

Ecological Pedagogies

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Humanity's rising ecological consciousness has sparked concern throughout the academy, beyond STEM fields concerned primarily with technical explorations of Earth's physical processes, creating the Environmental Humanities (EH). This interdisciplinary approach to ecological concern partners with the sciences to offer socio-cultural insight into humanity's volatile relations with Earth. The EH—whether pursued through artistic and literary, philosophical, religious, or historical lenses—explore a plurality of paths toward diagnosing humanity's self-imposed alienation from the world as well as concrete initiatives that might put our species back in touch with the more-than human. At the heart of the EH is a recognition of the way our inherited conceptual frameworks harm Earth's ecosystems and individual creatures and the consequent need to reimagine our relations with planetary systems and individual creatures. This is the ethical core present throughout the EH.

When it comes to translating and teaching the EH to students, the banal vibe of the standard university classroom compared to the vibrant, visceral reality of ecological relations is immediately evident. Abstract lectures and discussions are not useless, but they reveal and exacerbate the distance between the classroom and the world we all want to love. Learning to love the world requires, I suggest, an interruption of the typical collegiate discourse with creative and perhaps radical pedagogies that help move teachers and students into closer proximity with the planetary and creaturely vulnerability at risk in our current, anthropogenic ecological crisis. A pedagogy aimed at ecological proximity seeks to minimize our separation from all things to allow students the possibility of personally—i.e., affectively, intellectually, and physically—connecting with the world through the deconstruction of ecologically harmful frameworks and the facilitation of meaningful, caring relations with Earth, its systems, and its creatures.

All this means incorporating teaching strategies that might make traditional Western educators uncomfortable. Such strategies include rethinking the sources of academic expertise; inviting voices into the classroom that might otherwise be ignored; learning through feeling and at times even prioritizing pathos over logos; introducing students to non-standard texts and sources that take us to the heart of the ecological crisis; learning outside of the classroom; and assessing students beyond standard learning goals and

outcomes, if they must be assessed at all. Educators embracing these pedagogies face an uphill battle in the modern academy, given the reality that the goals of modern education are largely reduced to “qualification” and “socialization” at the expense of “subjectification.”¹

Ecological pedagogies thus strive for “the kinds of educational experiences that allow learners to sustain new ways of being in the world.”² Bob Jickling explores such experiences as found in the writings of “historic thinkers who have all, in one way or another, pondered their own transformations,” as they entered the transformative and interruptive proximity of alterity and ecological vulnerability.³ Jickling recounts the experiences of Arne Naess, who empathetically remembers a flea slowly dying on his microscope slide; Aldo Leopold, who lamented his participation in killing an old wolf; and a fictional character in Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, traumatized by an execution.⁴ These experiences taught each subject through the elicitation of deep, visceral feelings erupting in the exposure of a subject to another’s vulnerability. The EH seeks to somehow make such experiences present in and beyond the classroom for its students. “Educationally,” Jickling writes, “this resonance throws light on alternative ways of understanding and being in the world. And, this resonance points to alternative ways of understanding—ways of understanding that allow learners to intervene in their worlds productively, and in a sustained and transformative way. The stories point to something that seems absent and unvalued in much of contemporary education.”⁵

The reflective essays in this Transformative Teaching forum explore how the EH facilitate these alternative ways of being in the world. They harness the interdisciplinary approaches to ecological being and belonging to the world and reflect on concrete, experimental practices in the classroom that hope to move beyond educational models that distance humanity from Earth. Mariana Past’s essay explores alternative approaches to contemporary literature in the classroom and how fiction and the performing arts might put students in touch with the ecological experiences of those living in the Caribbean world and how facing such experiences requires students to be critical of any perception of the Caribbean shaped by the dominant perspectives of the Global North. Dave Aftandilian offers insight into how students might develop face-to-face relations with non-human animals within the contexts of anthropology and religious studies. His essay highlights the promise of contemplating non-human alterity and educating students outside of the classroom in contexts of direct care that allows students to spend time with animals in local shelters. Finally, César Baldelomar and Emeline Dickinson wrestle with how inherited religious frameworks shape our perception of the more-than human and the role of despair and hope in

deconstructing dominant socio-political and socio-economic that harm the world. Common to all the essays is the pressing need, evinced throughout the EH, to allow alterity to speak for itself concerning its ecological flourishing and vulnerability apart from any reduction of the other to the same. The pedagogies employed within the EH insist that these radical, alternative approaches to education are needed to disrupt typical collegiate discourse that stifles proximity to ecological vulnerability. Coming face-to-face with such vulnerability is necessary for students to learn to love the world.

¹ See Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2010). *Qualification* concerns the practical and analytic skills that help students fulfill vocational roles. It is the easiest goal to measure and standardize, support accreditation and funding, and is the focus of schools within capital driven cultures. *Socialization* concerns the integration of students into present socio-cultural systems and serves as a stabilizing force in a world that resists change. *Subjectification* develops students as unique persons, irreducible to socio-cultural norms, open to novelty and difference, and willing question socio-cultural sovereignties when they prevent individual, community, and planetary flourishing (Biesta, *Good Education*, 21).

² Bob Jickling, "Education Revisited: Creating Educational Experiences That Are Held, Felt, and Disruptive," in *Post-Sustainability and Environmental Education*, 15–30, at 17.

³ Jickling, "Education Revisited," 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21–24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.