the changing profession

Fresh Leaves: Practicing Environmental Criticism

KAREN L. KILCUP

Ecocide is more of a threat than nuclear war.

—Lawrence Buell

It is worth noting that [environmental destruction] is not the work of ignorant people. Rather, it is largely the result of work by people with BAs, BSs, LLBs, MBAs, and PhDs.

—David Orr

I CANNOT IDENTIFY WHAT SPARKED MY ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS. THE ROMANTIC IN ME INVOKES CHILDHOOD WITH AN ARDENTLY OUTdoor maternal grandfather, who taught me to distinguish a beech tree from a birch, to plant potatoes, and to welcome the tree frogs' spring chorus with awe and delight. More likely, the recognition arrived not from childhood pleasures or reading Henry David Thoreau but from something as quotidian and cumulative as exhaustion from years of commuting from New Hampshire to Boston for work as an adjunct, sucking exhaust fumes on Route 128.

Over the last fifteen years, I have become increasingly committed to what many believe must be our central concern: the abatement of climate change and the preservation of the planet. The challenge for literary studies is to make an environmental perspective fundamental far beyond the discipline, to avoid making ecocriticism merely another interpretive system.[1] I repeatedly ask, How can I most effectively move from recognition to responsibility and enable my students to do the same? How meaningful is traditional literary analysis in a world at risk? How can (and should) scholars in literature and language use their often privileged positions to contribute to the urgent project of global sustainability? How can I most effectively define *activism*? How can I practice what I teach?

The account below identifies some challenges to practicing environmental criticism and my solutions (not all successful). Beginning with conceptual frameworks, I turn to specific accounts of pedagogy and student responses, moving finally to broader professional considerations.

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Structuring this narrative are my, and my students', efforts to mediate between individual and community. Integrating the terms of this conceptual dyad—which defines many traditional courses in my discipline of American literature—provides an organic methodology for my practice of environmental criticism.

The writer Barbara Kingsolver has observed, "Humans no longer believe food comes from dirt" ("Lily's Chickens" 129). When we teach the works of writers such as Kingsolver, Octavia Butler, Wendell Berry, and their precursors, we can change people's minds about our current environmental crisis. Greg Garrard notes, "From the outset ecocritics acknowledged the importance of pedagogy" (363), and certainly many university-level professors consider teaching a form of activism. Garrard distinguishes between environmental education and education for sustainable development by articulating the investment of the former in self-improvement (my term) and the commitment of the latter to "genuine social change" (374; see also Capra xiii; Huckle; O'Grady). Environmental education often involves fieldwork, but integrating that activity and a sustained ecocritical perspective into "a student's school and home life, let alone the challenges of adulthood and employment," can be daunting; the relentless consumerism of modern Western societies poses a sometimes irresistible counterpressure (367). Although education for sustainable development offers opportunities for social amelioration, it also confronts major obstacles. While environmental education privileges individual responses (and often focuses on a traditional literary canon), education for sustainable development emphasizes a holistic vision, community responsibility, and action beyond appreciation of the aesthetic, either in print or embodied in nature.[2]

Activism presents formidable difficulties for many students today; even for those awakened by *An Inconvenient Truth*, political action often seems infeasible or dangerous (Bickford and Reynolds 229–30). The current environmental crisis may also appear so intractable that recycling plastic water bottles, choosing green fashion, and using fluorescent light bulbs—in Andrew Szasz's resonant phrase, "shopping our way to safety"—seem to be their only possible contributions. Moreover, "environmentalism is generally perceived as a politics of self-denial rather than liberation" (Garrard 360). Yet it is easier to act individually to clean up a local stream than to work collectively to eliminate systemic problems: a throwaway culture in which companies externalize environmental costs with tacit or explicit governmental support, a capitalist system that prioritizes economic gain and promotes environmental injustice, and a culture of individualism that fractures relationships and prevents structural change (Putnam). My courses aim to enable students to understand the world's interdependencies and to foster their comprehension of the possibilities and limitations of individual and collective action.

From the professorial perspective, synthesizing subject-area content, interdisciplinary knowledge, theoretical approaches, and practical experience and making coursework relevant pose intellectual, ethical, pragmatic, and institutional challenges.[3] Relevance often requires interdisciplinarity, an uncomfortable pedagogy for many academics, who have been trained to maintain disciplinary boundaries (Alabaster and Blair 98). Although many colleagues are committed to interdisciplinarity, community-based learning, activism, and sustainability, such considerations often remain limited to composition and specialized courses and underfunded programs.[4] For many—not just instructors but also administrators, alumni, parents, and even students—the classroom should remain a neutral, apolitical space, fostering critical thinking and creative theorizing but restrained in professorial opinion (see Larkin).

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For many students, however, experience—including that of our bodies—"is always situated, in ways that no amount of theoretical reflection can transcend, and no matter how valuable that reflection may be" (Levin 1098). From this perspective, "ecocriticism needs to inform personal and political actions, in the same way that feminist criticism was able to do only a few decades ago."[5] Part of this process involves dismantling students' misapprehensions. Because "[m]any . . . appear to recognize activism only as participation in huge events planned by global or national organizations . . . [t]hey do not recognize grassroots efforts as activism . . . [and] cannot identify actions they take in their daily lives as activist" (Bickford and Reynolds 238). For more conservative students, activists represent "dangerous fringe elements."[6]

Enabling students to synthesize knowledge, critique, experience, and activism poses additional difficulties. Even the self-selected students in my specialized courses require an overview of such terms and concepts as *nature*, *environmental*, *ecological*, *anthropocentric*, *biocentric*, *bioregionalism*, *deep ecology*, *environmental justice*, *sustainability*, *climate change*, *ecological footprint*, and *peak oil*. Framing the debates surrounding these terms in historical and cultural contexts—and even pointing toward the relations among economic, political, and social structures that influence policy and behavior—presents a substantial challenge, and the time available for discussing literature shrinks proportionately.[7] Nevertheless, an interdisciplinary ecocritical perspective has helped me synthesize environmental education and education for sustainable development and mediate among individual action, classroom community, and the broader community. The emergence of community-based (i.e., service) learning as a feasible (if not quite intellectually respectable [Hessler 27]) academic endeavor enables additional activist practices.[8]

How can a literature course be structured both to meet departmental (and disciplinary) demands and to connect reading with real life—while developing students' ecological literacy? (Orr x–xi; see Bickford and Reynolds 235). My undergraduate and graduate Literature and the Environment courses link readings to contemporary issues for weekly student presentations. Thoreau's *Walden*, for example, inspires the presentation "Walden, Then and Now." Students investigate the transformation of the Concord, Massachusetts, area between Thoreau's time and our own, and they learn what happens to a natural place when too many people love it and want a piece of it, whether that piece is a Walden Woods condo or a square meter on the pond's crowded beach. On our commuter campus, this topic dovetails with considerations of zoning, land use, and car culture. Thoreau also works well with a study of utopian and intentional communities, from Brook Farm to Seaside, Florida, providing us with the opportunity to ask, What should an ideal community look like? Who has historically had access to such communities?

In this context, *Walden* often elicits discussion of population, environmental justice, and sustainability. Having students evaluate their carbon footprint fits naturally; the amount of land required to sustain them in their present circumstances shocks them. Although many United States residents regard large Third World families as an environmental problem, it takes twenty children in India to equal the impact of one American child ("Population"); as Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* underscores, we ignore these facts at our peril. If all the world's people consumed at First World living standards, the current 6.5 billion people would consume like 72 billion at the current average rate of consumption (Diamond, "Population"). Overpopulation; the inequitable control and distribution of resources; and Western agribusiness's agricultural practices,

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including use of fossil-fuel-based fertilizer (and the resulting pollution), soil destruction, and monoculture, emerge for students as troubling and contentious issues.[9] The relocalization of food supplies and mushrooming of local farmers' markets exemplify positive recent developments that Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* forcefully advocates.

Other productive links with writers include women and the environment (Celia Thaxter, Rachel Carson, Andrea Smith), water use and water rights (Mary Austin, Donald Worster), slow food and genetically modified food (Berry and Kingsolver), animal rights (Vicki Hearne and Mary Oliver), and environmental justice (Sarah Winnemucca and Jamaica Kincaid). We place each topic in United States and international contexts; the subject of water resources, for example, offers opportunities to discuss the multibillion-dollar international bottled-water industry, water contamination at home and abroad, and the Cochabamba Water Wars, in which Bolivians protested the transfer of ownership of the municipal water supply to multinational corporations. Online materials, such as Janine Benyus's lecture on biomimicry, offer new visions of sustainability, while cultural critiques, such as Richard Heinberg's *Peak Everything: Waking Up to a Century of Declines*, George Monbiot's *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning*, Winona LaDuke's *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*, and John De Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor's *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, allow our discussions to circulate among literature, students' experiences, and the world.[10]

Each semester generally has at least two student projects, the first an individual, consciousness-raising one connecting aesthetics, the readings, critical thinking, and embodied experience.[11] Recent individual projects include an artist's relinquishing personal electricity for two weeks, using only natural lighting and already-lit public space, and a student's becoming a vegetarian or walking two miles to work. All these efforts reflect a necessarily "slow learning" (Garrard 376). Presenting their results in written or visual form, students discuss the challenges and benefits of their experiments. Despite much initial grumbling (undergraduates) and skepticism (graduate students), students cite these projects as revelatory.[12] While individual action is insufficient for educating for sustainability, it provides a crucial foundation.

Inviting undergraduate students to move from individual exploration to a more activist stance and collective perspective, I ask them to create a group project that extends the insights of our course texts. For a recent course, Edward Abbey's anticar exhortation "get out of the goddamned contraption" (xii) propelled students to respond to a university bicycling survey and to contribute on several levels to the university's transportation master plan (coordinated with the city of Greensboro). The transportation project arose in part from students' recognition that the university and community—putatively separate entities—are in fact connected. If students or staff members bike to work, they cross from one to the other; as with an estuarine system, there is no hard boundary. Students also recognized that the university itself is a community or, more accurately, communities (see Bickford and Reynolds 244), for students, staff and faculty members, and the administration often have distinctive needs and desires that may not mesh harmoniously. Meeting with representatives of the Sustainability Committee, students created a detailed list of priorities and advocated getting LEED certification for new buildings to measure what impact they have on the environment. Coupled with course readings both literary and popular, this experience led to community-invested final projects ranging from a studio art major's creating an exhibit of her work on sustainability to an English–environmental studies major's investigation of the serious contamination of the water supply in her grandmother's nearby poor, rural county.

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Enabling graduate students to practice their beliefs in their professional as well as personal lives provides another challenge, complicated at my home institution by the diversity of the students and their various degrees (MA, MEd, MFA, PhD in literature or rhetoric and composition). Students select a final project best suited to their aspirations: write an article-length scholarly essay (in practice transforming the genre's character); develop a course in literature and the environment, with a syllabus, reading list, and pedagogical essay with rationale; create an anthology of "environmental literature" (which they define) to be used in their current teaching contexts, again accompanied by a pedagogical essay; or define their own projects. Several high school teachers have created courses that integrated an ecocritical perspective into the junior-year American literature requirement—a significant achievement, given rigid state requirements for readings and measurable skills. A student specializing in rhetoric and composition analyzed the mission statements of several local and national environmental organizations, using his analysis to determine where best to situate activist energies.

Students call this course life-transforming. With productive dissent, members of its most recent incarnation concluded that environmental awareness, environmental justice, and sustainability require shifts in individual consciousness and behavior furthered by and complementary to community, institutional, and governmental action. Many favored taking control of the mainstream media in the United States, and some argued for a "positive" advertising campaign promoting sustainability. Everyone agreed that legal and financial incentives had to accompany such action. A particularly contentious issue was population control, favored by many scientists; given the hugely disproportionate consumption of world resources by United States residents, this issue dovetailed with immigration concerns: one student remarked, "If everyone in the world moves here and consumes as we do, there will *be* no world."

Perhaps the model project linking literature, theory, and practice was developed by an MA student, A. J. Price, who works at the outdoor-equipment supplier REI (Recreation Equipment Incorporated). A. J. initiated a reading-and-discussion series at REI for the local community. Readings paired with relevant local issues; July readings, for example, included "The Ponds" and "Creeks," by Mary Oliver; "Water," by Edward Abbey; and "Aces and Eights," by Annie Dillard. Water use and conservation have been pressing issues during recent summers, when much of North Carolina has had severe drought ("U.S. Drought Monitor"). Complementing the readings and discussion was a presentation by the Neuse Riverkeeper Foundation, a grassroots organization devoted to improving the water quality of the Neuse River Basin and lobbying for more sustainable development practices. The foundation monitors pollution from hog farms and other concentrated-animal-feeding operations, polychlorinated biphenyl contamination, and pollution caused by sediment and storm-water runoff (*Neuse Riverkeeper Foundation*). In developing this program, A. J. considered problems confronted by the potential participants, of diverse ages, races, and classes, understanding that "[a]ctivism argues for relationships based on connection. It does not valorize uniformity (i.e., we are all the same), and it does not naively assert that difference does not exist or matter" (Bickford and Reynolds 237).

One gnawing concern behind teaching courses that generate such projects has been ethical: given the transformation of the academic job market, can such courses compromise students' "marketability" (Cushman, "Letter" 1–2), especially if they include or advance forms of community-based learning? How can I enable my graduate students to succeed in an intellectual environment still skeptical about literary environmentalism (Alabaster and Blair 102; Buell 3, 6–7)? Young

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professionals involved in creating their own forms of environmental education, education for sustainable development, and service-learning courses confront a new set of political as well as pedagogical problems, and we discuss these problems explicitly.

I also "teach" outside the classroom. Because "[e]ducators who consciously and intentionally engage in activism or 'everyday rebellions' embody this engagement for their students" (Bickford and Reynolds 245), I bike or walk instead of driving (I have cut my annual mileage by more than eighty percent and hope to eliminate my car in two years), eat local food (mostly from farmers' markets), and join local groups advocating peace and a reduction or elimination of the United States military, which currently—unsustainably—consumes more than half the federal budget ("Proposed Discretionary Budget").

Practicing ecocriticism also means remaining conscious of how sustainable behavior can be integrated into professional service obligations in the department, in the university, and beyond. Academics consume unsustainably at all levels, and we must alter our characteristic practices. I have hectored my department, unsuccessfully, to relinquish individual printers and refrigerators. As president of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers, I have had a larger impact, conducting a geographic analysis of membership to assess the most environmentally acceptable location for our 2009 conference (Philadelphia) and replacing the customary biennial conference with a longer one held every three years (see Johnson). The most pressing issue for many academics is air travel, as Monbiot's devastating analysis underscores (170–88); for me it has meant declining opportunities to give papers in Europe and Mexico.

We can take other actions closer to home. Ironically, for this essay to be considered for publication, I had to reinstate my MLA membership, which, in part because of sustainability issues, I renew only in years that I chair a search committee. With a circulation of 32,000, bimonthly frequency, and an average page count of around three hundred, 192,000 issues with a total of 57.6 million pages are manufactured and shipped annually. Many members have online or hard-copy access through their institutional affiliations, and even halving the number of print copies would result in substantial environmental savings. All these initiatives, however, are insufficient in an era of peak oil and climate change; we will need, individually and collectively, to imagine better solutions.

Reenvisioning my research has provided the most readily available opportunity to practice ecocriticism. My current project connects nineteenth-century and contemporary women activists, speaks to a broad audience not limited to academe, and meshes with my teaching, professional, and community activities. Among many others, Fanny Fern energizes my work, speaking to the mind-body relation and describing with uncanny accuracy a perspective that resonates today:

> How I *rejoice* in a man or woman with a chest; who can look the sun in the eye, and step off as if they had not wooden legs. It is a rare sight. If a woman now has an errand round the corner, she must have a carriage to go there; and the men, more dead than alive, so lethargic are they with constant smoking, creep into cars and omnibuses, and curl up in a corner, demanding nothing so much as a little wholesome exertion. (125)

Exempting the genuinely ill, Fern insists that making "sound" decisions depends on eating well and exercising regularly. But her analysis extends beyond individual behavior to characterize a systemic, middle-class social ill, "fashionable invalidism." Practicing what she preaches—"a little wholesome exertion"—she affirms, "I walk, not ride," concluding, "[A]fter I am buried, don't let any fresh air or sunlight down on my coffin, if you don't want me to get up" (125). As it did for many

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in the nineteenth century, writing constituted a form of activism for Fern.

All academics and institutions will soon be rocked by environmental crisis—dwarfing our current economic problems—if we decline to take individual and collective action. I can envision a possible future in which students seek conversations and alliances with local communities, using their writing, speaking, and critical-thinking skills to help develop concrete solutions to local problems and learning about different perspectives in real-world contexts. Graduate students, aware of the transformative power of literature and rhetoric, help faculty members foster these skills and community links; their own pedagogy and scholarship reflect a commitment to sustainability. The canon will have changed yet again, with a new emphasis on cross-cultural attitudes toward the interrelation between nature (now seen as primary) and human beings. Awakened to the importance of faculty members in literature and language studies, who have demonstrated that imagination, critical thinking, persuasiveness, and holistic vision are crucial to our collective well-being, administrators increase funding to these departments and programs, enabling the restoration of permanent faculty lines.

Speaking in an earlier time of emergency, Audre Lorde urged, "Poetry is not a luxury." It still isn't, and we must use our poetry *and* our prose to make this imagined future real, or there will be no future. Practicing environmental criticism may not mean that as individuals we can safeguard coral reefs or ensure environmental justice, but it might mean that we cultivate enough hearts and minds, and spark enough action, to help accomplish such goals together.

Notes

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1. Buell 27–28; see also Garrard 373; Lindholdt 245–46; Estok 1096; Kern; Mazel; and Christensen, Long, and Waage. Defining such terms as *ecocriticism* and *environmental literature* is beyond this essay's scope; see Glotfelty xix; Garrard 360; and Buell viii, 11–13.

2. For models, see Crimmel; Webster; and Huckle and Sterling.

3. For some solutions, see Christensen, Long, and Waage.

4. For interdisciplinary models, see Ingram, Padhy, and Paradise; Adamson, Evans, and Stein; and *Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment*. On cultural critique and "politics in the classroom," see Hairston; Trimbur; Bizzell; Reid; Lindgren; and Lauter.

5. Cohen 1093; see also Glotfelty xxii–xxiii and Bickford and Reynolds 239–41.

6. Ingram. Sometimes students "will support an issue or cause we find abhorrent," and the best we can do is "help [them] recognize and claim their own assumptions and ideologies" (Bickford and Reynolds 246).

7. A more modest question is what media we should use. I believe in books, and I like to write in them. Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* exemplifies a visionary yet practical project appealing to students (admittedly, her hilarious account of turkey sex snags their attention). Books eat trees, and financially pressed working students prefer used print or online sources. But computers use electricity, incorporate a witches' brew of toxic materials, and are often exported to the Third World at the end of their life cycles.

8. My university's Sustainability Committee links with the city, and students have formed UNCGreen, an organization "working for a more sustainable campus, city, and world." A persistent institutional challenge has been the evaluation of service learning for tenure (Cushman, "Public Intellectual"; Flower and Brice Heath). Reliance on connections with the business community, often hostile to environmental concerns, represents another challenge (see McDonough and Braungart; McKibben).

9. Heinberg discusses the fascistic overtones of population control (122); see also Buell 102–03; Pollan. On sustainability, population, and economics, see Sachs.

10. Films that could be relevant to this context include *Blue Vinyl*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Supersize Me*, *The Next Industrial Revolution*, *The End of Suburbia*, and *Who Killed the Electric Car?*; see also *Peak Moment TV* on *YouTube*. Like our print resources, many of these films demonstrate that humor fosters learning about serious subjects.

11. These projects are often based on place as a central organizing feature; see Mitchell 35; Orr, "Place"; Campbell; Buell 62–96.

12. "[P]eople's personal experiences in and with the natural world are by far the most significant influences on environmental thinking and awareness" (Palmer, *Environmental Education* 133; see also Garrard 365).

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