

“Writing makes it easier to relate to the Environment” – The Valuable Role of the Composition Classroom in our Threatened Environment

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Abstract: The author examines the role and influence of a place-based Environmental Literature and Writing class on her undergraduate students’ perception of their personal position within their immediate and extended environments. Further, the author aims at gaining a better understanding of what course elements the students found particularly valuable and effective in the realization of their agency within our environmental context, and what role writing played in the students’ reflections and examinations of the complex relationships between self, nature, and matters pertaining to sustainability and the future of our natural habitats. By assessing student writing, collecting questionnaires, and conducting open-question interviews, the author explores her students’ impressions and experiences of navigating global and local environmental issues through a Humanities-based course.

Keywords: Composition; ecocomposition; place-based writing; composition and rhetoric

***Author Biography:** Originally from Germany, Yasmin moved to the US to study Communication and English, eventually receiving her PhD – Composition & TESOL from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She has presented her research at various conferences and has published pieces on multigenre writing, multilingual students, and ecocomposition. She currently teaches Communication and English at Divine Word College, and lives with her family in Iowa.*

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After all anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high, the air heavy or clear and anybody is as there is wind or no wind there. It is that which makes them and the arts they make and the work they do and the way they eat and the way they drink and the way they learn and everything (Stein, 1965, p. 45)

The world, as we’ve come to understand it, is changing. Undoubtedly. Neither one’s political affiliation, nor one’s belief or disbelief in regards to climate change can alter this inevitable reality. Once again recent storms have exposed our vulnerability and shown us that our human concepts, constructs, and current sense of human superiority, do not shelter us from unprecedented storms, floods that cannot be contained, and the inevitable horror that arises from natural disasters. While the mentioned natural catastrophes have in the past been viewed as a topic and problem of the hard sciences, such as physics, biology, ecology, and so forth, we are witnessing a push in the Humanities that urges us into the direction of our shared “reality”. It urges us to engage with what we are collectively facing and act with what we have and can do. We are no longer unaffected and uninvolved in our Humanities camp but must find paths and ways to bridge the Sciences with the Humanities (Wilson, 2014). We are called to come together to sift “through the fever swamp of human existence” (Wilson, 2014, p. 44), human tragedy, and human reality to address the truth that we ourselves have caused and which affects us now and in the future, despite our departmental affiliation.

In a report published in 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) wrote that “many aspects of climate change and its associated impacts will continue for centuries, even if anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are stopped. The risks of abrupt or irreversible changes increase as the magnitude of the warming increases” (p. 73). While statements like this may be clear and unambiguous to some, others might be filled with doubt, fear, even anger at this “liberal agenda” or “liberal propaganda”, terms we’ve heard abundantly over the past months, even years, especially in the academic sphere and our English and writing classrooms.

In her book *A Peaceable Classroom* (1993), Mary Rose O’Reilley reflects on teaching during the Vietnam era and the effect the contextual violence had on writing classrooms. She asked, “Is it possible to teach English so people stop killing each other?” (p. 20). O’Reilley recognized the importance of the composition classroom in response to our larger social, even global context and the realities associated with it. Now, over 20 years later, in 2018, we face another, perhaps even more pervasive issue: human violence against our only, our shared home: Earth. Now, we must ask ourselves and our colleagues, “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing our planet?”

With this question in mind, I embarked on a journey to get involved with efforts to bridge the Humanities and “hard” sciences in order to provide students with a holistic, complex, and realistic impression and concept of our natural environments. By providing this approach, I wanted to give my writing students the opportunity to grapple with questions dealing with self and nature and their role within nature and the future of our planet, while exposing them to writings from humanists, scientists, and those who have already meshed the two fields. I also wanted to provide my writing students with the chance to explore new ways of dealing with unprecedented environmental threats and matters of sustainability in our world that is an environmentally ever-changing place. I answered a calling that encouraged us compositionists to

“teach English to show respect both for human life and for our environment” (Bruce, 2011, p. 13).

Placing my Approach within its Context

In order to create a platform for teaching a class that would provide students with the opportunities I wanted them to obtain, I decided to go with a place-based approach that I would embed in the theoretical framework of Ecocomposition. I selected these approaches because I wanted to emphasize the idea of interconnectivity between writer, our shared and individual natural environments, physical and spiritual spaces we inhabit, language, and culture (Cooper, 1986; Owens 2001a; 2001b; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002a; 2002b; Dobrin, 2011; Cahalan, 2008; Hothem, 2009; Ingram, 2001; Mauk, 2003). Based on my approach, I wanted my student writers to understand that they were inseparable from their individual places and therefore, our larger global context.

I also set out to understand the symbolic and physical spaces that my students see as integral to their sense of self and how their association with a place, or several places, affected their perception of themselves in regards to sustainability efforts and general environmental concerns. With my contextually revised Mary Rose O’Reilly question in mind, I asked myself: *Do my writing students see themselves as being responsible for our Earth’s health decline? Do they view themselves as having the power to be solutions to those problems? What about the oftentimes confusing and contradicting messages about climate change that bombard my students all day long? Can they effectively sift through their reality, which is marked by “mass media and mass culture that threaten to blunt the mind’s power of critical thinking and reduce them to a state of indiscriminate conformity?”* (Bruce, 2011, p. 12).

The Composition classroom, along with other Humanities disciplines, offers a great and unique opportunity for students to create “intimate contact” (Wilson, 2014, p. 56) with others to then engage in rich and dynamic narratives and interactions to further explore our place within our places. Through the lens of Ecocomposition, the writing classroom becomes its own multifaceted environment and can be seen as an “intricate ecological system where organisms interact with one another and their environment” (Connolly, 1989, p. 3). Here, students rhetorically place themselves within their natural environments to make sense of their own position within the larger web and to examine how that position makes sense in the extended context that incorporates their peers’ places and other organisms dwelling in those locations. Further, through my place-based ecocomposition classroom, where the writer, text, other writers, personal experiences, are all intertwined, student writers can recognize that writing “requires a higher level of engagement, a higher level of interactivity” (Johnson-Sheehan, 2007, p. 13). As writing, “allows writers to connect prior conceptions to new conceptions” (Balgopal & Wallace, 2009, p. 17), my student writers could explore who they are and what they believed throughout our shared semester of place-based reading, writing, talking, and thinking. At last, as writing is a “method of enquiry” (Park, 2013, p. 338) it offers student writers a way to reflect on themselves, to realize their thoughts, and to express themselves while experiencing this expression through their self-produced texts (Park, 2013; Ivanic, 1998). This further supports the idea that writing in an Environmental Writing course can aid in our writing students’ ability to recognize and establish themselves in our larger environmental context.

Considering my Students

Reflecting on my idea of place and what it means to identify with a specific location, I had to recognize my own background of privilege in order to realistically gauge what I might expect of my students who were not exposed to nature as frequently and thoroughly as I had been. My early childhood was spent largely outdoors, either in my backyard, on hikes in the Alps, and the woods and two rivers surrounding my hometown, Augsburg, Germany. My father was a scientist/science teacher who could explain anything dealing with nature (or at least he could explain what constituted my “anything” at that point). He would narrate hikes and point out rock formations, waterways, or other place-specific items. Aside from gaining scientific insight into the nature around me, I was also able to deeply connect with my natural world as it was where my best memories were created and where I could find a unique peace and silence that resonated with my soul. However, there was also a dark side to paradise. Having been born only six weeks before the Chernobyl accident that left various European countries fearing the clouds that brought rain, I was raised with an omnipresent natural disaster that emphasized our human role in the protection and destruction of our shared places. While we drank American imported powdered milk mixed with water from the French Alps, were told to refrain from eating wild boar or other game, and to not bring into the house anything that grew in the forest, Eastern European countries were dealing with unprecedented cancer rates, radiation poisoning, and other horrors. It became clear that we, as humans, were tightly connected with other natural beings and contexts, for better or worse. Overall, I was able to live my love for nature and to explore and experience the wonders, questions, and awe that nature provides. This early life also enabled me to view myself as an inextricable part of nature as many children do when they are able to surround themselves with nature (Kalvaitis & Monhardt, 2015).

This was my background. I was filled with an affinity towards nature that resonated with what Wilson (1984) described as “biophilia”, or the idea that we as humans have an innate disposition to appreciate and love our natural world. Could I expect that my writing students would feel the same affinity towards nature that I had? I had to think of students who might associate nature with something threatening, dangerous, or otherwise negative. Also, what about students who grew up surrounded by a lack of nature? Perhaps in an inner city setting where “outside” meant dull concrete structures, loud noises, trash-filled parks, depressing shades of grey, and cracking sidewalks that might home a strongminded dandelion for a few weeks during the summer months. What about my students whose places, which had been integral to their individual development, produced feelings of despair, hopelessness, and fear (Owens, 2001b; Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998; Hurlbert, 2012)? Places where there was no room for nature or the sense or act of taking care of nature?

Coming to Life – Environmental Literature and Writing

Initially, I designed a four-week January term class, titled “Writing and Your Environment”. This place-based class focused on scientific journal articles dealing with climate change, local authors who wrote about nature in a way that my local students could recognize, various journaling and multi genre writing assignments and activities, and hikes through local parks to become familiarized with the local flora, fauna, history, geology, and so on. The class was received quite well so I decided to extend it into a 16-week course, titled “Environmental Writing and Literature”, as my department chair asked me to incorporate more literature instead of presenting it solely as a writing class.

While the 4-week course had been taught at my alma mater in Iowa, the 16-week class was adopted by my, then, full-time employer, a midsized university in southwestern Wisconsin. As place was such an integral part of the course, I spent months researching local indigenous tribes and pieces of writing (or transcribed oral histories), the writings of authors that called this region of Wisconsin their home, and foundational pieces of literature that set the stage for some, perhaps exploitative, ways of thinking about nature and views that had become mainstream in current US America.

To provide a solid basis and in order to explain to my students the theoretical foundations of our class, we read some seminal and fundamental texts, such as Cooper's (1986) "The Ecology of Writing, but also more contemporary pieces, like Hothem's (2009) "Suburban Studies and College Writing – Applying Ecomposition". The reading assignments were accompanied by place-based narrative writing assignments in which students were asked to reflect on how they presently viewed themselves and how their places have influenced their perceptions. My students told me how much they enjoyed the writing as it did not only help them express and think about their current perceptions, which oftentimes were laden with feelings of homesickness and a sense of dislocation, but also see how they already possessed so much knowledge and information that was valued in our class. Some of them had either grown up camping, farming, fishing, hunting, gardening, or simply being outdoors. Some mentioned that they had not associated these activities with something that might be academically valuable or of interest.

After spending some time with the theoretical background of the class, I started assigning place-based writings by local authors. As my students were all from the local tristate area - Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin - my selected texts were applicable to all, not just some. We began by reading works by local tribes, such as the Ojibwe (Tigerman, 2006). I decided to take this approach because members of these tribes were the true first place-based writers, orators, and inhabitants of this place. I also wanted to provide my student writers with the opportunity to view reality through alternate cultural lenses and, by doing so, give my student writers a different way of thinking about the environment, humans, roles within our shared locations, and the place of writing and rhetoric. Offering alternate views was important to me as our current environmental context is marked by an environmental crisis and therefore requires our students to develop a certain open-mindedness in regards to alternate ways of viewing nature, their roles within nature, and themselves (Donahue, 2014; Horner, NeCamp, Donahue, 2011). The inclusion of Native American texts also offered valuable approaches to composition, as some writings were filled with and based upon an alternate set of cultural ideologies, which can inform student writers of a unique rhetoric, way of writing, and way of engaging and thinking (Cole, 2011; Owens, 2002; Powell, 2002; Cushman, 2014). Cole (2011) points out that, "a more complete engagement with Native and indigenous rhetorics not only holds out opportunities to make students better writers, but it also carries the potential to make us better teachers and scholars in our field" (p. 142). Using local Native American texts became a way to not only expose my student writers to a different way of writing that reflected its own purposes, contexts, and audiences, but also to provide them with ideological insights that were different from our widely-accepted Euroamerican (Powell, 2002) behaviors and perhaps fundamental to a more sustainable approach to living, being, and thinking.

After exploring local Native American writings, I assigned readings (*see Appendix B*), which were always accompanied by journaling, that continued to move on chronologically to address texts by early settlers and the first conservationists such as John Muir. We then

journeyed beyond our current place a bit and read well-known environmental writers, such as Thoreau, Sanders, and even Lovelock. Leopold, a local Iowan and Wisconsinite, allowed us to bring things back to our current place and more local writers. The student writers composed insightful narratives, relevant research papers, and eventually published a place-based online publication that reflected every students’ place and writing.

One assignment that received a lot of student praise was the “mini-place/love letter to a tree” writing. For this, I asked students to wander around campus and locate a natural spot that was appealing to them. Then, the students experienced this place for some time and eventually composed a brief place-based narrative that aimed at expressing the student writers’ perceptions of their location. While some described sensory experiences, others added haikus or short poems. Some students used their phones to take pictures of the surrounding areas, selfies, or to research their mini-places, which yielded quite interesting insights into our shared place, the campus!

Students and Place

I taught the described class at a mid-sized Midwestern University in southwestern Wisconsin. This institution is well known for its engineering focus and houses an array of STEM disciplines. While several of my Environmental Literature and Writing students were majoring in areas such as Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, or Soil and Crop Sciences, I also had several students with an academic focus in Music, Education, or History. While there were no Freshmen, due to the class’ prerequisite, there were several Sophomores and Juniors to compile a class of 11 female and 6 male students. None of the student writers were English majors and most of them mentioned taking the course as an elective. It is also important to point out that due to our local environmental context, most students had grown up surrounded and involved with nature, or a subjective definition of it, in some way. Southwestern Wisconsin has harsh and long winters that oftentimes force the inhabitants to stay indoors for long stretches of time. As if overcompensating for this lack of outside exposure, most people here are hikers, campers, hunters, or at least park-goers during the warmer months, suggesting some interaction with nature. Further, Southwestern Wisconsin is an agricultural area where farmers grow soybeans, wheat, or corn, have dairy farms, cranberry fields, raise horses, or breed beef cattle. As most of my students had explained that they were either raised on a farm or in an agriculturally-based town, I could teach the course in a manner that reflected my students’ awareness of the local climate, geography, and agricultural and environmental agencies. Regarding my prior considerations of the possibility that my students might associate the outdoors with something unpleasant or reflecting an urban setting, I soon realized that this idea would not be the case as my students described their “green” concepts of nature within the first week. As my students shared some of my passion for nature and our environment it is important to consider how this course might have worked out had my students entered the classroom with a very different, less environmentally interested mindset.

Did it work? Examining the Results

After a fulfilling semester of writing and reading, the questions burned: did it work? How did the students place and see themselves in their natural surroundings after having completed the class? How did my students perceive their role within the environmental context? Did the class help them to recognize that they were a vital factor in the future of our planet?

Examining my students’ writings that consisted of narratives, research papers, journal entries, questionnaires, notes, in-class writing assignments, and speaking with them via semi-structured

interviews, allowed me to gain some insights into their perceptions of themselves and the class' effectiveness in regards to the objectives I had aimed for.

In their Words: Class Writing

To assess my students' writing, I modified and adopted a rubric that Balogopal & Wallace (2009) created in order to evaluate student writing in a Writing to Learn science class (*see Appendix A*). My modified version of the rubric aided in my assessment of students' writing following the completion of our Environmental Literature and Writing class. More specifically, I was interested in exploring if my students' writing exemplified "authority" (Owens, 2001b, p. 36), "powers of expression" (Hothem, 2009, p. 43), and if student writers became "agents" (Mauk, 2003, p. 216) who had taken "responsibility" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 11) of their environment as a result of having taken the Environmental Literature and Writing class that semester.

Another point of interest was my students' writing in regards to their rhetorical placement within a natural context. I evaluated authority and power in the students' place-based writing by examining if their writing clearly demonstrated that they personally identified with or attributed a sense of "I" to their chosen place. This would then indicate whether they successfully placed themselves rhetorically as writers within their mentioned environment. Student writings should have exemplified place-based research and reflection in a manner that allowed them to write confidently about their self-selected place. I also addressed the features of agency and responsibility by evaluating student writings based on the students' awareness of their active role within the environment, that they perceived responsibility for their places, and the environment beyond.

After analyzing sixteen student final essays using my rubric, I had rated eight students as having written about their places and environment in an "authentic" manner, which suggests that they had successfully combined researched materials with knowledge and personal insights about their places. These eight students had combined their awareness of the larger environment with a connection to their individual and unique places.

I only rated one student's final essay as being "objective" as she clearly understood the larger concepts and problems pertaining to the complexities of our natural world. However, she did not show a connection to her personal place that she should have identified in her essay. The objective writer failed to incorporate personal materials that would demonstrate her clear understanding of the interconnectedness of her individual place and her larger environmental surroundings, a tenet crucial to Ecomposition.

Considering the rubric's "subjective" category, I rated seven of the sixteen final essays as falling under this category because the mentioned student writers composed clearly about their personal connections, perceptions, and lives with their selected places, but did not express an understanding of their personal or their place's role within the larger environmental context that we are all part of. These seven writers often relied on extensive narratives about their places and the roles these places had in their lives. However, the writing lacked insights into the larger and more complex realities of our planet and its parts.

Concluding this part of my assessment, I had found that 50 % of my students who had completed a 16-week Environmental Literature and Writing class had achieved the objective of writing in an "authentic" manner about their environments. This authenticity should also present a manner of writing that combines personal, local, and oftentimes smaller places with what we consider our larger, extended, and shared environment. Both of these local and extended

locations are connected and interdependent as well as dependent on the student writer and other individuals within the places. Unfortunately, the other half of my class did not seem to have made that connection between interconnected environmental places and spheres and interconnected student writers and places through their written texts. Contrary to this insight, other types of assessment I used, such as interviews or questionnaires did not support this finding. All students seemed to have benefited from the course and all of its components in one way or another, but various factors might have contributed to the fact that I was able to classify only 50% of my writing students’ final papers as “authentic”. Perhaps using my students’ final papers as part of this particular assessment influenced this number. I can assume that my students, who shared their anxiety and stress over final exams and assignments with me quite frequently during those last weeks, were overwhelmed with work. Perhaps they knew their academic standing in my course, had calculated their final grade, and therefore knew which grade they needed in order to maintain an A or B; most individuals in the described course were excellent students. Perhaps they had lost their sense of engagement. Perhaps I had not been clear enough in my description of the final paper. Perhaps students were simply exhausted. I am not quite sure what made 50% of the students achieve “authentic” levels of writing while the other half of the class simply did not; all I can do is speculate. Fortunately, my other forms of assessment yielded quite positive results that made it clear that the course, readings, assignments, writings, discussions, and so forth, all contributed to my students’ engagement and the reaching of our shared objectives.

Regarding the “authority/power” category, which I incorporated in my final essay rubric to determine whether my students would write with confidence, power, and authority about their places (Hothem, 2009; Owens, 2001b) after having taken our Environmental Literature and Writing course, fifteen out of sixteen writers exemplified this objective in their final essay. The one student writer who did not meet the objectives for this “authority/power” category, did not provide sufficient reflection and research on her rather vague description of a self-selected place.

At last, I wanted to examine if the students’ papers exemplified signs of personal responsibility and agency in regards to their immediate, but also the extended environment. I wanted to see if my student writers demonstrated that they were aware that they were indeed crucial elements of the larger environmental context, and could be agents of action and change that might lead to the establishment of a more sustainable attitude towards their, and our, natural habitats. Out of the sixteen final student essays, I classified seven student papers as clearly showing a sense of agency and responsibility towards our environments. Another seven students’ writing did not present such a feeling of agency in their final paper, and the remaining two demonstrated a sense of communal and collectivistic responsibility towards nature, but failed to explicitly include their personal agency within our environmental context.

In their Words: Questionnaires

The three questionnaires that I handed out throughout the semester, presented a more cohesive story in which almost all student writers demonstrated a more engaged and involved perception of themselves in a larger environmental setting. I used these anonymous questionnaires to gain insight into the students’ perceptions of the course as it was moving along and make adjustments if needed. When I asked my student writers if they found that the course was enabling them to stretch their thinking in regards to their environmental surroundings, the answer was a unanimous “yes” as early as the second questionnaire (the first one, which I handed out in September, had two students who explained “not yet”). My student writers mentioned that “this

class has forced me to think about where my place is and be more aware of my environment [...]”, and “Yes, it makes me look past just simple and convenient answers and makes me really question and think about current perceptions and issues and their reasoning behind them”.

Also, the class readings seemed to impact the students’ ability to regard alternate sustainability-related philosophies and ideologies. One student mentioned that “I have also been more able to look at the topics discussed in class from more perspectives than just my own which I think has made me a better reader/writer”. Another student described: “I love philosophy + this deep meaningful thinking that we do in class + I’ve never had those types of conversations about the environment. These conversations have expanded + enforced my own ideologies and perceptions of nature”.

It appeared as though my selected local Native American texts had been quite influential, as students referred to them in the questionnaires and interviews. It became clear that most students felt challenged by the lack of reciprocity that is commonly associated with Western land use and ethics, but commonly alluded to in some Native American texts. One student writer mentioned that, “[...] I now know how the Native Americans [in our shared location] felt about it [nature] which makes me feel like them about nature. I feel like I should give nature a soul so I feel very personal with it and understand it better”.

When asking the student writers about their or our human position in nature, the answers echoed disillusionment and discontent but also a few almost idealized and overly romanticized sentiments. Some students declared that, “Our position as a whole is pretty detached. Some of us are close with nature, however, as a whole we don’t interact with it too closely”; “We have placed ourselves on a pedestal above nature. Our place is one we’ve created, not one we’ve been given”. On the other hand, some more positive comments suggested that “Our position is to help and restore nature. Preserve it, let it grow and flourish and not destroy it”; “Humans are children of Mother Nature and should take care of nature. We are the care takers of nature”.

Recognizing our agency and ability to make choices against or for nature, a student explained that “We, as humans, have a unique position because directly through our actions we can either help or hurt nature. We can live with the environment and protect it (symbiotic relationship) or we can exploit resources for our own use”. Another student writer mentioned that “I like to work with nature mutualistically I try to find the best benefit for both”.

The course also made students reflect on their role within our natural environments and gave them a platform to grapple with difficult questions dealing with themselves as potential agents of environmental change, as writers, and as inhabitants of various spaces. The course also seemed to help students examine the interconnectivity between various elements within a place. Students remarked, “It [the class] made me think about us being care-takers of the environment and when we hurt the environment, we hurt ourselves”; “[...] I didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to the environment prior to this class but now I do”; “[...] I understand more about nature, who is involved and how to help. I feel like I can make a change now knowing more about our environment”. Most answers reflected a repositioning and open-minded reevaluation of the students’ previously held perceptions of our environment that changed throughout the several weeks that we shared through the course. It was also clear that the third and last questionnaire presented more variety in regards to student answers, which further showed their growth. Some answers also demonstrate the student writers’ development into individuals who recognize their individual responsibilities within their environmental settings.

Let’s Talk - Interviews

Lastly, I interviewed five students following the end of our shared Environmental Literature and Writing course because I wanted a more direct interaction and shared recapturing of the course with my students. I also wanted to dialogically reflect on the semester and identify shared traits and elements that the students found useful and beneficial in terms of course content and their learning experiences.

All but one of the five volunteer interviewees – female students majoring in Criminal Justice, Geography, Crop and Soil Management, Reclamation, Environment, and Conservation, and Business - described that they had been raised with an affection toward and interest in their natural surroundings and that this course appeared interesting to them because it appealed to their existing positive disposition toward nature. The self-identified “city person” described the need for a balance between the city and nature life.

When asked about their perception of their personal role within nature following the completion of the course, the student participants remarked that the course had been influential in their reconsideration of themselves as active parts of nature or fortified their existing beliefs that they had a significant role within nature. One student mentioned the class made her realize that “we need to do more to preserve it and restore some aspects”. Another student remarked that the course gave her a platform for reflection and critical thinking. She stated that, “I’ve never looked at nature through a philosophical or historical philosophical lens so reading some of the readings that we did from Native Americans and the eighteen hundreds [...] and just understanding how the perceptions of nature have kind of shifted [...] I’ve never had a class that’s done that before so that was really interesting to kind of see through a different lens”. Another student noted that the course helped her recognize the interconnectivity of generational behaviors and the effects one generation can have on another. She explained that, “it [class] made me start to see more of how humans affected how something you do today can have an affect 50 years from now and how some of our problems today came from our grandparents, great grandparents and that wasn’t something I really thought about [...] it takes time to create the problems and it’s going to take time to fix the problem”.

Commenting on the course readings and the impact these had had on the interviewee’s renegotiations of herself within nature, she mentioned that the course helped her connect with authors and their ability to transform nature and resultantly, her personally held perceptions of her environmentally based role. She described: “[...] Reading the texts and short stories from the book or whatever the handouts were...it was nice to see how the author, other authors lived and how they took care of nature; it make me like ‘huh that’s interesting maybe I should do it’”.

The students’ answers suggested that the course was influential in their reevaluation of who they were and wanted to be within their natural habitats. Further, my former Environmental Literature and Writing students explained how the course made them gain a sense of motivation in regards to contributing to the preservation of our environmental surroundings and natural places. One student remarked, “I want to know like how I can help like little things like recycling not polluting with stuff”. Another student echoed these sentiments: “I became more aware of my actions and what I throw away, what I do, kind of looking at the ground I’m walking on...how can I keep it the way it is or make it better..kind of leave things the way, the way they were found”. A third student explained that the course provided her with a sense of urgency and the need to act soon and quickly. She explained, “I just really want to like volunteer more I think that’s what I want to do to just you know...like at shelters, or just at the like a national park if I can or just clean up trash at a park I think that would be super fun which I never thought I would

do before because I kind of don't want to but now after reading all the texts that the other people did like Thoreau". This student coupled her environmental responsibility with social awareness, suggesting that she recognized the interrelationships between these elements and aspects. She also relied on the texts that seemed to have been fundamental in her recognition of her own agency. This reflects the tenet of interconnectivity that *Ecocomposition* so clearly relies upon as the writer, texts, culture, environment, language, etc. all come together to create and recreate cohesive ecosystems and intertwined webs of writing and being. Also resonating with *Ecocomposition* is the students' clear recognition of agency and responsibility towards nature, which was also a central and important aspect of the course's overall objectives.

The interviews with my former students also shed light on the role writing played when they sought to establish their perceptions of themselves in nature and their abilities to make more concrete some abstract and complex topics associated with *Ecocomposition* and sustainability. Some students reflected on transcending academic boundaries by envisioning audiences beyond our physical classroom and other artificial boundaries that they seemed to associate with academic writing.

Others explained that the daily writings had improved their ability to explore and make sense of convoluted and intertwined relationships between self, their individual place, the larger environment, and the truths behind climate change and its effect on all of the other relevant elements.

Examining her writing, one interviewed student explained her increased rhetorical awareness and joy in being able to produce a text - the online published final - that could transcend academic boundaries and be shared with others outside of our physical, academic setting. The concept of transcending academic and artificial, human-made boundaries is fundamental to the elements of *Ecocomposition*. The student mentioned: "I think the coolest part about this class was publishing the book at the end because I was able to share that with my friends and family and I've had so many people comment [...] it was really interesting to be able to share kind of a collective piece of like kind of what this class was all about and kind of how our minds kind of formed these ideas with other people". Her insights further emphasized the idea of interdependence between individuals, which reflects the interrelated nature of our shared individual places, and how combining those thoughts and places can lead to the recognition of unity.

Also recognizing the role of writing, another student remarked that, "writing about the environment was definitely something new for me and I actually enjoyed writing [...] it was cool to get to write about something that I had cared about and cared about like more throughout the class". Demonstrating the integral role of writing in knowledge acquisition, the student explained that "surprisingly writing makes it easier to relate to the environment and like go through that thought process". Similar to her peer who also recognized the importance of her audience, the current student attributed great significance to her audience and remarked: "writing out your thoughts is kind of a good way to share those thoughts with other people if you want to see others start to change their views of the environment like seeing and reading your writing can kind of have that effect just like our thoughts changed by reading all those pieces, all the stories".

To emphasize the importance of the writer and self within our larger context, I asked students to incorporate their own places and sense of self into their research papers and other writings. One student remarked that "it [writing] was all from the heart and I could express myself however I wanted to and I think with all the feedback that I received [...] gave me more ideas of how I can improve and I did save all these essays to look back on and see what I can

improve on in my future essays”. Her comments do not only suggest the beneficial aspects of writing, but also her ability to transcend the class boundaries and take her improvements into her “future”.

At last, I wanted to know what my students found useful about the class, so I asked them to identify specific course elements that they identified as having been particularly helpful. Most participants mentioned that the course readings were effective and that “analyzing all the texts [...] helped me see the bigger picture of everything”. The most popular texts seemed to be all of the Native American pieces that we discussed early on in the semester, the *Wildbranch Anthology* (Caplow & Cohen, 2010), an anthology of contemporary nature writing, and various Scott Russell Sanders texts that I assigned from the *Wildbranch Anthology* or the Orion Magazine website.

In addition to the texts, the small and large group discussions were another popular aspect of the Environmental Literature and Writing class as these enabled the students to co-construct knowledge and engage in collective meaning making, especially for topics that “were vaguer” and called for the presence of “multiple different opinions”. One student mentioned that the discussions “helped to expand our knowledge of what we were really talking about”. In addition, these “big huge group discussions” seemed to help the students discern their own opinions: “it was just really nice to just hear other people’s opinions and see where they stand and see where I stand”. The discussions enabled the student writers to reflect on, construct, co-construct, and grapple with their developing roles and senses of self as they pertain to our natural surroundings, ideologies, other individuals and opinions, and perceptions of how all of these elements are interconnected and intertwined.

After carefully analyzing my students’ words, it became apparent that my Environment Literature and Writing students had gained an increased sense of environmental responsibility through course elements like our assigned readings, discussions, and the various types of writing we had shared throughout the 16 weeks. The students expressed a desire to become more involved with environmental efforts and to take on more engaged and active roles towards increased environmental protection. My student writers described a heightened interest in participating and volunteering at environmentally oriented organizations or making other environmentally aware and considerate choices toward a more sustainable future. The students explained that the course and course experience had enabled them to become aware of their own capabilities and power to become part of a solution or at least take on a position that does not further our environmental problems. My students also maintained that they realized their involvement and connectedness to their own places and therefore the involvement with our larger environmental context. Throughout my conversations with my former Environmental Literature and Writing students, it became apparent that they shared the recognition of their responsibility towards nature, explored their appreciation of their natural surroundings, and recognized the importance of their own unique places that are part of a larger web of beings and habitats.

Collective Narrative

The individual pieces of knowledge that my student writers so graciously produced and shared were not only fundamental to my data collection but also crucial to the overall course narrative that evolved throughout the 16 weeks we shared during that semester. Heise (2008) suggests that a commonly shared narrative that addresses and deals with our contemporary environmental realities that are marked by climate changes and the associated social, cultural, and economic

challenges, are of great importance for our time. Many student writers addressed and discussed climate change in their writings and words. They examined effects on the planet, researched recent data pertaining to their local environments, and evaluated how small places were intertwined with larger contexts through our shared climate and natural habitats. The Environmental Literature and Writing course that we shared for a semester generated the interactions and conversations that are necessary for the creation and re-creation of a collective human narrative and communal imagination that reflects and entails what we are experiencing at this moment in time. This narrative must present the realities of our currently shared presence that is marked by our planet being greatly affected by and suffering due to our anthropogenic behaviors and inabilities to find ways to live within and share our environments in an mutually beneficial, considerate, healing, and more sustainable manner.

Heise (2008) further states that “Understanding climate change ecologically and conveying a sense of the quite divergent impacts it might have on communities around the globe is a task of such magnitude that relatively few writers [and filmmakers] have attempted it so far” (p. 206). My student writers attempted this endeavor and effectively composed creative, insightful, and relevant texts that demonstrated their understanding of the planet and their personal spaces within differing environments. Together my student writers addressed and included the challenging realities of our natural surroundings as they created our understanding of a shared narrative of place, our role within nature, and the extended environmental contexts. They produced epistemologically valuable insights into their experiences with a time and place that is characterized by threats to the existence of all beings, thereby aligning with the idea that “narrative genres [...] provide important cultural tools for organizing information about risks into intelligible and meaningful stories” (Heise, 2008, p. 138). This kind of storytelling and collectively crafting and composing what our common story should include in order to realistically reflect the here and now in its symbolic and physical senses, was clearly addressed with and throughout my student writers’ work.

At Last

After the completion of our 16-week Environmental Literature and Writing course, it became clear that the course - with its various texts, writings, discussions, and other components – had been influential in my students’ realization of their personal role within the environment. The focus on reflections and discussions, or as the students often referred to it, “the philosophical part”, was conducive to their collaborative co-construction and meaning-making processes of experiencing and viewing themselves within nature. The writings, questionnaires, and interviews suggests that my student writers effectively used the semester to grapple with valuable and significant questions that, sadly, demark our current times. Our shared experiences enabled the students to make more sense of their individual places and roles within the larger web of nature. The course also seemed to fulfill the students’ desire to write themselves into their contexts, explore audiences, experiment with writing styles and ways of personal expressions, and thereby allowing them to recognize the transcending abilities of writing that can go beyond the classroom. Following the completion of Environmental Literature and Writing, three of my student writers added an English minor, which they attributed to the reflections, critical thinking, and joy the class had brought them.

Anderson (2014) remarks that our historic involvement with our natural environments and ways of cultivating our land “reveals constant adjustments, adaptations, failures, restarts, and negotiations” (p. 49). I see my Environmental Literature and Writing course as having been

impactful enough to become an influential part in my students’ reimagining and reconsideration process of their role within personal and our collective places. I can hope that the experiences that were shared and created in the course may lay the foundations for becoming such adaptations, restarts, and adjustments in the lives and places of my students. When seeing my student writers’ words, which reflect their new sense of environmental responsibility, I am hopeful that the changes in a more sustainable direction will remain with my students and that they will continue to ask themselves important and critical questions that led them to the establishment of their current roles within their personal and shared natural settings.

Reimagining oneself, critical thinking, and cultivating personal open-mindedness are only a few things that we can provide the students with from our Humanities perspective. “Because an understanding of sustainability requires an awareness of the interconnectedness of what are traditionally considered separate academic fields” (Owens, 2001b, p. 4), it is our shared responsibility to ensure that a bridging between the disciplines is attainable and common. Such a shared approach “should be at the heart of liberal education everywhere, for students of science and the humanities alike” (Wilson, 2014, p. 40), because “the most successful scientist thinks like a poet – wide-ranging, sometimes fantastical” (p. 41).

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Appendix A

Table 1

Overview of Modified Writing Rubric for Final Student Paper

Category	Description	(Fictional) Example
Superficial/subjective	Students write clearly about personal experiences relevant to the topic but do not successfully express an understanding of their role within the larger environment	“My family had a big farm and last year’s flood ruined our entire barn and all the wheat that we stored there. Our loss was so big that my mom had to take a part-time job in order to make ends meet. I realized that my whole life would change because of what had happened”
Objective	Students understand issues and concepts pertaining to their larger environment but cannot incorporate personal connections to the material	“According to scientists, flooding in the Midwest has increased by X% over the past decades, ruining farmable land and causing economic hardships for numerous family farms.”
Authentic	Students successfully combine the knowledge and awareness of the larger environment, which they are part of, and “make personal connections to their role” (p. 21) within the environment	“Over the past decades, flooding in the Midwest has increased by X%. Floods have ruined farmable lands, causing millions of dollars in damage for the farmers and consumers. When my family farm was hit by last year’s flood, we lost everything. My home, which had always been my place of refuge, was destroyed and my family hasn’t been the same since.”
Authority/Power	Students clearly demonstrates identification with her/his place. It is clear that student has researched or reflected on her/his place sufficiently to write confidently about it	
Agency/Responsibility	Student writing suggests that student is aware of her/his active role within the environment, that she/he has responsibility for her/his place, and the extended environment beyond	

Appendix B

Bibliography of Class Readings

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