Teaching Green: Experimenting with Green Values in the Classroom[1]

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One morning the group of students who were leading my "Ecology and Politics" class that day decided that we should hold class outside, in the garden of a nearby university reception center. We ventured out, into a classic South Carolina spring day, with a bright blue sky and trees full of blossoms. On the way, the group discovered that they had forgotten to bring markers to write on the large pad that they were carrying. I let them continue on, to get started, while I headed back to my departmental office to pick up some markers. When I returned, markers in hand, I was treated to a sight that reminded me of what education might be like: a large open-air tent had been erected in the garden for a reception later in the day, and under the tent were my students, seated in chairs in a circle, in the midst of an animated discussion of spiritual ecology. I took my seat in the circle, enjoyed the beautiful setting, turned in my journal assignment when asked, and contributed a few comments to the discussion.

My "Ecology and Politics" course is an on-going experiment in applying green values to the classroom. When colleagues asked me how the experiment was going, I used to reply that it was "failing, but failing in very interesting ways;" lately, however, the experiment has begun to succeed, in even more interesting ways. The experiment began in 1993, after I had complained about the lack of any environmentally-related courses in our undergraduate political science curriculum. Having never taken a course in environmental policy, or even read much about green political thought, I was at first hesitant to take on the responsibility for such a course. However, I then realized that this was not a "green" approach to the problem. Why did I need to fall back on hierarchy, on being the "expert" in the classroom, on explaining to my students from a superior position what they needed to know about green politics? All I really needed was a community of learners that would share my basic interest and explore this topic with me.

Thus began my experiment in teaching "Ecology and Politics" in accord with "green values." Over the years some of the details have changed, but the basic approach has remained the same. Rather than begin the course with a syllabus where all decisions about class content, format, and requirements are already made, I provide a "syllabus-in-progress" that offers the opportunity to make many of these choices through a consensus of the participants, emphasizing cooperative learning and non-hierarchical decision-making. The syllabus-in-progress describes the first seven weeks of the course in great detail, but the last seven weeks are left blank, to be planned later by the entire learning community. The stated objectives in the syllabus-in-progress are "to create a learning community that operates in accord with green values, to understand the major aspects of green political thought, to understand the basic components of the environmental policy-making process, and to develop our individual critical perspectives on the material covered in the course."

Creating a Green Learning Community

The creation of a "green learning community" is fundamental to the entire course, but initial versions of the course underestimated the difficulty of such a task.[2] Students enter the course with almost no experience with anything beyond traditional styles of classroom instruction and are unfamiliar, and often quite uncomfortable, with a setting that emphasizes cooperative and non-hierarchical learning. I learned this very quickly, the first time I offered the course, when a graduate student and I led the class on an exercise to help the students create the entire course together. Not surprising in retrospect, but surprising to us at the time, was that the students attempted simply to recreate a traditional and hierarchical course—they "wanted" the familiar experience of a standard class structure (though perhaps with fewer tests!).

In response to this experience, I realized that the beginning of the course needed to provide an intensive, experiential introduction to green pedagogy, and this introduction has gradually expanded so it now includes the entire first half of the course.[3] We begin with discussions about how values underlie all educational approaches and about the specific relationship between green values and green pedagogy (Orr 1992; Pepper 1996; Merchant 1992; Greens/Green Party USA 2001; Left Green Network 1989). Exploring core green values (such as participatory democracy, ecological sustainability, and decentralization) leads to an understanding of why the greens focus on the *process* as well as the content of education, and why a green pedagogy emphasizes cooperation and non-hierarchical learning. Because green thought has built significantly upon feminism and radical democratic theory, I also incorporate some of the parallel literature in feminist pedagogy (Mayberry and Rose 1999; Schneidewind 1985; Fisher 1987) and democratic education (Caspary 1996). From these readings and discussions, the class is asked to identify and agree on a set of basic characteristics that are indicative of a learning community in which green values prevail. For my most recent class, the list that we used to monitor our progress included: a sense of community and trust, respect for diversity, equality in decision making, full participation, cooperation, individual initiative and responsibility for learning, and community action.

Over time the course has become divided into three sections: the first seven weeks provide a structure within which students explore the meaning of green pedagogy (worth 100 points), the eighth week provides a process through which students are able to plan the rest of the course (15 points), and during the last six weeks the students implement their

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plan (85 points). The introduction to green pedagogy during the first seven weeks is organized around four tracks:

1. *Learning Green* includes topics related to green pedagogy, such as small group dynamics, cooperative learning, and consensus decision making.

2. *Thinking Green* covers the major aspects of green political thought, including deep ecology, spiritual ecology, social ecology, green democracy, and ecofeminism.

3. *Living Green* explores the politics of everyday life and offers the comparison of life in a contemporary "ecovillage" in Twin Oaks, Virginia.

4. *Acting Green* provides an opportunity to explore various avenues of green action and to agree on an action agenda.

The course typically enrolls between 15 and 25 students. Initially, most students were political science majors, but the course is now designated as a core course in the environmental studies minor, and political science majors are now the minority (with other students coming primarily from marine science, biology, and geography). Evaluation during the first seven weeks of the course is based on seven components: journal assignments, a group teaching project, an individual learning project, a group action project, participation, community-building, and progress toward a "green learning community."

Learning Green

The "Learning Green" track provides training in the fundamental approach of the course. Once we have identified the characteristics of a green learning community, we explore ways in which to overcome some of the obstacles to achieving that community. One of the biggest obstacles is that students often do not have the skills (and experience) necessary to work effectively in groups, and those that have the skills often have bad memories of cooperative, group-based learning experiences.[4] To address this obstacle, I ask the students to participate in a series of in-class workshops. When I first introduced the workshops, they were developed and facilitated by psychologists from our student counseling center, but I now conduct most of the workshops myself. The first three workshops cover basic skills that are helpful in the creation of any group: communication skills, group dynamics, and conflict resolution skills.

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These workshops enable the learning community to recognize and then solve its own problems. Conflicts always arise in some of the small groups created for other course objectives, and I try to use these conflicts as examples in the workshops.

One additional workshop, which has always been conducted by an outside psychologist, is on diversity and learning styles. In preparation for the workshop, the psychologist administers the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory, and then brings the results to class (including a diagram showing where each of us fit in the classification system) and discusses their implications. This exercise has always been an important one in initiating the kind of discussion that leads to a learning community. The students are able to see the wide array of personalities and learning styles in the class, see where they fit, and get a sense of which other students have similar or different learning styles.

Another component of the "learning green" track is community-building. To begin with, during the first few classes, I have a series of in-class exercises (mostly "cooperative games" of various kinds) designed to break down some of the barriers and build community. Over the years, however, I have elaborated community-building events to encompass a significant part of the course. Students are now asked to plan and attend a variety of community-building events outside of class, such as sharing meals, hiking, biking, canoeing, bowling, picnics, parties, trips to the zoo, and cultural events—these events sometimes even continue as "reunions" after the semester is over.

Finally, full participation is a vital component of the "learning green" track. At its most basic, in order to build community, students are asked to participate by just being in class and sharing the same range of experiences. I emphasize that what we are doing is unusual, and special, and requires their participation more than in most classes. The point system provides a tangible reward for attendance, which, in general, is much higher than in a normal class—almost always 90% or higher. Participation is also encouraged through journal assignments. Students are asked to write 10 journal entries during the first seven weeks about their responses to both the content and process of the course. I evaluate the initial journal entries and then, for the journals related to the "thinking green" topics, have the students evaluate each others' journals. I encourage students to use their journal entries as the basis for participation in class discussions.

Thinking Green

In the "Thinking Green" track, students encounter the substance of green political thought by exploring five topics: deep ecology, social ecology, spiritual ecology, green democracy, and ecofeminism. Instead of exploring these topics in a "hierarchical" way, however, students are asked to assume all the responsibility for guiding the learning process of their peers. Based on their preferences, students are placed into one of five groups, and each group is responsible for advocating the ideas related to their topic and for deciding how best to present the assigned material. Each group is asked to make and evaluate a journal assignment, create study materials, identify web sites, and design the in-class presentation. Students are encouraged to be as creative as possible and to design their learning experience based on green values.

I encourage students to explore the resources in their community by asking each group to consult with two "experts" on the topic—myself and anyone else of their choice (often a faculty member associated with the School of the Environment). In my meetings with each group, I answer their substantive questions and encourage them to think creatively about how to structure the learning experience for their peers. The meetings with the outside expert sometimes create interesting linkages for the class, sometimes developing into field trips and guest speakers.

Teaching groups have created a wide variety of learning experiences for their

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classmates. Occasionally, a group takes a traditional approach by providing mini-lectures on the topic under consideration. But more creativity is the norm, and over the years we have had a variety of skits, games, and simulations to facilitate our learning. The spiritual ecology topic seems to bring out the most creativity: over the years we have made masks, passed candles around a circle, created our own music, and wandered through a garden. The level of creativity generally increases as the semester proceeds, as students begin to realize what is possible.

Evaluation of the teaching groups is based on four components. One component is peer evaluation, in which group members evaluate each other, with a narrative evaluation and point allocation based on attendance at group meetings, completion of tasks agreed on by the group, and overall individual contribution. The second component is a written group self-evaluation, including their evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of their presentation and a description of their consultation with a member of the community. For the third component, groups receive points for evaluating the journal entries that they assigned and for turning in a series of reports about their progress in planning their presentations. The fourth component is a written and numerical evaluation by the rest of the class of both the class presentation and the journal assignment. Criteria include preparation, creativity, clarity, organization, and success at stimulating interest and participation.

The various efforts at self evaluation and peer evaluation, in this and other tracks, provide some of the more difficult tests of the bonds established within the evolving learning community. Students are usually not accustomed to—and often actively try to avoid—this style of evaluation. The higher the level of trust within the community, the more willing the students are to take risks. Self evaluations are generally more successful, particularly as students realize that there are no penalties (and indeed informal rewards) for being open about the problems they confronted. Peer evaluation is more intimidating, but in the proper environment students can be drawn in by the novelty of being "the teacher" assessing other students' work. An easy first step is to ask students to evaluate journal entries. Their responsibility is simply to award a point for a completed assignment and to make two comments about the ideas expressed. I have found that students are very interested in the comments made by their peers—partly because the comments tend to be full of encouragement and enthusiasm—and by observing this process I have gained interesting insights into how to make my own comments more effective.

What is different about this project, compared to traditional research projects, is that students are asked to design the "learning process" for the project, as well as procedures for documentation and evaluation.

Living Green

The "living green" track is an attempt to take abstract green ideas and make them concrete in the context of the students' everyday lives. Like any other ideas outside the mainstream, students are often likely to reject green values as being "impractical" or "unrealistic." Green critiques of materialism are sometimes found to "go against human nature." While my purpose is not to require students to adopt green values, I do want them to pause and give them serious consideration. I want them to consider how ideologies shape our everyday lives, and I invite them to imagine what life might be like if green values were the dominant values. I invite them to do this is two ways.

First, I have the students read about an intentional community in Virginia called Twin Oaks (Whiteman 2000; Hollick and Connelly 1999). As an aspiring "ecovillage," Twin Oaks provides a concrete example of how members of a community struggle with green values in their everyday lives. Documentation from the community is extremely accessible, including an excellent account of life within the community (Kinkade 1994) and internal policy documents available from the web site (including by-laws, decision-making arrangements, economic plans, the "labor quota" system, and policies for membership, conflict resolution, individual allowances, health care, and the support of personal and community projects). These documents are extremely useful, because they allow students to engage in very concrete discussions about the policies at Twin Oaks and about the internal debates regarding how "green" members should aspire to be (for example, some members are fully committed to reducing energy consumption to a minimum, while others prefer to have a hot shower always available).

I also try to allow students to interact with members of Twin Oaks, either through teleconferencing or through visits from community members. One semester three members met with my students for an evening, and never before had I seen greater focus and attention: for three hours students sat on the floor in a lounge, asking questions and listening intently to responses. For students accustomed to regarding hierarchy and inequality as "natural" aspects of human life, life at Twin Oaks provides a clear example of a largely non-hierarchical and egalitarian society that has functioned for over thirty years. Instead of abstract ideas, students have the opportunity to meet real people who are living real lives in accord with a value structure usually quite different from their own.

The other way I encourage students to experiment with the notion of living green is to ask them to devise an "individual learning project." Each student has the opportunity to select, and learn about, any topic in any way related to the course. Students may choose a topic mentioned in the syllabus or any other topic that can be justified as class-related (public policy issues, governmental organizations, philosophical issues, etc.). Projects require at least five hours of work outside of class. What is different about this project, compared to traditional research projects, is that students are asked to design the "learning process" for the project, as well as procedures for documentation and evaluation. I encourage students not to think of this as just another "research paper" assignment, but to take advantage of this opportunity to learn anything they want, using the learning style that best suits them.

For their learning process, students must decide whether to produce some kind of product (presentation, paper, video, art, social change, etc.) or focus on the learning process itself (information-gathering, experimentation, research, action, etc.). Their method of evaluation must address four questions: (1) what exactly is to be evaluated (product, process, both)? (2) how many points will the various components of your

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project be worth? (3) who will determine whether points are earned (faculty, peers, self, combination)? (4) what criteria will be used to determine whether points are earned?

Most students are surprised, and some are distressed, by the openness of this assignment: basically, go out and learn something! Their reactions range between two extremes. On the one extreme, some students quickly retreat to the known universe, by choosing a topic, finding something to read, and writing a paper. I discourage this kind of response, in part because it often reflects an effort to find the "easy way" to meet the assignment, and in part because it seems to be an effort to avoid thinking about the larger possibilities. At the other extreme, some students take full advantage of the assignment and respond immediately in creative and innovative ways. One student decided to spend three afternoons sitting by himself in the mountains, thinking, observing, and then writing down his reflections. Another student kept a diary for a week of every interaction she had with technology in her everyday life. Another student decided to interview her mother, a teacher who had always tried to talk to her about cooperative learning, about which the student had been completely uninterested until it was put in the context of green values.

Acting Green

The first time I offered this course, under the "special topics" number in our curriculum, I created a syllabus and submitted it to my department. The day before the course was to begin, the department secretary asked me to come to the chairman's office. When I arrived, the chairman and the vice-chairman were there, to talk to me about the disturbing word that had appeared in my syllabus: *action.* Taking action is certainly a core value of the greens, but my colleagues were concerned about the image of the department, particularly during a period of budget-tightening. They had visions of students appearing on the news chained to trees or sitting in front of bulldozers, and they advised me to delete the offending word. I declined to take their advice, on the grounds that any course taught in accord with green values would have to include action.

During the first half of the course, students are asked to participate in a "group action project." Action projects are intended to provide students with concrete illustrations of the various avenues of green action and of the problems that must be overcome in taking action. Sometimes the entire class works together on a project, but more commonly subgroups emerge to undertake different activities. Each "action group" is responsible for defining a problem related to the course, proposing a solution to the problem, proposing a method to evaluate group activity (which may involve peer evaluation, faculty evaluation, or some combination), and locating a contact person in the local or university community to advise the group about the action. Class time is provided for initial planning of the project, and each student is expected to devote five hours to the project outside of class.

To the delight of my administration, my students have never chained themselves to trees, but it is true that they have appeared a few times in the local news. The most common projects have involved action to improve the natural environment: helping improve trails at the Congaree Swamp National Monument, removing non-native plants from a campus park, or picking up trash along a river. Groups have also undertaken educational projects, in elementary schools, middle schools, and on campus. And some have engaged in action to affect public policy: mounting a petition drive to change the policies of the campus food service, lobbying members of the state legislature on a bill to reform the structure of the state environmental agency, and compiling the environmental voting records of candidates for public office.

Designing the Rest of the Syllabus

The eighth week of the course, when we plan the remainder of the syllabus, always fascinates me. Our training in consensus decision making in the first part of the course becomes very useful, as we spend a full week brainstorming ideas and then coming to a consensus on the topics and requirements for the last six weeks of the course (Estes 1990). Students are asked to write several journal entries reflecting on their experiences in the first part of the course and are given great incentives (double points) for attending these planning sessions. My only requirements are that we have at least 30 pages of reading each week and that 10 points be reserved for another round of individual learning projects.

As always, the status quo is very powerful. The important difference is that, after seven weeks of training in green pedagogy, the status quo has miraculously shifted from a traditional approach to a green approach to learning. Thus, the syllabus for the last part of the course usually resembles in broad outline the first part, with some parts deleted, some parts expanded, and occasionally some parts added. The community-building events are popular and are usually incorporated into the second half of the semester. Surprisingly, journal assignments and points for attendance are also usually continued. Often, students give themselves more options, so that they may choose to omit participating in an action or teaching group, and substitute those points with other activities.

Particularly interesting are the planning discussions with regard to the substance of the course. Students must collectively confront the notion that they can study whatever they want. The most common process is for students to brainstorm a long list of possible topics for study, and then group similar topics into broader themes. In all cases, the classes have relied on teaching groups to cover this material, generally proceeding in the same student-centered way as in the first part of the course. The added challenge for the second half of the course is that students must also assign the reading material for each topic. In the past this presented some logistical problems, but in recent years the students often assign material from the Internet, or ask their peers to search for information themselves on specified topics.

Conclusion

Participating in this course can be a transforming experience–I know it has been for me! My role in this course is so different, and so refreshing, and I enjoy the challenge of taking a group of students and trying to create a learning community. Once that community is created, I am able to participate in the class simply as a member of that community, being part of the class without being the focal point of every discussion. In fact, I use as one milestone of success the day that the students no longer turn to me to make their comments, but instead address their comments to their fellow classmates. Another measure of success is the response of the students when, late in the semester, I fail to show up for one of the class periods. In almost all cases, they have continued with their planned activities, and I enjoy the thought of them pursuing their education without me.

But, obviously more important than its effect on me is its effect on the students, and there again this course can

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be a transforming experience. Of all the courses I teach, I have received by far the most positive feedback from students in this course. Most commonly appreciated, which is a sad reflection on the state of mass higher education, is the simple fact that students are able to get to know other students. For some, this is the first class in which they even knew everyone's name, much less their deepest thoughts on spiritual ecology. Students often comment that this class provides an atmosphere in which they feel free to participate, a "community" environment in which they are free to make mistakes and reveal sides of themselves that they don't usually reveal in a classroom setting.

Ultimately, two aspects of the student response emerge most clearly. One is their reaction to the *substance* of the course. I think the course conveys, in a very tangible way, the core values of the greens and how those values translate into political issues in the real world. By "learning," "thinking," "acting," and "living" green, students are able to integrate an extremely broad range of material. Students may not learn as much about the specifics of the environmental policy process in this course, but they become very aware of the larger perspectives from which to evaluate environmental controversies. The other aspect is their reaction to a green learning *process*. As Orr (1994, 91) reminds us in his discussion of ecological literacy, "the way education occurs is as important as its content." I enjoy seeing students gradually become more self-confident in their ability to learn independently, and more comfortable in devising creative and cooperative approaches to facilitate the learning of their fellow students. Not everyone enjoys the process, or considers it valuable, but for those that do I like to imagine that it is the beginning of a richer and more satisfying educational experience.

Notes

1. Many thanks to John Creed, my co-conspirator for the first offering of this course; to Natalie Kaufman and Athey Kaufman, my constant advisors about improving the course; and to all my former students in "Ecology and Politics" (GINT 477).

2. See Sanders (2000) for an alternative approach, centered around an American Politics course. For other examples, see Masterson (1998) and Gabelnick et al. (1990).

3. I sometimes joke with my colleagues that the first seven weeks of the course might be the green equivalent of "boot camp," in preparing students for a new environment with a new system of values.

4. For an excellent summary of the literature on cooperative learning, see Occhipinti (2000). See also Bruffee (1999) and Cooper et al. (1994).

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