Creating a Culture of Sustainability: Infusing Sustainability into the Humanities
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Ultimately, sustainability ‘must take root in the consciousness and cultures of society’ (Calder, Clugston and Corcoran, 2002: 202) to become an effective means of creating widespread change. Indeed, the participants at the 1997 UNESCO Conference on Environment and Society: Education and Public Awareness for Sustainability recognised ‘that radical social change must occur before environmental change can transpire’ (Wright 2002: 210). The humanities, the broad disciplinary perspectives that include the study of languages and literature, the visual and performing arts, and philosophy and communication, are particularly well disposed to engage values and beliefs and thus to effect change in cultural systems.

At Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), The University Colloquium: A Sustainable Future and Composition I go a long way towards introducing students to the issues and challenges of sustainability (as described in the two articles by Rowland et al. and Bevins and Wilkinson). Indeed, students often leave these classes with a light burning in their eyes from the eagerness to know more. But two isolated courses rarely allow for a full transformation of perspectives or understanding. Our struggle has been to infuse education for sustainability into the curriculum across all colleges and programmes and across all levels of learning. Several programmes in the humanities, including Art, Communication, English, Philosophy and Spanish, have used the concept of sustainability as a thread that links programmes and courses. For instance, the Communication programme, our largest major on campus, includes a track in Environmental Communication; the Spanish programme includes service and civic activities guided

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by an ethics of sustainability; and in the Introduction to Philosophy class, faculty use the Earth Charter as a contemporary document that seeks to unite multiple perspectives into a coherent and codified value system for the new global economy. Within the Art programme, a studio course in Environmental Art ties the course content and skills to the campus ecosystem, directly connecting the local natural environment to the making of art, while a survey course, Art and Ecology, links an art historical methodology with systems analysis and more specifically, to an ecological approach in order to study institutions as they relate to art production or patronage.

SERVICE LEARNING

As part of its Quality Enhancement Plan, described earlier, FGCU is working to create a more comprehensive curriculum to advance sustainability education through service learning—the direct engagement of students in their communities on projects that advance their classroom learning. Gadotti (2008a: 20–21) notes that sustainability education is ‘not limited to cognitive aspects, since [it] involves challenges, behaviors, attitudes and intentions,’ as well as the ability ‘to feel bound to the human community’. Several courses have included a service-learning component tied to the development of an ecological perspective. Two in particular, Environmental Humanities, a sophomore-level course in our General Education programme, and Environmental Literature, an elective in the English, Environmental Studies and Communication programmes, use service learning to advance sustainability education. Ultimately, the service projects enable students to understand that their actions make a difference: ‘To change the world is to understand power as the capacity of doing, as a service, asserting that “we”—the “common people”—are the ones who can change the world . . .’ (Gadotti 2008a: 51).

ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES AND WINGS OF HOPE

Environmental Humanities is a course born of the theory that environmental sustainability requires human cultural production and symbolic life (faith traditions, philosophies and literatures) to prompt, and to be prompted by, lived ecological wisdom. As described in the FGCU catalogue, the course explores ‘central concepts of environment, community, and sustainability through the lens of the humanities disciplines, including literature, the arts, communication, religion, and philosophy.’ As currently designed, Environmental Humanities draws from childhood studies, religious studies, environmental philosophy and literary studies to broaden students’ understandings of the interrelationship between ideas and environment. The course opens with a unit on childhood and nature, driven by Richard Louv’s Last Child in the Woods (2005), and then moves into a unit on faith traditions and environmental philosophies, driven by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim’s Worldviews and Ecology (1994). The final unit of Environmental Humanities has students reading Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony (1977), as well as presenting their own eco-critical analyses.
‘Wings of Hope’, the service learning experience, is a grant-supported, environmental education initiative in which Environmental Humanities students team up in small groups to learn about the southwest Florida ecosystem, with a special emphasis on the endangered Florida panther. Areas of focus for student teams include natural history and panther signs, panther research, water conservation, wildlife tracks and panther kittens. Trained in these areas by Wings of Hope staff, students then present their knowledge, through interactive programmes either on the FGCU campus or at a local watershed site, to elementary school children. Both the college students and the elementary students then take their knowledge beyond the classroom as they use a brochure to teach family, friends and other members of the community about southwest Florida’s flora and fauna, as well as everyday ways to live more sustainably. Since 2000, Wings of Hope, led by Director Ricky Pires, has educated more than 100,000 people including students, parents and other community members. Coupled with Environmental Humanities’ focus on early childhood, Wings of Hope encourages students to reflect on their own formative educational experiences, and more theoretically, to think about the changing definition of childhood and how they might be witnessing—but also, possibly, curtailing—the end of an era when a sense of ecological wonder typified childhood.

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE AND THE EARTH CHARTER

‘Environmental Literature’ is an upper-level course jointly taught by faculty from the Environmental Studies and English departments and based on the idea that the path to sustainability requires more than a change in technologies and economies; it requires a change in our culture. We open with a discussion of Tu Weiming’s Confucian worldview, which seeks to move from the anthropocentric to the anthropocosmic, that is, from the exclusively human worldview to one that sees the human story as one thread, albeit a significant thread, in the much broader story of the universe. Tu Weiming notes:

Human beings are . . . an integral part of the ‘chain of being,’ encompassing Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things. However, the uniqueness of being human is the intrinsic capacity of the mind to ‘embody’ . . . the cosmic in its conscience and consciousness. Through this embodying, the mind realizes its own sensitivity, manifests true humanity and assists in the cosmic transformation of Heaven and Earth. (Quoted in Tucker 2003: 48–49)

As Tucker (2003: 49) observes, ‘This cosmic transformation implies that humans have a special role in being aligned with the fecund, nourishing powers of life. They need to be responsive to other humans but also to the larger macrocosm of the universe in which humans are a microcosm’.

Students read literary works through the lens of the Earth Charter, a document that provides an ethical framework that encompasses not only ecological integrity but also issues of social and economic justice and democracy, nonviolence and peace, which allows us to expand our notion of sustainability. Works that are especially
successful are Alison Hawthorne Deming’s *Writing the Sacred into the Real* (2001), Rick Bass’s *Winter* (1991), and Janisse Ray’s *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999). Students respond to each text differently, but usually find in at least one of these works a personal connection that allows them to grasp the concept of sustainability and to develop an ethical framework around it.

The service-learning project brings the learning goals of the course to life. One group of students volunteered at a sustainability education lecture and public event that brought together a wide range of age groups who shared their experiences in the environment. This project fostered a deep sense of intergenerational respect. Several students initiated projects in their workplaces, seeking to transform an established culture. Projects ranged from starting a recycling programme to seeking local sourcing for products. Other students investigated the sustainability of their lifestyles; one analysed the environmental effects of all of the beauty and hygiene projects in her bathroom and then created an educational programme to make others aware of what she found. For all projects, students kept a journal reflecting on how their service activities expanded their ethics and wrote a final paper that summarised their activity and defined their emerging ethics of sustainability. Ultimately, the projects, along with the self-reflection, created an opportunity for the transformation of lifestyles and, perhaps, the beginnings of changes in culture. Students have the often-uncomfortable opportunity to reflect on their values, their beliefs and their daily actions. Ultimately, they reflect on identity issues such as: Who am I? Why am I here? How can I make Earth a better place to live? What do I want to learn from my parents and grandparents? What do I want to give to my children and grandchildren? How can I fashion my life around an ethics of sustainability? As Gadotti (2008a: 29) notes, sustainability ‘involves human beings finding a balance between themselves and the planet, and more, with the universe itself. The sustainability we defend refers itself to the discussion of who we are, where we come from and where we are going, as human beings’.

In his essay ‘What We Need to Learn to Save the Planet,’ Gadotti (2008b: 24) suggests that education for sustainable development is not sufficient, that instead we should be educating for a ‘sustainable life’. He explains that such a lifestyle is intentional and includes ‘personal responsibility, commitment to other people and a spiritual life’; it is ‘related to the options that people take in daily living’. In order to provide a foundation for the creation of this lifestyle, this new way of being in our students at FGCU, we have incorporated service learning into the curriculum to make their learning about sustainability a concrete, lived experience.

References


