

May 10, 2003

To: Participants in the Education for Sustainability Workshop, Spring 2003

Fr: Dorothy S. Nelson, English

Re: Some notes on The Education for Sustainability Faculty Development Workshop and its effect on the pedagogy, methodology and content of my present sustainability curriculum and future courses.

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### **Reflections on Current Changes in Eng 102**

In my presentation to my colleagues, I gave everyone “The Questions Posed by Ecocriticism” from The Introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm; a narrative essay, “There is a Man on a Rock” by Charles Bowden; and some questions to consider. Bowden’s essay presents challenges because of its web-like and somewhat disjointed form. I use Bowden’s essay in my classes because he explores what is unknown – experiences and issues that are difficult to understand. We are asked to fill in the spaces, draw meaning from the key metaphoric references and suggest connections between the various elements. Even the seemingly disconnected parts of his essay more accurately represent our condition as humans in these times – more so than the essayist with a sure hand and seamless prose. I appreciated everyone’s thoughtful efforts to look at this essay from an ecocritical perspective, using Glotfelty’s questions as a guide.

After our second workshop, my students were reading, Edwidge Danticat’s book, After the Dance. Instead of waiting until they read Bowden’s essay, I presented “The Questions Posed by Ecocriticism” introducing this method to students while they were reading Danticat. I gave them a take-home “quiz” and asked the following question: “In what ways do the ideas and questions of Ecocriticism help to shed light on the intentions and value of Edwidge Danticat’s travel memoir, After the Dance? Use quotations from her writings....”

What value did this method have for students? One student wrote that when the book was first assigned he had approached it as just another memoir about an author’s return to her childhood home. He didn’t think he would be that interested. But when he began to use this ecocritical approach the book came alive for him.

He wrote: “The quiz on Danticat was a turning point for me. Once I read the handout on ecocriticism and looked back at the novel a revelation occurred. The environment is important to me for a completely different reason than I had ever viewed it. Now, I see that the environment controls so much. It has control over one’s occupation, upbringing, socialization, interest and phobias. Or in shorter terms, everyone is a product of his or her environment. Now with this information I can look at the environment, with passion and interest. I see how Danticat describes her native land and the impact of it, on the history and the future of Haiti.”

Another student wrote: “Danticat frequently compared the present with the past, which amplifies the current degraded state of the environment. Danticat gives life to the natural world throughout the book, indicating figuratively that the earth is in pain. ‘The rocks form fields of natural sculpture, some split down the middle to look like mouths screaming up at the sky.’ (104) She associates the rocks with artwork, which gives encouragement to preserve the earth as we preserve art...She frequently compares Haiti to more agriculturally successful time periods and describes the rise and fall of agriculture in Haiti. It is strange that a tropical country like Haiti has to import food from other countries. There is sun and rain all year round but the land has become barren and infertile. Danticat uses characters that knew of better times to emphasize her point of preserving the land...”

These student writings have shown me even from this initial exploration that an ecocritical perspective helps them to read particular works in significant ways not only because it foregrounds the physical setting but because it makes us all the more conscious of humankind’s *relationship* to the physical setting.

One student wrote of her difficulty with this method. “I was taught to put people in the center, to base my discussions and thoughts about literature solely on how people were relating to each other and what they were doing.”

To prepare for the final essay we read a number of different narratives in addition to Danticat and Bowden’s work. For example, students were asked to read Clarrisa Estes’ “Butterfly Woman” and answer the following questions: Does taking an ecocritical approach challenge the way we see things? Does this approach invite us to interrogate our own conditioning? What did you learn from taking an ecocritical perspective while reading Estes’ narrative?

We were learning ways to do this together. And for a time the lines between teacher and student were blurred.

In the book, Ecocompostion, edited by Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser, Marilyn Cooper writes, “...to move place more forward in our studies, to add it to race, gender and class, is to recognize more fully that place is not just about environmental destruction, but is, in part, how we live in relation to other cultures, discourses and species. In many respects this move releases the environment from the background and expands it: it is no longer setting. Critically, it is a move with crucial ethical implications for thinking about who we are, how we interact, and how we behave...” (p. 160)

### **Modifications in my syllabus for future Eng 102 Composition courses.**

*“...What we think of any landscape depends on what we know, what we imagine and how we are disposed; each of us puts together the information we have differently ‘according to his or her cultural predispositions and personality.’” Sue-Ellen Campbell quoting Barry Lopez in her essay “The Land and Language of Desire” from The Ecocriticism Reader, p. 129.*

Preliminary Plans and Condensed outline for syllabus for Eng Comp 102 or Honors 101/102.

These ideas are enhancements of a course I have been teaching for a few years.

I would divide the course into three segments.

**1. The Personal Essay.** Four page paper. Personal history with the non-human world. Stories and concerns. Assigned readings include such writers as: Rick Bass; Wendell Berry; Marilou Awiakta; Maxine Hong Kingston; Alberto Rios.. Writing exercises will focus on: The double-entry notebook; observation, perception, description, narration, problem posing, purpose, wondering, reflection, connections, questions, looking again, contentions, contradictions.

**2. Critical Research.** Eight page paper. Two drafts. Plus double entry notes. Practical Competence. Focus on Sustainability. What are the problems? *“Good thinking proceeds from the friction between reflective thought and real problems.” David Orr*

We will form six groups of four students each to research such areas as: I. air pollution, toxic testing and waste storage; biological and chemical warfare. II. food production, agriculture, land use, organic farming; GMOs; III. water pollution, potable water, oceans, drought, famine, flooding. IV. fuel, global warming,, energy sources – nuclear, solar, etc.; V. species and wilderness protection; VI. work place health; future work ( recycling, technology); environmental racism; health and medicine. (These are examples of some of the topics that students have chosen on their own during the last several semesters.) Each Group will present their projects to the class after mid-term. Students will be encouraged to incorporate personal knowledge and experience when appropriate to their research. Papers will reflect and apply ideas about alternative and critical research and dialog with and integrate the ideas of at least two essayists from the syllabus. Five weeks. Eight pages.

Assigned readings will include such writers as Janine Benyus; Rachel Carson; Jerry Mander, Wendell Berry; Sharman Apt Russell; John McPhee; Terry Tempest Williams; Ellen Meloy; Aldo Leopold; Pam Houston; Running Grass; Scott Russell Sanders; Alan Durning; Martin Lewis; Bill McKibben; Julien Simon; Joseph Bruchac. Students will be encouraged to research and address contending views, to write about what is unknown, to provide relevant background, to evaluate sources, to situate themselves and their research questions, to wonder and to think critically.

**3. Final Essay.** Ecocriticism. Minimum five pages. Two drafts, plus notes.

Readings from such writers as Edwidge Danticat, Charles Bowden, Clarrisa Estes, Evelyn White, Leslie Marmon Silko.

“...all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of languages and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human.” from the Introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, editors.

Larger purpose: *That quality of mind that seeks out connections. (Opposite of specialization and narrowness) David Orr, page 92.*

**Assignment (in part):** Compose a series of questions that have been prompted by the authors we have studied since mid-term. Choose one or several of these questions to serve as a generating force for the beginning focus of your essay. Your essay should express ideas that you have formed based on your understanding of the issues and the positions of the writers...

**Pedagogy.**

The ideas of ecocritics in Glotfelty and Fromm’s Ecocriticism Reader connect to scholars, compositionists, educators and writers I have drawn on for years in my teaching.

Concerning the concept of relationships, I think of UMass/Boston Professor Emerita Ann Berthoff’s words, “You can’t make meaning unless you form concepts and that involves you in generalizing and interpreting; in gathering examples and seeing how they are related to one another...” And, “Articulating relationships as we form and develop concepts depends on a capacity to see the form of one thing in another, to use the form of one to explain and define the other. Such a description is called an analogy and it represents the way we see relationships. The continuum of the composing process depends on the fact that we can see one thing, shape, event, concept – in terms of another.” Also, “Thinking is seeing relationships; rhetoric is the art of naming, opposing and defining in order to articulate relationships.” from Forming, Thinking and Writing, Second Edition.

When I think of ecological language, I think of Paulo Freire’s words, “Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word of language; rather it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically

interconnected. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context.” from Literacy: Reading the Word and the World.

The idea of interconnectedness and the analogy of the spider’s web brings to mind Leslie Marmon Silko. She writes eloquently about the ways that all things are connected in her essays and her fiction. In Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit, she writes, “The Pueblo people have always connected certain stories with certain locations; it is these places that give the narratives such resonance over the centuries. The Pueblo people and the land and the stories are inseparable.” And, “Only through interdependence could human beings survive. Families belonged to clans, and it was by clans that the human being joined with the animal and plant world...Only at the moment that the requisite balance between human and other was realized could the Pueblo people become a culture...”

Thinking about the concept of co-existence should remind us to encourage our students to move in and out of intellectual positions, to recognize that books embody many worlds.

In the past, I have often referred to Edward Said, literary scholar and Professor at Columbia in my course objectives. In The World, The Text, and The Critic Said writes, “...texts are the world, to some degree, they are events, and even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.” This view of texts as primarily representative of a “social world” apparently unconnected to the non-human world and the biosphere as a whole will be addressed and problematized in my classes in the future. Sue-Ellen Campbell, a contributor to The Ecocriticism Reader, writes, “...ecology insists that we pay attention not to the way things have meaning for us, but to the way the rest of the world – the non-human part – exists apart from us and our languages.”

I am in the process of creating two new courses as a result of these workshops. They could be part of the Honors Program, literature courses or special topics in writing courses. I will be happy to share my plans for these courses in the future.

In his book, Life is a Miracle, Wendell Berry asks many questions. “Where are we?...Who are we? ...What is our condition?...What are our abilities?...What appropriately may we do in our own interest here?” He then asserts, “These questions address themselves to all the disciplines, but they do not call for specialized answers. They cannot, I think, be answered by specialists—or not, at least by specialists in isolation from one another.” In light of Berry’s words, I hope that we can still meet as a group and keep this thing going.

Dorothy S. Nelson