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A Place for Ecopedagogy in Community Literacy

Rhonda Davis

“To speak, people must first listen to what the world has to say.”

—Judith Halden-Sullivan, “The Phenomenology of Process”

Educators focused on community literacy and public engagement have access to a unique critical platform from which larger social issues that impact us both as a whole and on very personal levels are open to exploration. Being particularly situated to have significant impact on community, literacy work in this area may require uncommon pedagogical strategies. Based on its comprehensive focus on sustainability, ecological literacy, sociopolitical factors that affect communities, and a multitude of other factors that underpin social injustice, ecopedagogy may be uniquely positioned to offer a more holistic view than other composition pedagogies such as place-based education and ecocomposition.

In considering the powerful impact writing can have in both the personal and social arenas as a primary mode of communication and expression, we can clearly identify the importance of composition studies. Educators in composition studies, particularly those focused on community literacy and public engagement, have access to a unique critical platform from which larger social issues that impact us both as a whole and on very personal levels are open to exploration. Being uniquely situated to have significant impact on community, literacy work in this area may require unique pedagogical strategies. In light of this, what follows is a discussion of the approach to ecopedagogy as it might apply to community literacy. Based on its comprehensive focus on sustainability, ecological literacy, sociopolitical factors that affect communities, and a multitude of other factors that underpin social injustice, ecopedagogy may offer a more holistic view than other composition pedagogies, such as place-based education and ecocomposition. As ecopedagogy explores the ways in which literacy impacts community needs, it may prove successful in guiding practitioners and participants toward viable solutions for their communities.

This essay, in part, reviews a project discussed by Robert Brooke in “Voices of Young Citizens: Rural Citizenship, Schools, and Public Policy” as a supportive example of how ecopedagogical thinking might be applied to real community literacy concerns. Involving five rural schools in Nebraska with the primary objective of helping rural youth create their own rhetorical space to address community issues, this particular project not only highlights the importance of community literacy efforts but also its unique applicability and possibility within rural settings.

In addition to considering ways in which ecopedagogy might contribute to community literacy, I will discuss an analysis of how ecopedagogy can be utilized in conjunction with the rhetorical model that Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower propose in “Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry.” This model will serve as a framework for both understanding and meeting the challenges of community literacy projects in a rural setting.

Higgins, Long, and Flower claim that “literacy should be defined not merely as the receptive skill of reading, but as the public act of writing and taking social action” (167). The authors define their approach to community literacy as one that “uses writing to support collaborative inquiry into community problems; calls up local publics around the aims of democratic deliberation; and transforms personal and public knowledge by restructuring deliberative dialogues among individuals and groups across lines of difference” (168). Combine this approach to community literacy with the broader ecological scope of ecopedagogy, and practitioners do indeed have a potentially powerful strategy for making real and lasting personal and public change.

Ecopedagogy, evolving from critical pedagogy and pulling from various educational ideas and practices, serves to elevate the mission of composition pedagogy while providing a framework from which practitioners might gain a broader scope to understand the diverse influences communities are subject to. It is widely accepted that the primary mission of ecopedagogy is to guide teachers and practitioners of all types to not only see the collective potential of human beings, but to develop an appreciation for it and to foster social justice. Ecopedagogy also seeks to value local knowledge as well as expert knowledge. In tackling literacy issues that underpin social injustice, ecopedagogy also seeks to embrace the inherently ecological nature of human life and society that requires input from local populations, established experts, and the larger society (Kahn 18). In doing so, it places ecoliteracy at its center and opposes the globalization of ideologies such as neoliberalism and imperialism that may hinder local literacy efforts. Ecopedagogy may be a more comprehensive strategy than those of traditional literacy approaches when working within the field of community literacy as, according to Richard Kahn in *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planetary Crisis*, it seeks to humanize experience based on ecologically oriented politics and make connections between culturally relevant forms of knowledge (18).

Other scholars are making the connections between what is defined as culturally relevant knowledge, politics, sustainability, and ecology. Gregory Martin, in “The Poverty of Critical Pedagogy: Toward a Politics of Engagement,” claims there is a much needed “revolutionary critical pedagogy based in hope that can bridge the politics of the academy with forms of grassroots political organizing capable of achieving social and ecological transformation” (349). For ecopedagogy, the ideas of planetarity and biophilia must be added to Martin’s notion of revolutionary critical pedagogy; we must necessarily approach education, specifically literacy skills, with the underpinning that we are all indeed part of life on earth. As Antonia Darder notes in the preface to Richard Kahn’s *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planetary Crisis*:

Any anti-hegemonic resistance movement that claims social justice, universal human rights, or global peace must contend forthrightly with the deteriorating ecological crisis at hand, as well as consider possible strategies and relationships that rupture the status quo and transform environmental conditions that threaten disaster. A failure to integrate ecological sustainability at the core of our political and pedagogical struggles for liberation, Kahn argues, is to blindly and misguidedly adhere to an anthropocentric worldview in which emancipatory dreams are deemed solely about human interests, without attention either to the health of the planet or to the well-being of all species with whom we walk the earth. (xiii)

In adopting ecopedagogy at the outset of community literacy projects, we acknowledge that the health and survival of our communities is dependent upon planetary sustainability and as such, is a “vital and necessary critical pedagogical concern” (Kahn xiii).

In support of these critical pedagogical concerns, what follows is an investigation into the links between community literacy and ecopedagogy. I begin with a brief exploration of the role composition pedagogy and literacy skills play in public engagement and social action. Next, I explore how literacy as an ecological act delves into the ways compositionists and community literacy practitioners see themselves in relation to the world and the positive potential of holding such a view. A discussion of various pedagogical strategies that take into account ecological relationships between writers and their environments follows, claiming that a unique approach to community literacy is warranted. Finally, I detail how ecopedagogy may serve as a powerful and comprehensive approach in community literacy, leading into an analysis of why this may work well in rural literacy programs specifically.

Public Engagement and Social Action

In her essay “Service Learning as the New English Studies,” Ellen Cushman notes that “[r]ather than simply imparting literacy skills that are indeed useful in the workplace, much research in rhetoric and composition engages students in the critique and appropriation of literacy practices necessary to influence and change workplaces and communities from within” (205). Both the academic and public spheres appear to be crawling away from strict conceptions of selfhood to constructs that include the wider environments within which we exist. As an additional layer in the unique position educators in composition studies find themselves, we can also examine this broadening of the concept of selfhood and how its more inclusive perspective affects pedagogies and strategies aimed at community literacy.

While the concept of selfhood is expanding, scholars like Christian Weisser argue that the inclusion of the larger biosphere we live in has had little impact on composition theory. In “Ecomposition and the Greening of Identity,” Weisser observes: “In order for composition theory to fully account for the many ways in which human subjectivity is constructed, we must begin to recognize that our own personal, social, and political lives are wholly dependent upon the biological matrix

of life on this planet” (82). In doing so, we begin to recognize our own “green identities” and this “moves us closer toward realizing exactly who we are in relation to the rest of the world” (82). What are the consequences of reaching literacy goals for composition studies and community literacy practitioners in particular?

Realizing who we are in relation to the rest of the world as writers and educators is important because writing “can be seen as a search for identity” (Weisser 85). In seeing ourselves as constructing and being constructed *by* the world around us, understanding our relationship to the world is crucial and is undoubtedly expressed in our literacy skills. This fuller understanding of who we are can have tremendous implications for shared problem solving and solution building. In community literacy efforts, community building, identifying shared concerns, giving voice to those concerns, and finding appropriate, fair, and just solutions are all founded on a broader understanding of who we are in relation to the world around us. Weisser asserts that a fuller understanding of our identity in relation to the world will necessitate that “compositionists in particular begin to move toward a more ecological understanding of identity” (87).

Literacy as an Ecological Act

In analyzing literacy practices in terms of affecting a broader scope and set of environments, most noticeably our workplaces and our communities, what we are adopting can be viewed as a more ecological way of looking at the world. We are part of a greater whole—an interdependent network of actions and consequences. Therefore, our discourse ought to reflect the primacy of such a relationship. In “Ecomposition, Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches,” Sydney Dobrin supports this notion of writing as an ecological act, as we cannot be separated from our environments as we write and are written. He claims that “rhetoric and composition is an ecological endeavor in that writing cannot be separated from place, from environment, from nature, or from location” (13). Dobrin also emphasizes that composition and rhetoric studies is “a study of relationships: between individual writers and their surrounding environments, between writers and texts, between texts and culture, between ideology and discourse, and between language and the world” (12). Nowhere is this more apparent than in community literacy where compositionists take part in analyzing and learning from a matrix of ever-evolving relationships people find themselves, for better or worse, embedded within.

It is critical in this ecological framework to recognize that “identity emerges not only from our human relationships, but from the connections we have with other life-forms in an array of habitats” (Weisser 87). While ecological literacy and the pedagogical approaches that result do not focus exclusively on environmental concerns, they have the potential to expand participants’ awareness of such concerns. Once one’s identity is expanded to include other life forms and environments, a more ecological imagining of our relationship with the world we live in becomes more evident. An ecological framework opens up understanding and appreciation for the biodiversity of which we are a part, and the need for preservation of such diversity becomes apparent.

As citizens, students, teachers, and writers, we are embedded within particular environments that affect us, engage us, and challenge us. It is a reciprocal relationship that involves other people, nonhuman others, the natural environment, and constructed environments. In order to effect socially responsible change, which many composition scholars believe to be an integral goal of teaching, it is critical to embrace this ecological concept in teaching composition and rhetoric, as well as to engage in public discourse. Writing is a fundamentally human activity, and when viewed from an ecological stance, it cannot be separated from human experience.

A Unique Pedagogical Requirement

As an ecological act, literacy holds tremendous potential for real civic engagement and tangible social change. When one views oneself in terms of being an active part of an interdependent whole, a dynamic, integrated way of thinking must take hold, one that forces a larger world view and therefore specific approaches to being in the world. As a composition instructor, course design and implementation would necessarily be geared with this in mind—aiding and guiding the student in the formation of a more ecologically minded approach to optimally meeting personal and social challenges. The same holds true for community literacy practitioners; program design and practical application of an ecological approach incorporate the multifaceted aspects of a community's identity.

Scholars like Ellen Cushman and Thomas Deans also support this notion that an integral goal of teaching is to effect socially responsible change and that helping students develop a critical consciousness to that end is essential. If, as Thomas Deans asserts, an “important goal of composition courses is to encourage critical consciousness” and that our objective as teachers is to help our students “to see problems as systemic” and “to see things from multiple perspectives,” then an ecological approach is inevitable (99).

The ecological approach to composition and rhetoric has not been fully explored when it comes to applicability both inside and outside the classroom. In community literacy, its potential becomes even more visible as students and community members may begin to see their writing and their participation in community literacy as not only an important part of our democracy but as a liberating personal action. Clearly, a unique pedagogical approach is needed for such a powerful and engaging framework.

An approach that is gaining ground in both public education and community literacy programs is *place-based education*. Scholars in the field of place-based education agree that centering on local issues, both cultural and geographical, serves more long-term good than a more “migratory” approach as discussed by Robert Brooke. David Sobel, author of *Childhood and Nature*, *Design Principles for Educators* and *Place-Based Education, Connecting Classrooms & Communities*, has done much to advance the pedagogy and provide teachers and other educators with the tools to fully embrace place-based education. Sobel defines place-based education as

the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies,

science, and other subject areas across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school. (164)

According to Sobel in *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities*, place-based education is “not solely a way to integrate the curriculum around a study of place, but a means of inspiring stewardship and an authentic renewal and revitalization of civic life,” (iii) and as such, cannot focus only on local realities. No community exists within a cultural, economic, or political vacuum. Communities are shaped by these forces and as such, guide students to take part in the larger world to which they belong.

While making connections between the larger culture and local realities, is place-based composition only a starting point for community literacy? In “Deep Maps, Teaching Rhetorical Engagement through Place-Conscious Education,” Robert Brooke and Jason McIntosh introduce the notion of using maps to both represent and connect with the places we find ourselves—both literal and abstract. Two main objectives in using deep maps are that they help develop considered space and encourage civic participation in that space. This approach makes inhabited space something to reflect upon and to “open mental maps to analysis” of those spaces (133).

Brooke and McIntosh claim that “initially, writers need to become accustomed to seeing themselves *in a place*, that is, they need to become aware of the various ways location (literal and mental) creates their understanding of landscape, culture, class, race, and gender, and surrounds them with local issues and local possibilities” (132). What better place to exercise one's cognitive and rhetorical faculties than in a community literacy project? By definition, community literacy seeks to engage people in writing, communication, and civic life. Therefore, place-based composition seems inseparable from community literacy initiatives. But is it comprehensive enough?

Another pedagogical framework with which to approach community literacy may be ecocomposition, as envisioned by Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser in *Ecocomposition, Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches*. These authors view ecocomposition as an “investigation of the total relations of discourse both to its organic and inorganic environment and to the study of all of the complex interrelationships between the human activity of writing and all of the conditions of the struggle for existence” (13). Much like place-based composition and education, ecocomposition is underpinned by the interconnected nature of things. Dobrin claims it is “the study of relationships: between individual writers and their surrounding environments, between writers and texts, between texts and culture, between ideology and discourse, and between language and the world” (12). Truly an ecological perspective on a writer's/citizen's place in the world, ecocomposition

places the community literacy practitioner at the heart of an evolving matrix rich in economic, social, and political dynamisms that require deeper understanding if real and lasting progress is to be made.

While this is a completely appropriate and laudable approach to any composition classroom or community literacy program with far-reaching benefits for students, participating community members, teachers, and the larger world, one must ask if it is comprehensive enough. Dobrin himself poses similar questions in “Writing Takes Place,” in an attempt to define ecocomposition. Clearly recognizing its lack of full methodological development, he asks pointedly if our primacy of language has not separated us from the natural world. In doing so, he sees ecocomposition as “the place in which ecology and rhetoric and composition can converge to better explore the relationships between language, writing, and discourse; and between nature, place, environment, and locations” (12). Regardless of the more fully developed, ecological scope in composition that scholars like Dobrin and Weisser call for, one gets the sense that a more critical pedagogical approach may be necessary, especially when working in a community literacy setting. In light of this, ecopedagogy may be a more comprehensive strategy when working within the field of community literacy.

Richard Kahn, in *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planetary Crisis*, discusses the roots of ecopedagogy as representing a “profound transformation in the radical educational and political project derived from the work of Paulo Freire known as *critical pedagogy*” (18). He claims that ecopedagogy seeks two aims: (1) to humanize experience based on an ecologically oriented politics that stands in opposition to global neoliberalism and imperialism, and (2) to develop a cohesive ecoliteracy and realization of “culturally relevant forms of knowledge grounded in normative concepts such as sustainability, planetarity, and biophilia” (18). With these formidable goals in mind, ecopedagogy takes ecocomposition and critical pedagogy and infuses them with a militant passion geared toward social change.

The Strength of Ecopedagogy

It is fair to say that a large proportion of community literacy practitioners are geared toward civic engagement and social change. Given the ecological nature of writing and the broader range of literacy skills, ecopedagogy is a unique and powerful pedagogical strategy in which to frame an approach to service learning programs and other activities engaged in the goals of community literacy.

An important component of ecopedagogy is its view of environmental crisis as an essential pedagogical concern. Scholars such as Richard Kahn consider ecopedagogy as a way to profoundly transform education and in turn, make for a more sustainable world. Ecopedagogy supports sustainability by helping to construct curricular frameworks that contribute to ecological, political, and social policies. In the field of community literacy, this works well to inform scholarly approach and program development because it upholds similar values that see the exploration of social injustice, educational inequities, and marginalized populations as a central areas of focus.

Just as community literacy practitioners such as Linda Flower focus on facilitating community conversations within marginalized groups of people to work

toward building solutions and democratizing knowledge, ecopedagogy is a critical pedagogy that seeks to do much the same with the additional focus on environmental literacy as the underpinning of a healthy human society. Ecopedagogy also seeks to shed light on systemic injustices that squelch individual voices that make up community and inhibit solution finding.

The philosophy of Richard Kahn shares common values with community literacy practitioners; he points a critical finger at the silencing of communities and the current trend toward social and environmental disaster by a “global technocapitalist infrastructure that relies upon market-based and functionalist versions of technoliteracy to instantiate and augment its socioeconomic and cultural control” (9). Such a critical pedagogy can be immensely powerful in examining communities and the social, institutional, and political structures that impact them. These structures may inhibit fair and just solutions from being implemented and the democratic knowledge that arises from community conversation can help identify this.

A Strategy for Rural Literacy Programs

I would like now to consider the applicability of ecopedagogy to rural literacy programs, particularly because rural environments may have unique literacy needs and challenges. In “Rural Literacies,” Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell view literacy as inseparable from notions of sustainability. While they do not utilize the term ecopedagogy in their analysis of rural literacies, they explicitly state that their approach is underpinned by a conception that involves a “multidimensional definition of sustainability, one that is informed by ecological, economic, political, and social factors and the interdependence of these factors” (6). Clearly an ecopedagogical approach, their goal to “promote models of citizen participation that will ensure the future of rural communities and spark potential solidarity between rural, urban, and suburban communities” is admirable and rich with potential for community writing projects aimed at broadening and deepening understanding about what it means to be a rural community member as well as a global citizen (8).

An important aspect of engaging public pedagogy and citizen participation is to connect teaching and learning to social empowerment. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell urge that a critical step in achieving this in rural communities is to interrogate “constructions and representations of rural people and life” and analyze how they match up with characterizations and stereotypes of rural life and literacy (9). A global understanding of where communities fit in is also crucial because it provides a deeper contextual foothold. In order for students and citizens to move toward literacies, they need to be part of a global conversation. In order for people to understand how and when to “resist, critique, and imagine alternatives to the official logic of neoliberalism, the global movement toward increased privatization of public services and toward a market economy dominated by predatory multinational corporations” citizens must have literacy skills (10). Ecopedagogy can help achieve this deeper contextual foothold to inform their decisions.

How do rural citizens take up the challenges to “resist, critique, and imagine alternatives” in their communities? How do literacy skills in rural communities

rise to these challenges? Literacy skills as taught in standard public education have been subject to endless scrutiny, and regardless of how they “measure up,” scholars are considering this potential lack of skill with a fresh perspective—one that seeks to empower rural citizens. But in doing so, students, teachers, parents, and community members are often faced with a reality that is deeply ingrained in our psyche: that moving *away* from one’s community is a measure of success. Contemporary economics has witnessed for decades the inclination to identify success with migration; migration to larger, more cosmopolitan cities has come to be viewed as synonymous with success. This trend may have not only created a false sense of security for prospective job seekers; it also may send the message that to stay where one is located equals lack of success.

When rural communities not only witness but anticipate the exodus of their youthful population, this can have lasting and damaging effects. The work and community building that is going on is devalued and a sense of historical association is lost as a community’s young citizens seek meaningful lives elsewhere. The lack of connection and understanding of place and one’s history in public education has indeed created several harmful practices, including reduced empathy for real places and people, disregard for cultural heritage and its preservation, and the creation of one’s own identity in relation to accountability and sustainability as citizens. In his essay, “Voices of Young Citizens: Rural Citizenship, Schools, and Public Policy,” Robert Brooke claims that “rural communities need a new kind of citizen, and rural education ought to help shape such citizens” (161). Brooke claims that mainstream education, as predominantly practiced, “points elsewhere: to history happening in other parts of the world, to migration as the means of personal advancement in the corporate industrial complex, to an ineffective form of citizenship” (163).

How can education, literacy programs, and their unique pedagogies, aid in Brooke’s assertion that rural education ought to help shape new kinds of citizens? In shaping such citizens, the odds that rural communities will improve and thrive are greatly increased. Brooke goes on to say that “if rural communities are to survive into the next century as places where vibrant, thriving populaces can live well and grow, then rural citizenship needs to become more active, rhetorically effective, and politically savvy” (161). To do so, education must clearly focus its curriculum on more than preparing youth to seek meaningful lives elsewhere without questioning and rhetorically analyzing the world around them.

Utilizing rural education to support the development of this “new kind of citizen,” Brooke details what he refers to as a place-based project in rural Nebraska. Although not explicitly labeled as such, the project also serves as an example of ecopedagogy applied to a rural community literacy effort. Entitled “Voices of Young Citizens,” this project was the result of a collaboration between community partners that had previously worked together: the Nebraska Writing Project, the Nebraska Humanities Council, and NET-TV. Based on a previously filmed series depicting regional leaders exploring questions about the survival of rural communities in Nebraska, producer William Kelly made the decision to follow up with discussions with rural youth (Brooke 167). The project then focused on finding teachers within schools that had already implemented place-based education in their curricula to help develop a plan for the program. The aim of the project was to give students the

opportunity to create their own public rhetorical space to discuss issues they found pertinent to the growth and survival of their communities.

Giving rural youth a chance to develop their own rhetorical space for public television, Brooke asks, "What kind of persuasive, public action do young people create?" (168). Focusing on senior students from Nebraskan schools, Brooke notes that students were making connections for themselves between rural communities and economics, their own families, and the larger global economics impacting rural economies and communities, as well as migration and economic opportunity (169). From five different high schools, the following issues arose: dwindling economic opportunities, the nature of community, reliance on overused local natural resources, rural depopulation and disappearing elements of rural life, and water usage and economic controversies across the Great Plains (167).

In exploring these issues with family members, teachers, friends, and other community members, Brooke emphasizes that the issues selected by the students were "also identified as crucial by the state's business community" and that the issues also fit "into the national pattern of rural net migration loss" (169). As a community literacy effort, this project involved many community participants with a diverse level of literacy skills from professional TV producers to students. In identifying issues affecting their rural communities, students analyzed the issues through an ecological lens. The very nature of giving students the opportunity to create their own rhetorical space required community involvement and analysis of their place within a larger social matrix.

As Brooke notes, it is not solely the education of a community's youthful student population with their newly acquired literacy skills that point them elsewhere; the lack of meaningful connection and commitment to the places we inhabit often force people away. Community literacy efforts that span the population and pull people together through shared commitment and civic participation in their communities are essential to combat these tendencies of disconnection and distance. The "Voices of Young Citizens" project serves as an example of solidifying community partnerships and raising the stakes for students involved, which creates in them a sense of shared meaning and purpose.

Contributing to these notions and their negative consequences are the underrepresentation and often false representation of actual rural communities. In their introduction to *Reclaiming the Rural, Essays on Literacy, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy*, Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell claim that what results from neoliberalism, which gives "markets primacy over people," is "under-represented constituencies, such as rural residents who lack lobbying power, have difficulty asserting their needs and values" (8). Increasingly, rural people and the geographical locations they inhabit are viewed as "economic, political, or military resources" (9). It is in this rhetorical space that ecopedagogy may contribute to a more thorough understanding of the challenges faced by rural literacy programs.

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell claim that "to avoid treating rural areas as sites for resource exploitation, sites of cheap labor, or as dumping grounds for toxic substances or institutions that no one else wants in their backyards (prisons, for instance) means identifying with rural life and people" (9). But how might literacy practitioners successfully identify with rural life and people? In reviewing

ecopedagogy's aims as presented by Richard Kahn, it becomes apparent that its aims would not only support, but strengthen goals common to community literacy practitioners, to which identifying with the lives of the people in the community is paramount. According to Kahn's assertions, in seeking to "humanize experience based on an ecologically oriented politics that stands in opposition to global neoliberalism and imperialism," it becomes evident that ecopedagogy digs deeper into the underlying reasons and assumptions for difficulties in rural communities.

For example, rural communities often see increased levels of poverty, lack of education and opportunity, and a feeling of helplessness and lack of identity, as well as a desire to migrate to centers of civilization. These trends can all be explored further when viewed under an ecopedagogical lens. Developing a cohesive ecoliteracy and realization of, as Richard Kahn points out, "culturally relevant forms of knowledge grounded in normative concepts such as sustainability, planetarity, and biophilia" (18) can only result in more meaningful constructs arising in rural communities, as well as a deeper understanding of the challenges they face. Ecoliteracy is seen as an essential goal embedded within ecopedagogy. In "From Education for Sustainable Development to Ecopedagogy: Sustaining Capitalism or Sustaining Life?" Richard Kahn sees ecopedagogy as a "total liberation pedagogy for sustaining life" because of its potential for recreation and reconstruction of the very notions of what constitutes human society (11).

Bringing ecopedagogy and its critical ecoliteracy to bear on issues that plague rural communities holds tremendous potential to benefit not only everyday citizens but communities as a whole, including the ecological matrix that supports the very basics of life. Kahn, in discussing the goals of the "Earth Charter Initiative," a document arising from the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, emphasizes the importance of thrusting "environmental and socioeconomic/political problems together in one light and demanding long-term, integrated responses to the growing planetary social and ecological problems" (7). He says that three types of ecoliteracy need development if we are to build just and sustainable communities: the technical or functional, the cultural, and the critical (9). Functional ecoliteracy deals with basic environmental literacy as it is relevant to communal human impact including geology, ecology, etc., which most public education has until very recently been seriously lacking. For rural community literacy practitioners, integrating bioregional literacy with rhetorical analysis is not only imperative, but it can make for a more interesting engagement for both practitioners and participants.

Rural literacy practitioners, while clearly holding firmly to established literacy goals, might infuse their composition pedagogy with this more rhetorically focused agenda that invests participants in finding solid solutions to local concerns. In "From Education for Sustainable Development to Ecopedagogy: Sustaining Capitalism or Sustaining Life?" Kahn once again pushes the merging of critical pedagogy and ecoliteracy and argues that ecopedagogy holds the potential to move environmental education beyond

its discursive marginality and a real hope for an ecological and planetary society could be sustained through the widespread development of radical socioeconomic critiques and the sort of emancipatory life

practices that could move beyond those programmatically offered by the culture industries and the State. (8)

In so doing, rural literacy becomes a place of rhetorical empowerment—a place of claimed identity, sustainability, and real hope.

Practitioners need to aid students in understanding the rhetorical spaces that exist and in defining their own. People need the literacy skills to do this and to develop themselves as community members and citizens as part of a larger persuasive public. Just as many minority groups are marginalized, many rural students denied visibility because the cultural environment from which they emerge is insignificant in comparison to larger metropolises. Robert Brooke acknowledges that his own community in rural Nebraska could “benefit from more citizens who can, *make* persuasive public rhetorical space” (163). Literacy practitioners would, I think, be hard-pressed to find a community that could not benefit from such a citizenry.

Clearly, an ecopedagogical approach to rural literacy programs is a comprehensive strategy that could be utilized when working within the field of community literacy and could benefit from the addition of a rhetorical model that helps to frame the inquiries that a community literacy program might encounter. The rhetorical model of Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower as proposed in “Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry” is one such model that may work productively in rural settings. Their model consists of “assessing the rhetorical situation, creating a local public, developing participants’ rhetorical capacities, and supporting personal and public transformation through the circulation of alternative texts and practices” (170) and is a clear framework in which to place ecopedagogical inquiries. Consisting of elements that are essential in any community literacy effort, the model could provide structure and cohesion but is not without its own challenges as explored in the following section.

Challenges as Explored by Higgins, Flower, and Long

In working with rural literacy communities to potentially help others gain “rhetorical capacities” regarding issues that affect the community as a whole, practitioners might view “eliciting situated knowledge, engaging difference in dialogue, and constructing and reflecting upon wise options” as a critical foundation upon which to base pedagogy and practice. This may prove effective in any literacy project but especially one that is tied up in contentious misunderstanding (178). As previously discussed, rural communities are often not only sites of misunderstanding, but of misrepresentation and under-representation, resulting in the community’s actual needs and values being overlooked. By assessing the rhetorical situation in hopes of what Higgins, Long, and Flower refer to as “developing participants’ rhetorical capacities,” (170) ecopedagogical inquiry could be a grounding experience—one that attempts to instill an ecological worldview that benefits one’s own community as well as the larger community. It is also a pedagogy that recognizes the inherent challenges of such an undertaking and can only serve the practitioners and participants in furthering constructive dialogue.

Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower refer to developing rhetorical capacities and participants' "situated knowledge" as a "resource for transformed understanding and wise action" (179). Ethical issues of primary concern in this type of literacy community center around two things: (1) citizens' motivation to help create a "local public" as defined by Higgins, Long, and Flower, and (2) engaging a truly deliberative democracy (176). The ethical challenges surrounding creating a local public with which to engage becomes problematic, as it can only exist if citizens in a particular area are "willing to lend their attention, to participate in the discourse." They go on to say that "in a democracy, one of the most necessary but problem-ridden functions of a public is to deliberate about shared social concerns" (175).

Given trends of migration and lack of connection to place, one would have to wonder how participative a rural public might be. Practitioners may be surprised by participants' desire to rhetorically analyze the situations they find themselves within communities that typically lack economic, political, and social support. Higgins, Long, and Flower contend that assessing the rhetorical situation in local publics ought to involve the following considerations: "configuring the *problem space* or object of deliberation, identifying relevant *stakeholders* in the community, assessing existing *venues* for public problem solving, and analyzing *literate practices* used to represent and address problems and the way these practices structure stakeholder *participation*" (171). They view public deliberation as a "cognitive-social-cultural activity" which echoes the conception of ecoliteracy as an experienced action-based literacy. Engaging citizens in a rural local public in such deliberative discourse could only deepen understanding and community connection.

Regardless of the pedagogical strategy community literacy practitioners use to build their courses or programs, they must first investigate what Higgins, Long, and Flower identify as a challenge in creating a deliberative democracy – identifying shared concerns of a local public. The shared concerns in rural communities may be forthcoming only after constructive dialogue begins and increased rhetorical capacity is evident. The rich and varied work in rural communities available for community literacy practitioners seems unending. However, several questions arise in investigating a rural literacy community: What types of things constitute shared concerns? How do levels of literacy compare with other populations? And how successful are deliberative democracies in more isolated communities?

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell advocate a "critical, public pedagogy that questions and renegotiates the relationships among rural, urban, and suburban people" (155). Recall that ecopedagogy also calls for the critical questioning of rhetorical situations and making connections between culturally relevant forms of knowledge. Its emphasis on humanizing experience based on ecologically-oriented politics mutually reinforces the goals of the model proposed by Higgins, Long, and Flower while digging deeper into the multi-faceted layers of human societies and the connections that can propel communities forward or hinder the very stability they depend on. Even with the challenges literacy practitioners might face in rural communities as outlined above, ecopedagogy still serves as a foundational springboard from which to frame questions of literacy, empowerment, justice,

and community building because it views everything in terms of relationship and interconnectivity.

Conclusion

In exploring and unraveling the goals of ecopedagogy, it is clear that it provides a dynamic and viable option for community literacy practitioners, and in particular, those whose work focuses primarily on rural communities. Merging critical pedagogy with radical ecoliteracy, ecopedagogy holds the potential to not only encourage multi-culturally relevant forms of knowledge but also to analyze, critique, and deconstruct the cultural texts that surround us. According to Richard Kahn, the kind of ambitious ecoliteracy that is embedded within ecopedagogy involves

empirical and lived action-based literacies but it also requires ideologically critiquing and deconstructing various forms of cultural texts – including print materials like books, magazines, and newspaper articles; video texts such as films, television shows and other videographic forms; pictographical representations ranging from museum art pieces to t-shirt images; and digital texts of the Internet and association information-communication technologies. (14)

In light of this broader conception and its embrace of action-based literacies and lived experience, utilizing ecopedagogy in a community literacy setting offers a rich and diverse palette for participants and practitioners alike. It also elevates the local public to a space of deep and valued consideration; as stated by Higgins, Long, and Flower, “local publics not only spark personal transformation but public change” (193).

The primary goal of community literacy practitioners in rural programs is to develop collaborative and deliberative democracies, thereby helping citizens view themselves as part of a larger community and begin to understand the importance of living based on the interconnectivity of all life. An integral component of these goals is to help people see that individuals in a community are capable of powerful rhetorical action. Rural community members may view themselves as independent and isolated, when in reality, they are capable of taking powerful rhetorical stances. By debunking myths surrounding rural literacies that prevail in the scholarship and working against urban biases, community literacy programs founded upon ecopedagogical strategies can inform and empower both scholars and community members.

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