And another discussed her high school’s attempt to ‘green’ the campus: ‘There was no real nature to observe. This was the architect’s perception of beauty and nature . . . and nature seemed to be whipped.’

As noted by Wals and Jickling (2002: 227–28), ‘Teaching about sustainability requires the transformation of mental models. . . . Teaching about sustainability includes deep debate about normative, ethical and spiritual convictions and directly relates to questions about the destination of humankind and human responsibility’. Discussion of the selected readings in the Composition I classes led students to an analysis of sustainability practices on campus and in their everyday lives. An assignment for an analytical essay asked students to observe an environmentally unsustainable practice committed by themselves, other individuals, or businesses. Students were asked to consider and explain the reasons behind the practice, going beyond obvious reasons such as laziness or carelessness to investigate the reasons behind people’s carelessness, and identify the implications of the practice for sustainability.

The classroom discussions around these essays were highly charged because students were deeply engaged. As Lyndgaard (2008: 90–91) notes, ‘In a writing course where the goals are skill-based, the amount students learn is directly related to their level of engagement with the subject matter. By studying issues that impact their daily lives, students become energized in their discussions and essays to think more critically than they otherwise would’. The Composition I course readings, discussions
and writing activities have allowed students to engage issues related to sustainability on a personal level, laying the foundation for further study at higher levels during their academic careers.

**References**


