

## Can literacy be environmental? Saving the world, one verb at a time

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*ABSTRACT: In today's world, it is as important to teach our students concern for the planet as it is tolerance for all races, religions and genders. Educator and literacy theorist Paulo Freire defines literacy as the ability of a learner to "read the word and the world" and claims that such learning, indeed all learning, begins with the novice understanding how to "name" (that is, read and write about) the tangible items that make up his/her personal world (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29). This paper will discuss how English classes in which students focus on the environmental issues which impact their own lives can serve as preparation for success in academia.*

*KEYWORDS: Eco-literacy, English, environment, composition.*

### INTRODUCTION

There are probably few people in the United States today who would not agree that education in this country is deeply in crisis. Many students – I would even go so far as to say most – make the transition from high school to college unable to comprehend written academic discourse, unable to write a complex sentence (and frequently not even a simple one) without a half-dozen errors in word choice/ usage, syntax, grammar and punctuation. Most frustrating, however, is that not only are they unable to think critically, but that they don't want to be taught how to: it's the just-tell-me-the-right-answer-so-I-can-fill-in-the-blanks syndrome, and it's a direct result of the teaching practices employed from kindergarten through secondary school.

We all know that formal education (as opposed to vocational training) is not action-oriented, at least not in this country. Indeed, students frequently joke that the methodology in most classrooms, often sometimes even at the graduate level, is "sit-down-and-shut-up." The "I lecture; you take notes and regurgitate on tests" mode, what Freire called the "banking system of education," is still rampant from third grade through graduate school. It is compounded by a package of approaches which include an ever-stronger emphasis on standardized testing (for example, the current administration's *No child left behind* program); in-class reliance on examinations (usually in true/false or multiple-choice formats, which demand memorization rather than understanding or critical thinking skills); and the infamous five-paragraph essay.

Educators such as Giroux (1985), and Freire and Macedo (1987), have long called for eradication of this unfortunate scenario. They claim, quite rightly, that it is essential to develop a community of learners in each of our classes, stimulating the type of questioning attitude that permits students to read critically, think critically and write critically about issues that are pertinent to their lives in the world outside the classroom. Over the past couple of decades, there has been a good deal of discussion about, but not nearly enough action having to do with, the need for interdisciplinary classes, courses and curricula, and for a focus on "real life" issues.

## A CASE FOR ECOLOGICAL LITERACY

But why should we teach our English classes from an environmental point of view? In attempting to develop a rationale for such an approach, we might begin by considering the words of educator and literacy theorist Paulo Freire. In *A pedagogy for liberation*, Freire and Shor (1986) write:

This is a great discovery: education is political! When a teacher discovers that he or she is a politician, the teacher has to ask, What kind of politics am I doing in the classroom? That is, in favour of what am I being a teacher? (p. 76).

In no classroom are his words more pertinent than one dedicated to the development of critical thinking, reading and writing. Freire always insisted that the idea of value-free education is nonsense, an impossibility, and that only critical praxis, the union of inquiry and action, holds the key to true learning, and hence to true change. In agreement, Henri Giroux (1985) calls it “a radical pedagogy informed by a passionate faith in the necessity of struggling to create a better world” (p. 27).

Certainly ecological literacy falls into this category. An environmentally focused curriculum provides a truly authentic context for learning for all students because it is the only one that everyone shares, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, socio-economic status or nationality. But there is another, more urgent, reason to consider an eco-curriculum. Because of our rapidly shrinking natural spaces, very few young people growing up in today’s world have hands-on interactions with or understanding of the world’s natural systems. More often than not, unfortunately, the only place they can acquire an appreciation for its beauty and a sense of responsibility for its accelerating demise is in the classroom.

There are, however, problems in bringing environmental ethics into the English classroom. One of the most volatile of these is that culture, politics, ethics, philosophy and aesthetics are all “don’t-tread-on-me’s.” They are bound up with highly subjective, individual choices, untouchable, seen as part of both our individual and our collective identities. Even before political correctness became an issue, teachers were trained not to impose their own agendas – political, religious or other – on their students. They were taught that their personal opinions might be offensive to others, and that “the American way” was to give every student the right to his/her own beliefs. In recent years, however, issues such as domestic violence, racism and homophobia have begun to be addressed in classrooms both in the United States and abroad. In none of these cases do the instructors advocate in favour of what we now recognize and openly discuss as unacceptable attitudes and behaviors. Why should violence to the planet – upon which our very survival as a species depends – be dealt with differently?

The issue of what schools should teach, and/or should be allowed to teach, is certainly not a new one, but this is perhaps the first time in humankind’s history that its own survival as a species depends so directly on that decision. Our goal in eco-English classes – and we need to be up-front about our intentions from the first day of each semester – should be to teach students about both the planet’s environmental problems and their own responsibility in helping to solve them, not necessarily so that they will believe what we believe, but rather so that they are better able to articulate

their own beliefs, to understand where these come from and what the consequences of those beliefs are in environmental terms.

Writing, as we know both from personal experience and many years of research in the field, helps us discover what we know, articulate our values and prioritize our lives. Telling stories, especially stories about nature and humankind's place within it, is indeed an art as old as the earth. As educators who choose to teach English with an environmental focus, we demonstrate a commitment in passing on to our students something more than simply an understanding of the material at hand and an ability to write well. We want our students to feel for the planet and its eco-systems some of the same passion – and compassion – that we ourselves feel. *Good* writing – the kind we demand from our students – always deals with the “real world”, and nothing is more real in this new Millennium than the perilous state of the planet. In addition to teaching the craft of writing, eco-rhetoricians have an obligation to help our students become what Kirkpatrick Sale (2000) calls “....dwellers in the land” to help them “come to know the earth fully and honestly...” (p. 23).

The discipline of composition, when taught as most other purely intellectual exercises, has always tended to be isolationist. While it often focuses on social issues, such examination is usually done through a wrong-way telescope, allowing its practitioners to maintain a comfortable distance from the problems under consideration. In contrast, activism by its very nature is hands-on, down and dirty, making it unappealing and perhaps even frightening to many in academia, instructors as well as students. A praxis-based syllabus built around real-life environmental projects that are linked directly to reading and writing assignments can provide students both a “safe” introduction to eco-activism as well as the knowledge and understanding with which to address the rhetorical and philosophical demands of the “eco-comp” classroom.

Senegalese ecologist Baba Dioum, in a speech made in 1968, said that “In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we have been taught.” People who are lucky enough to grow up in areas where nature is relatively unspoiled are “taught” by nature itself. But that, unfortunately, is not the case with most of our students, and as urban sprawl continues apace, students with nature backgrounds are becoming as rare as Dodo birds. The majority of our students don't have a clue as to how the web of life functions – nor their own place within it – despite high-school classes in biology, earth sciences and sometimes even environmental studies. They come into our classes not knowing what a food chain is, or the fact that recycling alone isn't enough to save the planet. They don't know where the objects they depend on daily come from, or that throwing something “away” doesn't get rid of it. They don't realize that development and “progress” translate into habitat destruction or why it is a problem. They know nothing about the hundreds of species condemned to extinction every day, or the immediate or long-range effects of biocides, or how their own lifestyles contribute to and suffer from any of these problems.

In an article entitled “Semiology, ideology, *praxis*: Responsible authority in the composition classroom,” James Ladikta (1990) discusses the role of personal ideology in teaching:

There is a need for philosophy among teachers of composition, a need to examine critically the assumptions that govern our personal lives and professional practices....As responsible teachers, we must recognize that classroom discourse is ideologically charged regardless of individual teaching practices, and that those who strive for “objectivity” are acting, though perhaps unwittingly, to powerfully support a particular ideology, the ideology of our societal status quo (§1).

This is basically just a fancier way of restating Eldridge Cleaver’s claim that if we’re not part of the solution, then we’re definitely part of the problem.

In addition, as Voloshinov (1994) notes, basing our pedagogical practices on the assumption of objectivity – either our own or our students’ – gives a perversely mistaken view of language, by focusing attention only on the words themselves rather than on their inherent capacity for either repressing or instigating change (p. 63). If we are dissatisfied with the status quo, including racism, misogyny and violence to the planet, we cannot continue to condone educational practices that uphold those circumstances via adherence to a false neutrality. Teaching responsibly in the “eco-comp” classroom means recognizing our commitment to the planet, and accepting the fact that to educate *is* to change.

Sharon Crowley (1989) has written an article entitled “A plea for the revival of sophistry,” in which she discusses similarities between the Sophists and modern teachers of composition, pointing out that the rhetorical ideal justifies the acquisition of knowledge in terms of the improvement of the quality of human life. And, by extension, the life of the planet, by which human life is sustained. Crowley advocates our return to the teaching of “rhetorical awareness” in the Sophist tradition, meaning “the realization that all acts of composing and interpretation occur within a complex network of social, political, ethical, and cultural parameters” (p. 323).

Like Freire, James Kinneavy (1988) feels that we should restructure not just composition programs but the entire educational system in order to address issues of critical social consciousness. He writes: “What is required, if we are to be faithful to our historical analysis [of *kairos*], is to devise a college composition program that will have ethical, epistemological, rhetorical, aesthetic, and political dimensions” (p. 108). Students in programs such as the ones he advocates would begin to understand the real power of words. Their writing would then become of telling importance. If indeed knowledge is constructed and not merely transferred, then students must learn to be the creators of their own knowledge, and in the process may also come to understand that social institutions and inequalities that seem to be givens are merely constructs, subject to change via conscious social action. Students thus feel empowered to produce change, both in their individual lives and, concomitantly, in the world around them.

In addition to providing basic environmental information, how can “eco-comp” teachers promote respect for the environment? We must seize every chance to emphasize the importance of environmental values and ethics. We are abdicating our responsibility, if we forgo opportunities to build curricula that emphasize these issues, if we do not choose our texts with an eye to the eco-values they present, and if we do not develop our lesson plans and writing assignments in such a way that students are forced to deal with the difficult questions of environmental ethics.

## **ECO-LITERACY IN ACTION**

There is, however, the issue of job security. Just how radical dare an environmentally-focused teacher be in a classroom which includes an Exxon executive's son, the niece of the vice-president of a major land development corporation, and the daughter of a fundamentalist minister who is also on the Board of the Sugar Growers' Association and owns considerable shares in Monsanto? That was the situation I found myself in several years ago while teaching at a private Prep school in Miami, Florida. And that was the point at which I determined that I would never again accept any position before making my eco-agenda absolutely clear ahead of time. I now teach "eco-comp" and "eco-lit" at Moorpark College, a two-year community college that prepares students to go on to four-year universities. My classes are identified in both the catalogue and each semester's class schedule as "focusing on environmental issues."

Although Moorpark's campus covers 134 acres in the mostly undeveloped hills of Ventura County some 45 miles northwest of Los Angeles, its students – living in a half-dozen small, mostly rural, communities nearby – are in many ways urbanites, with shockingly little awareness of (and often a great deal of resistance to) the still relatively abundant flora and fauna in the hills that surround them. And before coming into my classroom, they certainly had never considered the possibility that their Burger-King, mall-hopping lifestyle could have any impact on those surroundings. These students share their campus with many types of wildlife, from creepy-crawlies, as they call them, to skunks and possums, to deer, bobcats, coyotes, and even the occasional cougar. The hills surrounding the campus are a paradise of native vegetation, much of it under federal protection, where the air is loud with insects and all sorts of birds, from the tiniest hummer to hawks, eagles and the recently re-introduced California condor.

And yet, I find that not only are the vast majority of my students blissfully unaware of but often actually resistant to any interaction with their natural surrounding. Almost none have the slightest interest in venturing the 50 feet or so beyond the edges of the campus into what they refer to as "wilderness" (hardly!!). Not a single one is able, at the beginning of each semester, to recognize or articulate any of the problems inherent in the establishment of a 20K population (students, faculty and staff) in a previously untouched, natural setting. Students (and unfortunately, I might add, most of the faculty and staff as well!!) simply do not understand the environmental costs of cutting a new road, putting up a building, creating infrastructures, and so forth. Their lack of eco-awareness, despite 12 years of required science education, is a result of the fact that, although they can (well, a few of them can) mouth words such as "over-population", "habitat destruction" and "pollution," these are only vocabulary items, having no real meaning for them, and certainly no impact on or importance to their lives.

At the end of this past term, my students handed in the final draft of an essay in which they examined the impact of urban sprawl on their own local communities, the culmination of a four-week unit of classroom study and individual research. As I do at the end of each semester, I gave them a sheet of paper with "ANONYMOUS" written in 26-point caps across the top, and the following question: "Is it possible for

an environmentally-themed, freshman composition course to have a lasting impact on a student's day-to-day lifestyle?" I would like to share some of their responses.

One student writes: "Yes, of course it can, because we are learning to think critically about how our daily choices can have big impacts on the planet. I never knew that I had an 'ecological footprint' and certainly not that I would see its results so clearly in my own hometown."

Another says: "I would say that I was a fairly nature-friendly person before this class, but I have definitely become much more concerned with my own and others' actions in the last couple of months. Now, after examining the impact that humans' attitudes and actions have had on my own small community, I have made, and intend to continue making, serious changes in my lifestyle and consumer habits."

This next student came to me after class and insisted on signing his name, standing up for what he believes in, he said. The attitude didn't surprise me since this is his third class with me, and when he finishes at Moorpark at the end of this semester, with a straight four-point GPA, he will be going on full scholarship to the University of California at Davis, having changed his major from computer science to environmental studies. He writes: "Personally, the lessons that I have learned in Environmental English will last a lifetime. These classes have changed my perspective on how we live on this planet – so much so that it scares me to think that there are people out there with grossly distorted views on the current state of the environment. I feel that I am much more aware now than before I took these classes: in my day-to-day life I constantly stop to think about the little things that I do, from choosing not to buy a particular product, to biking or walking whenever possible instead of driving. By talking to friends, family and neighbours about the things that I have learned, and by choosing environmental studies as a major, I hope to someday have as much impact on others as these classes have had on me."

An environmental English syllabus provides common ground for students by focusing on issues that are the same for everyone, regardless of age, gender, race or religion. It levels the playing field because most of these problems are usually equally unfamiliar to all of them. Readings, class discussions and writing assignments that deal with pollution of air, water, soil and food, or that trace consumer items from raw resources through production to waste disposal, seem able to bridge the gaps that frequently separate students coming from different socio-economic, cultural, linguistic or educational backgrounds. In classrooms that include non-traditional students, often the case in community colleges, such an approach has the added advantage of allowing traditional students to interact with and gain an understanding of the lives of community members with whom they might otherwise never have come into contact in a situation of equality.

Another pedagogical advantage to an eco-syllabus is that it provides opportunities for students to read, think, talk and write about authentic problems in a recognizable, tangible world – the world they inhabit on a daily basis – rather than on theoretical ideas or issues so distant that they are essentially meaningless. In addition, it provides real-world opportunities for students interested in community volunteerism and/or for courses with a service-learning component.

All of the readings, films and writing assignments in my courses have to do with the values and ethics that impact today's environmental issues. As a group we examine the sources of today's eco-problems, consider the obstacles to their solution, and propose reasonable options. The materials used in an eco-comp classroom are usually somewhat easier to read than the often much denser, "intellectual" materials used in other English classrooms. Films, both documentary and feature, are frequently used in my classes since, in addition to the fact that humans are essentially visual animals, we're dealing with students raised on TV. Films are especially important learning devices for students from cultural/ educational backgrounds where reading has not been stressed.

While so-called "popular" materials are often not considered valid teaching or reference sources, the assumption being that they are not intellectual enough, the on-going collapse of the planet's eco-systems is not intellectual either. I would argue that the lasting success among the general public of works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent spring* (1962) has very little to do with her highly scientific discussion of DDT and its effects, but rather with the shock value – the gut-level impact – of her call-to-conscience, her condemnation of society's use of biocides and other toxins, and her plea for a re-thinking of our moral and ethical stance toward the planet. Carson has passion; Carson creates passion in the reader. And it is passion that we must create in our students. Other popular works that have had a similar consciousness-raising impact on the public are Lovelock's *The ages of Gaia* (1988) and Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), and more recently Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael* (1992) and Karen Tei Yamamoto's *Through the arc of the rainforest* (1991). And while I am certainly not advocating the Disney-escuing of nature or our environmental dilemma, I know from my students' own admissions that *The Lorax*, *Fern gully*, and *Pocahontas* have had far more of an impact on their environmental consciousness than all their years of science classes – exactly because their emotions, their affective domains, were engaged.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to keep in mind that it is the values, beliefs and lifestyles of the general public, not those of the much smaller intellectual and scientific community, which will eventually save or destroy the planet. To believe that more than the tiniest fraction of our student-body is anything other than the general public is not only delusional, but downright dangerous. And the general public, as we have seen in almost half a century of environmental education, does not respond emotionally to scientific knowledge. Our choice, then, is simple: we can either continue not to tread on the anthropocentric values of our "eco-comp" students while we watch the environment disintegrate, or we can teach environmental values in the same way that we teach tolerance of race, religion, nationality and gender. I appeal then for a willingness on the part of all of us who profess to care for the earth to teach not just hard, cold facts or ivory-tower theories, but that which we all know in our hearts – that we cannot continue to break nature's laws and expect the planet to survive.

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