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Stephanie Wade

Bates College, swade@bates.edu

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Feed Your Mind: Cultivating Ecological Community Literacies with Permaculture

Stephanie Wade

This article proposes *permaculture*, an ecological alternative to industrial agriculture, as a way to design first-year composition and community literacy classes. First, the paper connects permaculture with post-humanism to describe ecological community literacies—the type of knowledge that ecological theorists say we need to navigate the end of the anthropocene. Next, it describes assignments that can lead college students to this knowledge, and finally, it describes actual community literacy projects where college students can lead elementary students through assignments to gain this knowledge.

As a college writing teacher, I often feel that my work—teaching writing at Unity College, a small, private, liberal arts college in Maine devoted to environmentalism—is like the work of farmers making the transition from conventional to organic farming. Just as the farmers face soil depleted of important nutrients, soil that bears the scars of industrial agriculture, soil that is compacted and resistant to change, having been subject to pesticides and chemical fertilizers and misused in the name of profits, I face students depleted of physiological and psychological nutrients, students who bear the scars of conventional education, students who believe their test scores represent their worth and who are resistant to change, having been subject to standardized tests, packaged curricular materials, and rubrics that fail to register creativity, imagination, kindness, and curiosity. The problems I face, like those faced by organic farmers, have been caused, for the most part, by conventional approaches to education and agriculture.

Tracing the histories of conventional agriculture and conventional education reveals that both have been shaped by modernist ideals of progress, by industrialism, and by capitalism in ways that cause harm. Happily, organic farming and other alternatives to conventional agriculture have succeeded in creating ecological farming choices and new food cultures. In this essay, I propose that writing teachers, especially those working on community literacy projects, may find viable alternatives to conventional education by practicing *permaculture*, an ecological alternative to conventional agriculture. I ask that we build on the growing awareness of ecological food choices to promote ecological approaches to education in general and to composition studies in specific, and I demonstrate that community literacy projects are an important feature of ecological approaches to literacy. Lastly, I describe ecological community literacy projects that are grounded in permaculture.

Ecological community literacy projects respond to what Paul Lynch calls the “apocalyptic turn” in composition studies (458). According to Lynch, the apocalyptic turn redefines the work of composition studies today in the context of the end of the anthropocene, the end of the era dominated by human impact on the ecosystems of the planet. Redefining this work requires us to acknowledge our embeddedness in multiple, shifting, dynamic material and ideological worlds, worlds where ideas and lived experience are less stable and less hierarchical than they had appeared in other eras. Several decades ago, postmodern philosophies tried to account for these multiplicities, but they failed to truly attend to the lingering effects of modernism and to adequately account for agency (Jameson; Owens; Gare). Emerging ecological philosophies more fully account for the material effects of our embeddedness in multiple ideological and material worlds (Latour; Morton). This, of course, creates uncertainty, and at the same time it creates hope and room for alternatives. In this paper, I use the term *ecological community literacies* in three ways: first, to describe the type of knowledge Lynch and other ecological theorists say we need to navigate the end of the anthropocene; second, to describe assignments that can lead college students to this knowledge; and third, to describe actual community literacy projects where college students can lead elementary students through assignments to gain greater understanding of themselves in relationship to the multiple communities that comprise their worlds.

Lynch directs us to ideas that are grounded in good research about teaching and learning as well as broader work in ethics, aesthetics, and education, yet such approaches to education conflict with trends in conventional education, such as poor assessment and labor practices that create barriers to projects that require time, space, and funding. Because similar forces have shaped agriculture and education, educators can learn to navigate these forces from farmers and gardeners who use permaculture to design alternatives to conventional farming practices. Below, I provide an overview of permaculture that connects it with ecological approaches to literacy, especially those that are grounded in posthumanism and object-oriented ontology. Then, I review examples of ecological community literacy projects that apply permaculture to education, with the hope that readers will begin to imagine other types of ecological community literacy projects

I.

Industrial approaches to both agriculture and to education are rooted in the old Cartesian hierarchy that posits humans near God, above the plant and animals and material worlds and that posits human intellect as the supreme human ability. This paradigm, which many call humanism, has reached the end of its usefulness, as we learn from the posthumanists, who explain that the era in which we currently live—dominated by anthropogenic changes such as climate change—is nearing its end and that we need new ideas and practices to navigate the emerging world. Humanism—the dominant paradigm in the west for the last several hundred years—disseminated important values, such as increasing freedom and dignity for many humans, but these

values also wrought destructive changes as they have been used a veil for the values of capital.

Jean Francois Lyotard's 1979 work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, connects changes in education to changes in economics and power. He explains that the humanistic tradition, supported by the emancipation narrative, views education as the route to human freedom, so knowledge in the sciences and humanities gains legitimacy from its liberatory potential. This narrative is threatened in the postmodern world, according to Lyotard, as our disbelief in all master narratives has paved the route for the rise of the performativity narrative and the values of capital, which gain their power from force rather than belief and create problems for agriculture and education because they legitimize knowledge based on efficiency. The performativity narrative serves capital and perpetrates the hierarchies that tie value to economic productivity rather than ecological balance, but vestiges of the emancipation narrative linger, so rhetoric about education associates it with freedom while education practices serve capital.

The effects of the change from the emancipation narrative to the performativity narrative can be seen in the parallels between agriculture and education. In Wendell Berry's history of farming *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, he reports that small family farmers were pushed out as the values of efficiency encouraged the use of technology rather than human and horsepower. On the impact of the business model on farming, Berry writes, "It forces a profound revolution in the farmer's mind: once his investment in land and machines is large enough, he must forsake the values of husbandry and assume those of finance and technology" (45). Ravitch's more recent study of the privatization of K-12 education, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement*, similarly assesses the impact of the business model on education. In fact, she explains that the principle of value-added assessment in education came from William Sanders, who first worked on such assessment in agriculture. This model proposes that progress in agriculture and in education be assessed in measurable ways, so we can quantify the value. But, Ravitch points out, many important goals of education cannot be objectively measured and those who support such initiatives do so because they stand to make money from them either through testing contracts, curricular materials, or for-profit charter schools.

In 1974, Bill Molisen and David Holgrem developed a sustainable alternative to industrial agriculture based on ecology. They called it *permaculture*, which stands for permanent agriculture, to emphasize their commitment to soil health, thus laying the groundwork for a system that could be permanent, unlike industrial agriculture, which threatens our food supply by emphasizing profits and convenience at the expense of long-term environmental balance. Bill Molisen explains: "Permaculture is a philosophy of working with, rather than against nature; of protracted & thoughtful observation rather than protracted & thoughtless labour; & of looking at plants & animals in all their functions, rather than treating any area as a single-product system." David Holgrem has recently defined three core values of permaculture: earth care, people care, and fair share. Upon these three values, he has created a list of twelve permaculture design

principles. Those that I have used most often in my literary work include: “observe and interact,” “produce no waste,” and “use and value diversity” (“Permaculture Principles”). I will review how permaculture designers and organic farmers follow these principles, and then I will describe my applications of these principles in my teaching.

Permaculture designers begin by studying the site itself: the soil, water, wind, human, animal, and plant communities that comprise the place, their patterns, habits and needs, following the principle observe and interact. Then, they use this information to assemble an aesthetically, ethically, and ecologically pleasing environment. A permaculture designer may use rain barrels to add a decorative element to a garden, to solve a run off problem, and to provide water. Using one step to create multiple benefits is known as stacking functions. Farmer would have diverse crops and types of livestock on their farms, like Polyface Farm, which Michael Pollan writes about in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. This diversity shields the farmer from fluctuations in the weather and the economy. Plus, farmers who value diversity by raising crops and livestock produce less waste because resources, like hay, become fuel for cows and then milk and meat for sale as well as manure to enrich the soil for continued growing of crops. In these ways, permaculture attends to the material world, pays serious attention to the elements, and situates humans in relationship to plants, animals, and the elements. By studying permaculture and acting on its principles, then, we can begin to expand our work in the very way that Paul Lynch asks, expanding literacy work so that this work connects participants with multiple communities—human, plant, animal, and elemental.

Bill Molisen explains that permaculture begins with the nose, then the hands, then the back door, and finally, the doorstep. Permaculture is multisensorial embodied work that begins where we are with the material at hand rather than where we hope to go. In this way, it aligns with theories of affect, which creates more room for embodiment and emotional appeals in our discourse and offers a strong theoretical rationale for the value of imaginative writing. Brian Holmes explicitly situates affective and aesthetic discourse in the collapsing systems precipitated by neoliberalism in his book *Escaping the Overcode*. Holmes extends and updates Lyotard's work as he details the master narratives that continue to exert much influence in material and ideological realms, in essence, training people to define themselves as consumers rather than creators, which perpetrates environmental destruction. In order to stop this destruction, Holmes claims we need to engage in affective discourse, which he describes as art that appeals to the senses and reminds us of embodiment. This grounds us in the world of the senses and move us beyond logocentric discourse, but, it is unruly, unpredictable, hard to assess, and not necessarily connected to narrow, financial values, so affective discourse requires us to reframe our work if we aim to move beyond deadly, deadening conventions.

Closer to our field, Rachel Riedner and Kevin Mahoney emphasize the importance of affect in their book *Democracies to Come*. They use the term *rhetorical action* to describe interventions that create alternatives to neoliberalism. The examples they use—post-colonial theory and Zapatista resistance work—include a range of media—

academic writing, political writing, storytelling, and political action—which places their work in the tradition of composition scholars such as Mark Shadle, Robert Davis, Christian Weisser, and Nancy Welch, who urge us to move beyond academic discourse and to engage in what Welch calls “rhetoric from below”: the language practices and organized actions employed by marginalized groups to increase their agency.

What I aim to add to this important work is attention to the rhetoric from even further below, from the ground, from the soil that sustains life on earth, where we find important knowledge about the value of diversity, new ideas about identity, and important connections between permaculture and posthumanism—an outgrowth of new materialism that, like permaculture, calls for collaborative rather than hierarchical relationships between humans and other beings, ideas, and objects. Dating back at least as far as Donna Haraway’s 1985 “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” new materialist approaches resituate human perception and identity in multiple, shifting contexts in relationship to other people, plants, animals, ideas, and things. Much of Bruno Latour’s work on actor network theory rethinks agency as an ongoing collaboration among beings where constraints are opportunities. As I mentioned above, Paul Lynch explains that Latour’s work requires composition studies to understand our work in the context of the end of the anthropocene, which connects to the work of posthumanist thinkers, such as Levi Bryant and Tim Morton, who explain that contemporary environmental forces—such as climate change, what Morton calls “a hyperobject” because it is so vast that it evades our apprehension—have toppled the ideological and material hierarchies that supported modernist ideals of humanism.

This has implications for agriculture in that the ideals of convenience and choice, which construct us as consumers, are being replaced with a better understanding of the material constraints wrought by the ecological implications of industrial food production as well as a better understanding of our agency as creators of food via victory gardens, urban vertical farming, participation in community-supported agriculture, and a renewed interest in cooking and preserving food (Katz 2006). This also has implications for education in that it changes our understanding of ourselves and of the type of knowledge we need to navigate an ever-changing world. Next, I explain how ecological community literacies provide such knowledge.

II.

Ecological approaches to literacy date back to Richard Coe’s 1975 article “Eco-Logic for the Composition Classroom,” which, much like posthumanist theory today, argues for alternatives to analytic-logic, and Marilyn Cooper’s 1986 article “An Ecology of Writing,” which argues for attention to the contexts of writing to counterbalance the cognitive approaches were favored at that time. In 2001 and 2002, ecological approaches received more sustained and deep attention with the publication of two books: *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation* by Derek Owens and *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition* by Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser. Owens begins with an environmentalist agenda and concludes with

ecological theory that proposes reconstructivist design as a means of acknowledging the provisional nature of knowledge and at the same time moving beyond the impasse of postmodernism. In this way, Owens's work aligns with that of theorists who use object-oriented ontology (Morton 2011) and actor-network theory (Latour 2010) to recast our understanding of agency as neither completely free nor completely determined but rather constrained, which also aligns with the work of permaculture designers who ask us to view constraints as possibilities rather than limiting factors. Dobrin and Weisser (2002), coined the term *ecomposition*, an extension of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, to describe an approach that moves in two directions: to probe rhetorical social constructions of nature and to enable students to exercise their ability to produce discourse, which situates them as predecessors of Paul Lynch and his call for more creative composition and less critique.

Ecological approaches to literacy, mostly called ecomposition after Dobrin and Weisser's work, share many common features. Reviewing the work of Owens, Dobrin and Weisser, Nedra Reynolds, and M. Syverson as well as four syllabi informed by ecomposition, I discerned eight important features of ecomposition: student-centered approaches, place-based assignments, readings with nature themes, interdisciplinarity, public writing, use of new media, service learning, and posthumanism. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on a cluster of features that most closely relate to ecological community literacies- place-based writing, public writing, interdisciplinarity, and community literacy work. First, I will review the research that underpins these features, then I will explain how I employed them, and finally, I will reflect on what my students and I learned.

Place-based writing falls into the tradition of place-based education, an approach to teaching that is used in K-12 settings and beyond, which engages students in work that matters to them by connecting school work with the students' lived experiences and the world outside the classroom (Sobel). Because our lived experiences rarely fall into the seemingly neat academic demarcations of academic disciplines, placed-based writing is inherently interdisciplinary (Davis and Shadle). The interdisciplinary nature of this work is important because the problems that communities face require multiple stakeholders to navigate information from multiple fields. Public writing is both a step towards preparing students to communicate with multiple stakeholders and a response to research that acknowledges the limits of academic discourse, which may be insular (Davis and Shadle; Weisser; Welch). In the tradition of shifting the focus of college writing beyond the campus, community literacy projects take students outside the classroom (Goldblatt).

At Unity College, a school devoted to environmentalism, students enroll in a two-semester sequence of communication classes that integrate writing and speaking. All faculty use place as a theme for these classes, and we lead students through a shared set of formal assignments beginning with a personal place project followed by an informative place project in the first semester and including a public place project and a persuasive place project in the second semester. These classes are informed by ecological approaches to literacy and by permaculture, especially slow observation

over time, stacking functions, and valuing diversity.

Students generate material for the personal place project by reading, writing about, and discussing traditional print and multimedia works about place as well as their own experiences. In addition, students draw, talk, and listen to generate material. One activity, inspired by Kristie Fleckenstein's work on spatial literacies, asks students to pick a place that they care about and to sketch an aerial view of that place. Students jot down memories associated with the place on the sticky notes. Next, students present their drawings and memories to each other in small groups of three or four. Students are instructed to think about questions to ask each other while they are listening to their classmates' informal presentations, questions that will help their classmates see where they might include additional material. In this process, students learn about their peers, engage in low stakes peer review, and slowly generate material for formal writing and speaking assignments. This example follows the permaculture principles of engaging in slow observation over time, stacking functions, and valuing diversity. The informal assignments serve multiple purposes: students get multiple, diverse perspectives on their emerging assignments and place; and their topics emerge slowly as they engage in multiple activities using multiple media.

The first formal part of this assignment asks students to either write an essay about the place or to create a multimedia piece about the place. Students have written narratives, created series of vignettes, made PowerPoint slideshows, as well as Prezis and collages about the places that they care about. These multiple media allow students to engage in affective discourse, one route away from logocentricism. For their second formal project, students create a speech about this place. After giving the speech, they continue to revise their first project. We begin with the material at hand, the students' experiences and observations and their connections to places they care about, and students work with this material in a variety of ways. Thus, we continue to follow the permaculture principles of slow observation over time and valuing diversity.

For the next assignment, students return to their drawings. We discuss the circulation of resources (the movement of energy and material through the place) as well as the ecological communities (the human, plant, animal, and other neighbors that inhabit the place or travel through it). Students then sketch in the circulation of resources and the overlapping ecological communities, using sticky notes to down questions that arise as they sketch. This part of the assignment is informed by one devised by Dobrin and Weisser, which has students study the circulation of resources around their collage campus. Our version allows students to select from a variety of places to study. As with the personal project, students share their drawings and sketches and offer each other preliminary feedback to help each other craft good research questions, which we define as questions that are grounded, focused, and interesting.

Students then engage in research with an emphasis on using public information rather than academic research. Underlying the focus on public information are two principles. First, the ability to access and evaluate public information about the places we care about—information about land preservation, trash and recycling, wildlife habitats, planning and development—helps students become informed citizens.

Second, academic research is aimed at specialists, and first semester college students are not yet specialists. Thus, we aim to help students develop a process for writing about new information that is aimed at a general audience rather than specialists. In this way, we encourage interdisciplinary work and we encourage students to engage in public discourse, two features of ecological approaches to literacy. We continue to follow the permaculture principles of working with the material at hand, in this case by selecting public genres that are accessible to students. We also employ this principle by having students create question rooted in their observations that take them beyond their immediate experience and that connect them with ecological communities.

In the second semester, students may return to the questions from the first semester and expand them or devise new questions. They use these questions to engage in library research and to develop two major products- a persuasive research appear and a public document. We follow the principle of slow observation over time in that students may continue to study one topic over the course of two semesters and to learn more about this topic through different types of research, through drafting and feedback and revising, and through translating their material into multiple genres. In pushing students to use multiple types of research and multiple genres, we follow the permaculture principle of cultivating diversity and the imperative to produce no waste. The students' work—their research questions and other material—serves as the compost for the next projects in the series. For the public document, they select an audience outside the class and select a genre that would be appropriate for their chosen audience. They then use their research to compose a document for this audience. Finally, they distribute the document to the audience and write about their experiences. The practice of distributing public documents connects students with communities outside the classroom and allows students to teach outside communities about ecological community literacies.

For example, one student wrote about a family camp for his personal place project. For his informative project, he began with a question based on his own experience and observations. As a duck hunter, he had noticed fewer and fewer ducks over the years, so, for the informative project, he researched duck migration patterns in northern Maine and found that they had indeed been declining. The next semester, he continued to research duck migration patterns and found links between this and climate change. For the public project, he created a pamphlet aimed at hunters to teach them about climate change. He distributed the pamphlet at Cabala's, a store that sells hunting and other outdoor gear. He reported that his audience was responsive to his research.

Another student more directly addressed the value of ecological community literacies and the impact of permaculture pedagogies on her learning. She began with memories of walking the trails behind her home in Connecticut. Her research took her to an exploration of the environmental impact of a water park in a former quarry near her home. In the second semester, she continued to research the ecology of the Connecticut River Valley, she wrote a paper that advocated for more ecological approaches to recreation, and she created a blog aimed at her home community to teach them about the Connecticut River Valley. As she wrote on her blog:

... recently ... I took on the project of developing an understanding of the ecology of the Connecticut River...I realized that the best way to care for our natural homes, is to try to understand them, so that decisions about human living are made with these places in mind. Through this page, I hope to share a greater understanding of the Connecticut River, which is home to me, as well as all of the people living in Connecticut Riverside towns, not to mention the biodiversity of insects, plants, fish, birds, mammals and other organisms that find their ecological niche in the river.

Thus, the student explicitly identifies the value of ecological community literacies and defines her work as sharing such knowledge with her community. Later in the semester, she described the impact of the course on her own understanding of herself:

Before taking Composition and Communication, I felt bitter about the experiences I had with writing and speaking in high school—like I was at a dead end ... However, by using the recursive process in class, and utilizing different methods of generating material, I found that I actually contained a fountain of ideas.

Here, the student explains the deadening impact of her high school experiences and how the permaculture approach allowed her to connect with ideas in herself.

These ecological community literacy projects ask students to attend to multiple communities and relationships. In addition, as students share their work with each other, they learn about the ways in which their communities are unique and in which they are similar. For example, one semester in one of my classes, three students wrote about growing up on the east coast along the shore. Each noticed changes in the lobster industry. From each other, they learned that the problems facing their communities were part of larger trends.

The community literacy class I taught in 2012—one option by which Unity College students could satisfy their community-based learning requirement—also followed permaculture principles and promoted ecological communities, so it serves as another example of stacking functions. Students began by reading and writing literacy narratives. Next, these students created personal place projects much like those described above, but these students were required to also create a visual artifact about the places they selected. Over several weeks in the middle of the semester, the college students traveled to a nearby elementary school and worked with a mixed class of fourth and fifth graders. Students worked in groups comprised of two college students and two or three elementary students. During our first visit to the school, we worked on the place-based drawing to generate material. During our second visit, we worked on informal peer review and drafting. During our third visit, we worked on revising. For our fourth and final visit, we brought trifold boards and helped the students assemble displays. The next week, the elementary school students traveled to our college campus and displayed their work along with the work of the college students. In attendance was

a class of fourth graders from a neighboring district.

Like the place-based assignment sequence, the writing projects created in this class helped students cultivate ecological community literacies in a number of ways. The college students learned more about the local communities that comprise Waldo County by working with school children, who shared stories about growing up in places, some of which were marked by severe rural poverty. The fourth and fifth grade students learned more about their human, plant, and animal neighbors by composing and sharing their projects. In addition, students from separate parts of Waldo County learned more about each other and about the ecological communities that comprise the county.

I will teach another community literacy class in the fall of 2015. The college students in this class will have already completed the two-semester, place-based writing sequence I described above, so they will be able to expand upon this work and drawn upon it as we develop workshops for local school children. This assignment sequences follows the permaculture principles described above. In addition, I aim to use eco-poetic aesthetics to deepen my students understanding of the importance of affective discourse.

If this creative writing class is successful and students want to continue working on the community literacy project, I hope to have the ability to run a class solely focused on community literacy in the spring of 2016. This class would also allow college students to work towards their graduation requirements, as it would fulfill their community based learning requirement, which aligns with the principle of permaculture that advocates stacking functions- solutions that address multiple problems and offer multiple benefits, such as the use of rain barrels to prevent erosion from water run-off that also creates a renewable water source. If this works, I will have a structure in place for students to begin to explore community literacy in their first-year general education classes, to deepen this exploration in a creative writing class each fall, and to expand it via a community literacy class the following spring. This would allow me to maintain an ongoing relationship with the local schools and to bring in colleagues from other disciplines to develop ongoing, place-based research projects where our students would work with students in local k-12 schools to improve literacy in terms of communication and in terms of understanding of the human, plant, animal, and material worlds.

What posthumanism adds to community literacy is our responsibility to include our plant, animal, and material neighbors in our definition of community. This means listening to the material world and understanding the material world as capable of producing knowledge. Permaculture provides us with design principles to put posthumanist philosophy into practices: slow observation over time, working with energy flows, paying attention to the margins, and promoting diversity rather than monoculture. Permaculture and posthumanism allow us to cultivate what Marilyn Cooper calls “a pedagogy of responsibility” (quoted in Lynch 459). They allow us to answer Brian Holmes’s question “How do you rearrange the stars above your head to open up unexpected ground beneath your feet?” by teaching us that we are the stars

and we are the ground, the boundaries between head and feet and stars and ground are temporary, and we are all the same matter and all matter the same.

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Author Bio

Stephanie Wade is an Associate Professor of Writing and the Director of Writing at Unity College, a college devoted to environmentalism in Unity, Maine.