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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THINKING GLOBALLY AND ACTING LOCALLY IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

“We have to go out and take action. This is not the end.
It’s the beginning—”

—Kofi Annan, quoted in United Nations.
Johannesburg

On September 4, 2002 United Nations representatives from around the world, who had assembled in Johannesburg for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, issued the following statement: “We assume a collective responsibility to advance and strengthen the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development—economic development, social development and environmental protection—at local, national, regional and global levels” (United Nations, *Report 1*).

The resulting 167-page report lays out a detailed checklist for defining and implementing what constitutes good, socially responsible government, addressing conditions such as sanitation and health, poverty, education, com-

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munication technology, and employment. All of these issues and systems are interdependent, leaning up against and overlapping each other with no one system, social ill, or solution standing in isolation from the rest. The summit's report and plan for action, ratified by the U.N. General Assembly, clearly emphasizes the magnitude and significance of sustainable development, serves to underscore global commitment towards a sustainable social future, and provides a critical baseline for international institutions to work from.¹ But the sweeping ideals expressed in the report also illustrate a need for local action and commitment to sustainability. Defining this concept in terms of citizen action in local, discrete contexts is, arguably, a task for educators. As writing instructors at a large state university with a traditional composition requirement for thousands of incoming first-year students, we were inspired "to go out and take action." What follows is a description of our experiences in designing and implementing a writing course based on the concept of sustainability. By sustainability we mean a course of action and a mindset that meet the needs of the present while being conscious of, and not compromising the needs of, the future. Teaching this course truly represents a beginning for us and one we hope will inspire others to take up the call of the UN for collective responsibility.

Tarla Rai Peterson has pointed out that the concept of sustainability, while remaining politically contested in the face of divergent interests, nonetheless "promises to promote a philosophical unity that could streamline implementation of specific environmental policies." She warns, however, that "the risk is that both frustrated scientists and environmental activists may grasp this tantalizing possibility for resolving social conflict without attending to the dangers inherent in any such totalizing construct" (2). Mindful of the potential for totalizing, we approach sustainability here rhetorically, arguing not for a particular agenda or program for sustainable development, but as a theoretical construct for designing a pedagogy for writing instruction.

Many concerns of sustainability identified by the UN fall into fields of specialization in which composition has yet to define a clear scholarly interest—architectural design, urban planning, global economics, and resource management. In general, though, the pillars of sustainable development (economic, social, and environmental) represent opportunities for applied rhetoric that some composition scholars are already paying attention to. Ira Shor's work with "activist education," Linda Flower, Elenor Long, and Lorraine Higgins's work with intercultural dialogue and community literacy; and Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser's work with "ecomposition" are a few notable examples. Our own interests led us to emphasize the environmental and social in composition with leanings toward the ecological. To design the course, we turned to Derek Owens's *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation* for his pedagogical and cultural approach to writing

and sustainability and to Dobrin and Weisser's *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition* for their critical approach to writing and ecology. The respective authors illustrate the interdependent role of composition and sustainable development. Owens notes:

We can envision composition studies as environmental studies—not as an offshoot of ecology but as the study of one's own immediate and future environs (city blocks, mall parking lots, backyards, office cubicles, apartment buildings, crowded highways) so that students might explore how their identities have been composed by such places and vice versa. This approach conceives the writing workspace as a place for students to explore what they consider right and wrong about where they work and where they live; a site for thinking about the cultures and families that matter to them, and how to preserve the stories and the languages that belong to them; and an arena for thinking about one's needs and desires (and the fundamental differences between these two concepts) in conjunction with possible future careers. (6-7)

Recognizing the importance of the World Summit's mandate and Owens's call for English studies to adopt sustainability as a disciplinary endeavor, we asked: (a) How can scholars and teachers of rhetoric and literacy invest in and contribute to sustainable development? (b) What theoretical frames might we draw from? (c) How might we reinvent our pedagogical approaches to literacy in the university as we work towards a sustainable society? Our challenge was to find out if these questions could successfully be addressed within the limited space of a semester-long, first-year writing course.

In this essay, we trace the development, implementation, and assessment of a writing course designed around the theoretical construct of sustainability. We begin by exploring the significance of and need for such a writing pedagogy. We then outline a design for a first-year composition course based on our goals for students' engagement with sustainability as both a vehicle and a dynamic rhetorical lens for study in written communication. We end with an account of our classroom experiences, discussing both the successes and problems we encountered and offering suggestions for future development in composition and sustainability pedagogy.

SUSTAINING A BEGINNING

The impetus for our course came in spring 2003, when our college announced that it would be funding a Learning Communities Project for entering first-year students in the fall made up of thematic clusters from various fields in the humanities and sciences. The Learning Communities Project was designed

to make the first-year experience at a large state university a more personal one (MacGregor et al; Smith et al.) Students would enroll together in thematically integrated course clusters and take an interdisciplinary approach to learning instead of the traditional, pick-and-mix method (sometimes referred to as the “buffet” method) of course selection. The project’s goal was for students to learn not only multidisciplinary ways of approaching the courses in the cluster, but also to learn to approach all of their academic experiences this way. The proposed cluster on sustainable societies consisted of components in sociology, philosophy/ethics, botany, and first-year writing. The idea was that the first three disciplinary fields would focus on the reinforcing pillars of sustainable development (social, economic, environmental) while the writing component served as the rhetorical lens and conduit to situate and integrate all four approaches. Faculty from these different disciplinary fields met regularly during the year prior to the course to collaborate in cluster design, teaching, and assessment. Fundamental differences in pedagogical ideologies (such as assessment and collaborative learning practices) were some of the many factors that encouraged thoughtful debate and compromise toward goals that themselves needed to be defined, thus, modeling the very core notion of sustainable development that students would encounter.

Unfortunately, the cluster itself was not sustainable. Because of low enrollments in the overall program, Sustainable Societies, one of the lowest enrolled clusters, was sacrificed to free funding for the remaining clusters.² However, the idea of sustainability as both a metaphor and pedagogical model for first-year writing was too promising to give up on. As Dobrin and Weisser argue:

Relationships between text and nature are impossible to avoid. In fact, postmodernity has come to identify nature as text, despite the fact that humans often ascribe anthropomorphic languages to that text rather than listening to or reading nature’s own text. It is our goal to explore the relationship between discourse and natural systems, between language and environment, and between writing and ecology. . . . We wish to show that ecocomposition is a critical part of our scholarly inquiry in composition studies. We agree with Kenneth Burke (1965) who argues that intellectual life cannot be removed from “life,” from biological, natural existence. (2)

The fact that the cluster project was unsustainable did not stop us from taking some of the core ideas from the earlier cluster design and putting them into practice in our introductory composition course for the fall 2003. Although we recognized at the time that the cross-disciplinary matrix of the course would be missing, we assumed that refocusing specifically on a cultural approach to

writing would be sufficient for having our students explore and employ the concept of sustainability.

Our decision to press forward was motivated by a number of issues: the notion of writing as grounds for citizen action; the promotion of critical self-awareness; an introduction to media literacy; and connectivity with environmental, social, and political forces of influence and change.

The federally funded Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP) argues that environmental education without knowledge of how decisions regarding environmental policy are made and how communiqués based on such decisions are generated is not enough to affect meaningful social change:

The ultimate outcome of environmental education is promoting citizen action; in other words, to be environmental [sic] literate, a person must possess citizen action skills. . . . For students of the ages 18 and higher, teachers should reinforce fundamental scientific principles and human relationships with natural systems. Additionally, teachers should help foster a sense of empowerment to help solve environmental problems. Students must believe that their decisions actually do make a difference in problem solving. This empowerment is essential because students can use it to address environmental issues in different realms rather than simply understand what to do about specific circumstances.

While sustainability does not focus solely on environmental issues, the point is well taken. The notion of sustainable development and sustainable societies on local and global levels as ratified by the U.N. General Assembly cannot and should not be the responsibility only of states, corporations, and other institutions, but also of citizenry. Obviously, educators and those who research education are key players in influencing the young people who will make up future citizenry and assume both our legacies and their own responsibilities for a sustainable society. The challenge for educators is how to make spheres of environmental literacy and sustainability visible and relevant enough so that students can conceive of themselves as participants, consumers, corporate leaders, politicians, parents, and, yes, even activists.

In his introduction to the edited collection, *Global Citizen Action*, Michael Edwards, director of Governance and Civil Society at the Ford Foundation, addresses the growing rhetoric of participation, partnership, and citizen promotion of sustainable development and the real difficulty of meaningful engagement and participation. He states: “We may dream of a global community, but we don’t yet live in one, and too often, global governance means a system in which only the strong are represented and the weak are punished”

(1). In the diverse communities of university campuses, what constitutes strength and weakness is difficult, if not impossible, to assess with assurance. Certainly students and faculty are privileged members of society simply by being in the university community, yet this does not ensure their strength (or weakness) according to local, regional, or global governance or their status and representation within their various social and cultural communities outside of the university. The key challenge is how to design a writing pedagogy that operates within the boundaries of institutional constraints (such as required number of papers, grade percentages, exams requirements, and so forth) while fostering an awareness that the illusion of a relatively egalitarian structure that exists within the university boundaries may not represent the realities of life outside those boundaries.³ Emphasizing sustainability may serve as a desirable motivator for social activism. However, social activism itself must also be the subject of critical inquiry and critical self-reflection by those who would challenge and support the multiple systems that have constructed not only the individuals within them but also the very notions of social activism, citizenship, and sustainability themselves. In this context, institutional constraints must be made more transparent to foster an environment in which students may begin exploring possibilities for social involvement in the texts they read and write as active citizens while also recognizing the limitations of institutions such as the university.

SOME CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABILITY

Even though scholars in English studies are ideally situated to take up the challenge of fostering environmental literacy in the classroom, until quite recently, they have paid little practical attention to such concerns as the welfare of future generations, preservation, and conservation. For the most part we have left these concerns to our colleagues in the sciences and social sciences who have a longer tradition of utility embedded in their disciplinary ideals. While scholars of environmental rhetoric such as Jamie Killingsworth have pointed to interest in sustainability as an emerging and growing area of inquiry, others have been less generous. Glen Love states, “Given the fact that most of us in the profession of English would be offended at not being considered environmentally conscious and ecologically aware, how are we to account for our general failure to apply any sense of this awareness to our daily work?” (227). More recently, Derek Owens argues that “composition studies, and, indeed all of English Studies, needs to recognize as a field that sustainability is not only equal in importance to race, class, and gender but also entails many of the concerns associated with those rubrics” (xiii).

Robert Yagelski further stresses the need to address the complexities and connections between people, institutions, and communication technologies

and their relationships with each other and the physical world. Underscoring the importance of paying attention to these issues, Yagelski invokes the notion of “crisis of sustainability,” quoting environmental educator David Orr:

The crisis of sustainability, the fit between humanity and its habitat, is manifest in varying ways and degrees everywhere on earth. It is not only a feature on the public agenda; for all practical purposes it is the agenda. . . . Sustainability is about the terms and conditions of human survival, and yet we still educate at all levels as if no such crisis existed. (qtd. in Yagelski)

Yagelski relates educators’ lack of connection to the crisis of sustainability to a western tradition of rationality, individualism, and progress that promotes duality in learning, as if the learner is an outside observer, disconnected from her direct and tacit involvement in the conditions and subjects she studies. Yagelski calls for a redesign of composition’s pedagogical model to one built on the concept of David Loy’s “nonduality”:

The task, then, is to re-imagine and restructure our curricular and pedagogical practices in ways that challenge these beliefs in progress, individualism, and rationality and foster new ways of understanding the relationship between humans and the natural world they inhabit. But to fulfill that task, I believe, requires first re-imagining the literate self. (Yagelski)

This is no small task. As Doug Brown points out, self-actualization, what he describes as the “Be All You Can Be” social and moral imperative, is ingrained into Americans as if it is a universal reality. It is a way of being in the world that rewards those who can “be” and shuns or dismisses those who either fail or resist. This “Culture of Insatiable Freedom,” as Brown terms it, directly conflicts with a culture of sustainability: “anyone can see that our insatiable desire to ‘have more’ is directly related to the potential destruction of our earthly habitat” (2). The National Innovative Initiative report recently released by the Council on Competitiveness endorses a mandate for innovation and progress as if it were inherently manifest in American economic supremacy and social democracy. Endorsed by the heads of leading corporate and academic institutions (IBM, Verizon, Pepsico Inc., General Motors, Georgia Institute of Technology, Texas A&M University, Columbia University, University of North Carolina, Stanford University, University of Michigan, to name a few), the report states:

If America were a company, freedom and exploration would be our core competencies. And the capacity to innovate is the foundation for bringing our competitiveness into full fruition. The first Americans were innovating when they made the decision to leave an established life for the perils of an unknown world. They were innovating before we had government, a functioning economy, an educational system or national defense. In short, if Americans stop innovating, we stop being Americans. (6-7)

Despite the seemingly obvious racial, cultural, and historical myopia of such a statement, the report represents a popular vision that is deeply rooted in a particular myth of social progress. It is a myth that is likely to appear not only viable, but unquestionable, to most first-year university students raised in the Culture of Insatiable Freedom (whether they are “being all that they can be” or not) who enter increasing numbers of academic institutions that foster innovation and “excellence” as hallmarks of the “new American university.” A pedagogy of sustainability in composition would not only require making such institutional assumptions as Insatiable Freedom visible as the dominant model for social imperative, but would also address the very notion that it is, in fact, *a* model and that a culture of sustainability serves not only as a theoretical and wishful enterprise but as an alternative model that is equally viable as a human construct.

At heart, the concept of sustainability assumes confluence of pragmatism, activism, and critical awareness conceived within the complex realm of social context. It means considering, as much as possible, all the players and their often conflicting ideologies and value systems about what present and future development is best for individuals, groups, cultures, collectives, species, and industries. It is a sort of “think tank” approach to development that requires critical reflexivity and a willingness to address issues of compromise and inequality in order to tease out the complex assumptions underlying the concept of general welfare, such as *whose* general welfare gets precedence under a model of sustainability and *whose* model of sustainability drives the concept. It means critically examining how and why devising and implementing courses of action and sponsoring activism affect special interests and political ideology in promoting a “big picture” perspective, i.e., thinking globally. After all, the construct of a sustainable future may look very different to cultures and individuals with a tradition of a “be all you can be” philosophy as compared with those who ascribe to a “live and let live” philosophy. A pedagogy of sustainability would require heeding such complexities. The New London Group’s pedagogical theory and model of “multiliteracy” offer a design that has sought to address such complexities.

SUSTAINABILITY AND PEDAGOGY

New London Group authors, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, have argued:

Different conceptions of education and society lead to very specific forms of curriculum and pedagogy, which in turn embody designs for social futures. To achieve this, we need to engage in a critical dialogue with the core concepts of fast capitalism, of emerging pluralistic forms of citizenship, and of different life worlds. This is the basis for a new social contract, a new commonwealth. (19)

The London Group's argument for a multiliteracy pedagogy, i.e., the notion that a reconceived perspective on literacy education—in our case, first-year composition—might embody a design for a social future, resonates with the calls for a composition pedagogy based on sustainability issued by Dobrin, Weiser, and Owens. In response to these intersecting and mutually reinforcing notions of sustainability and multiliteracy, we set forth to design a localized first-year writing course that explores the mandates of global sustainable development. The question for us then was: How might we and our students play a role in a sustainable future through Composition Studies? For the theoretical basis of multiliteracy pedagogy, we drew on Brian Street's new literacy theory which argues that there is not one, but multiple literate practices and that constructions of literacy are always ideologically situated. In addition, we drew on James Gee's theory of discourse that locates language and literacy practices in terms of social identity, purpose, context, and experience.

The question of how scholars and teachers of rhetoric and literacy invest and contribute to sustainable development is one that probably depends more on individual and localized conditions rather than general ones. Disciplinary validation alone is likely not enough in many situations to motivate scholarly effort. As our own case illustrates, institutional incentives, validation, and resources at the local level may be more of a determining factor than disciplinary ideals, particularly if those ideals are not mainstream, disciplinary concerns. In our particular case, the validation of the Learning Communities project and resources provided by our college to develop our writing course had allowed us to make early design investments that we decided to follow through on. However, the interdisciplinary course that had been envisioned was itself no longer viable. This meant that we could not presume to bring biological, sociological, ethics, or other approaches to literacy education in sustainable development beyond our own disciplinary understanding. So, instead of having students focus on writing about sustainable development across disciplinary fields as we originally planned, we had them explore sustainability as a

rhetorical/cultural concept limited to the writing course. At the time, we did not fully anticipate that the concept of sustainability might be too complex for a single, stand-alone course, particularly in addressing multi-disciplinary issues. However, in a composition course, the complexities of sustainability provided excellent opportunities for students to tease out questions concerning written communication and opportunities for us as teachers to recognize limitations and potentials for future course development.

This then brings us to the second question of what theoretical and pedagogical frames to draw from in designing and implementing a writing course on sustainable development. The key seemed to be the familiar epithet: “Think globally, act locally.” After all, while the plan ratified by the U.N. General Assembly espouses ideals on national and global scales, such ideals might have little concrete bearing on the lives of our individual students. The challenge, then, was to design a course that would allow students to write about sustainability through overt rhetorical and literate practices. That is, they would not merely be students who write in a sustainable society, but students of writing focusing on what it means to write and live in a sustainable society. For this purpose, the pedagogical model advocated by Cope and Kalantzis and the New London Group on Multiliteracy is especially robust. Their model is constructed around four tenets: *situated practice*, *overt instruction*, *critical framing*, and *transformed practice*.

Situated practice assumes that students learn best when immersed in the contexts in which actual literate practices take place and when they engage in real literate tasks; when, in short, they experience meaning-making in real contexts and through a variety of media. For our students this means that as much as we are able, given the artificiality of the writing classroom, we immerse students in real-world reading and writing tasks that emerge from their multiple studies of an area they are invested in, whether personal, academic, or professional.

Overt instruction is based on the concept that students who develop metacognitive skills through studying theory are better able to select and use appropriate rhetorical strategies. In examining what writing means in a sustainable society through short, accessible lectures on such subjects as tacit knowledge theory, process and post-process theory, invention theory, discourse analysis, and so forth, we introduce students to various rhetorical and cultural theories that we draw on ourselves for teaching writing as well as competing theoretical views that they have likely encountered in their years of school-based literacy instruction.

Critical framing assumes that when students learn rhetorical tools to interpret social and institutional contexts in terms of diverse purposes and audiences, they discern the most effective ways to communicate in particular

rhetorical situations. We work with the students to help them defamiliarize the familiar as a means of gaining critical distance from the reading and writing activities they are engaged in as well as the social and cultural contexts in which their meaning making occurs. To do this, we overtly teach critical tools, such as those mentioned above, for analyzing rhetorical situations and the ways these both permit and constrain what may be written.

Transformed practice holds that students become effective meaning-makers by transforming strategies they already control to engage in new rhetorical situations. We begin assuming that students are not lacking in literate practices—what Brian Street refers to as a deficit model—but come to the course with all sorts of socially acquired literacies and discourses. They come, that is, with a diverse variety of conceptual and material tools that emerge out of their past literate experiences and shape their literate practices. By asking students to analyze and write in ways they have likely not encountered prior to this course, we seek to disrupt and challenge previously held assumptions through a process of controlled confusion that allows students to reinvent and adapt existing literacies to new contexts. Writing and sustainability are thus understood as dynamic rhetorical and social constructs. Understanding written communication, then, can be seen not so much as a quest for answers, but a recognition that a literacy event is comprised of multiple assumptions and questions. The goal of transformed practice is to enter into a new situation with the ability to learn how to look for those assumptions and questions.

The socially acquired literacies students bring to a first-year writing program vary from institution to institution. Our university annually enrolls over 7,000 first-year students in writing. During the semester we taught our course on sustainability, 84% of our first-year students were in the top half of their high school class, with an average composite ACT score of 23. Approximately 21% of the first-year students in our university are ethnic minorities and 52% are women. The students in our sections of first-year writing fit this demographic profile. One instructor taught two sections of the course with 21 and 20 students. The other instructor taught one section of the course with 20 students. The courses were held during regularly scheduled daytime class times. A rough show-of-hands survey in one of the classes showed that almost all of the students were in college for the first time, almost all were 18 or 19 years old, most were living in the dormitories or other university housing, were in-state students, and had parents or other family members who had attended college or university. In other words, they generally fit the profile of what the news media might refer to as “typical” college students. We used this knowledge to impress on students at the outset that they were already accomplished writers in many ways that are meaningful to them. What we impressed on them was

that, in this course, they were not only there to be students who write, but to be students of writing.

IMPLEMENTING A MULTILITERACY APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY

The four tenets of the New London Group's Multiliteracy model provided the basis for designing a pedagogical model that focused on issues of sustainability in a writing course. The following outlines how we implemented the multiliteracy approach and includes selected student comments and reflections on their experiences in our classes.⁴

First, following the tenet of *situated practice*, we started with the assumption that students are not lacking in literacy but are coming to the course with all sorts of socially acquired literacies and discourses. From this perspective then, they come to the course not only as students who write, but also as students of writing. That is, the course itself, the requirements, the setting, their own learning, our own teaching approaches, and the theories and assumptions that drive all of these elements are themselves the objects as well as the methods of the course of study. We used these questions as guides: What is writing? What does it mean to write in a sustainable society? Why are we looking at writing this way? Thus, throughout the course, students were immersed in various practices and modalities of written communication. Students were also assigned various texts for analysis and guidance. These included websites, supermarket circulars, each other's writings, artifacts *in situ*, and the primary textbook we selected for the course, George and Trimbur's *Reading Culture*.⁵

Each class met twice a week. We taught our classes as hybrid courses: the students meet in the physical classroom space one class session per week and in an asynchronous online forum setting for the other class. This approach, which allowed for an expanded range of settings for student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions, underscores (along with the various assignments and research activities) the multimodal aspects of literacy education and offers more venues for exploring sustainability than are available in print text only. For example, in addition to textbook readings on culture and consumption, students also accessed the PBS website, *Frontline: The Merchants of Cool*, where they could view streaming video from the original broadcast, read email commentaries, and listen to audio testimonies. These resources, in addition to their own physical world experiences and memories, provided a rich, multimodal terrain for exploring the complexities of sustainability and consumer culture in the forum discussions. Many students used to writing and interacting in physical classrooms found writing in the course's online forum to be a new and rewarding experience, as demonstrated by Allison's reflection on the course experience:⁶

The sense of writing over the internet not only gave the impression of anonymity, but there was no fear of having to write formally. I believe that the Discussion Board was a very helpful tool that not only enhanced this course, but the way I wrote also.

Other students expressed similar appreciation for the hybrid format. Barry stated:

I would just like to say that these forums have allowed me to openly express my opinions on various topics. There were a few occasions where I received criticism from my peers on what I've said about certain issues but that is what discussion is all about. All in all these forums were a great idea because I know and I'm sure that others feel the same way about this but if we were to have an in-class discussion these types of responses wouldn't have been put out there.

Barry mentions receiving critical feedback from other students in the discussion boards. This important aspect of the hybrid course format, helping to demonstrate the contextualized (i.e. *situated*) nature of writing, is illustrated in the following exchange between two students discussing the disposable mindset of our culture:

Chantal states:

I find it disheartening how quickly everyone is to attack actions and practices that they participate in, everyday. Our country is moving on to a time when it can create a more "disposable" mindset, but this is not such a bad thing. The technological advancements of today are being made because that is what we, the consumer, want and demand. These goods that are being made, such as the disposable camera and contact lenses, were developed to make our everyday lives more convenient and easy.

Dean then responds:

I agree with you that technology is not a bad thing in its ideological state. Its own advancement benefits all aspects of human productivity. Farmers produce more food with fertilizer; General Motors makes more cars by Henry Ford's assembly line. But this whole "throw-it-away" philosophy comes with an unmeasured cost to society. Consumers only pay for the \$7.99 it costs to produce these disposable products but society pays for the effects these products leave on our earth. The natural resources of our earth are being abused.

Here, Dean questions Chantal's assumptions and challenges her to look at the issue in a more sustainable way. Through discussion board exchanges like this one, students were made aware that the writing they do in these spaces has a real audience who might disagree with their views. In this way students began to understand the significance of paying attention to audience quickly.

Through *overt instruction*, we also introduced the students to those theories of rhetoric and composition that we ourselves draw on for teaching writing as well as competing theoretical views. The goal was to embody the notion of design that Cope and Kalantzis argue for—that all written communication is constructed through language and consists of socially negotiated literacy acts and practices, imbued with tacit and overt cultural values and embedded assumptions that inform, and are informed by, local and global conditions as well as ideologies that shape and constrain social development—including the course on sustainability in writing itself. We wanted the students to appreciate that all writing is by design—i.e., it doesn't just happen—and to make connections between writing by design and sustainability by design. Throughout the semester we and our students discussed various rhetorical theories that addressed the notion of knowledge construction as design. We guided the students to begin constructing the questions that they could then bring to their own explorations of the various theoretical frames and designs that informed their academic learning and where they might locate their learning within a broader concept of sustainability.

For example, one writing assignment asked students to discuss their educational experiences, ultimately evaluating the social sustainability of the school systems they have experienced. It became clear in assignments like this that students had very strong opinions about the sustainability of the current educational system. Erin states:

I think high school needs to remain the same. One thing about high school that is extremely beneficial is the ability to meet all types of people from all different backgrounds. I think high school introduces us to the world as young adults with opinions. In high school, in the atmosphere that is controversial, you are able to exercise your opinions in a way that introduces you to yourself in a different way. High school classes raise questions to who we are, and what we believe in. High school helps develop and manufacture our political ideas and Western mentality. . . . Though the experience is not always perfect, the overall effect of the high school experience is universal: the introduction to self-identity.

Although Erin seems to believe that the current educational system is beneficial, other students disagreed vehemently. For example, in another response Felix states:

High school should be abolished. I learned nothing in high school. It was a complete waste of time. I think one of the reasons for this was the fact that I had the ability to see all the fakeness that creates the institution of high school. Everything about high school is based on the illusion that life is based on how good you make yourself seem. Every piece of work that is not based on solid facts leaves you to the mercy of your teacher. If you don't look like someone they think is responsible and a good citizen then your grades will suffer only because teachers can't take the time to get to know you or are not willing to overlook their biased opinions based on appearance. . . . The most important reason why high school should be abolished is because high school can no longer teach the things that people need to know in order to live successful lives.

These disparate views led to discussions on the different pedagogical and theoretical approaches used in the educational system, helping students to ponder the idea of the culturally situated nature of all literacy instruction.

Next, in keeping with the third tenet of *critical framing*, we worked with the students to help them question transparency in their writing and reading activities to critically examine contexts of sustainability and culture in which meaning making occurs. For example, early on we examined a familiar and essentially invisible genre of writing—a shopping list. The students generated their own lists and deconstructed them in a collaborative exercise to examine the lists in terms of language, rhetorical design, discourse, tacit knowledge, technology, and embedded social and cultural assumptions. We also looked at the concept of environmental footprints (building on an exercise from Derek Owens), and using the familiar disposable camera (and the more recent digital disposable camera), defamiliarized it by examining it in terms of raw materials, manufacturing processes, environmental impact, material, conceptual and cultural values, and so forth. The idea was not to promote or denigrate consumable goods, but to recognize that the choices we overtly or tacitly make as consumers have important consequences. For example, once introduced to the concept of tacit knowledge, students were able to apply it to their own lives and the world around them. Gabrielle states:

Tacit knowledge. Very interesting and entertaining. It made me think and consider a lot of things that I think we all take for granted (or at least I know I do). For example, I discovered many people going to

class in what seemed like their regular routine. I would guess that they expected their class building to be there, they expected there to be other students to be there, and they expected their professor to be there. All the things I expected before our discussion last Tuesday. People just don't pay much attention to the details of their surroundings, unless they have to come face to face with it. Next time I purchase even a camera in a store I will try to remember this assignment, and think about all the dedicated people who made my purchase possible. But like most people shopping has become natural, something that you don't think about, you just do.

Another student, Humberto, expressed a similar point on awareness:

This morning as I was brushing my teeth I turned on the faucet. I questioned my action and asked myself if the water would pour out. Unsurprisingly enough, it did. It was probably the first time in my life that I didn't take it for granted. I would have never thought that there was such a long process involved in the production of a camera, something I considered such a simple object. But ever since, we started seriously analyzing all the aspects that go into a simple grocery shopping list, I feel like my world has been changed because I look at things with a whole new perspective.

Another writing assignment asked students to deconstruct and discuss advertisements, again considering the sustainability of advertising in our culture. Many students found much to critique. For example, Iris states:

Our culture is a slave to advertisements and mass media. In fact it almost appears that we are numbed by the media's visual images because we are so used to them and we don't take the time to think about them. Advertisements are mental pollution. They swamp your brain and take you hostage with their relentless, persistent and brain damaging messages of buying, selling, marketing. And we surrender all of our free will to them. We buy that shirt because its cool and in style and has a Gap label. I think that is a very disturbing reflection upon our society. It's as if we don't even think for ourselves anymore and that's pretty awful.

Armed with strategies that foster a new awareness and new terminology, students were able to think and write in increasingly more sustainable ways over the course of the semester.

Finally, and again this element ran throughout the course, students were reminded over and over to return to the questions, What is writing?

What is sustainability? These questions enacted the multiliteracy tenet of *transformed practice*. The idea was to have them build layers of reflection and re-reflection and to engage strategies they had already experienced within new rhetorical situations. As the students kept returning to these questions, they were able to bring new problems, insights, and observations to what are clearly complex questions. Some noted that they began to question previously held convictions about the nature of writing and to identify conflicting views in their own writing about social issues. Many began to grapple with the idea that while writing was far more complex than they may have thought earlier, the recognition of those complexities allowed much more control and insight into their own writing practices. As Jerry stated in a reflective analysis of his work over the semester:

For the first time, I feel like I was being graded on the actual content and ingenuity of my ideas and observations, not if I had a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph. Knowing this, I felt much more free to discuss my idea openly and less constricted by an exact format. Even more interesting was that we were encouraged to question the system. I was asked to say how I felt about education, schools, and even our university. . . . In knowing this I stepped away from just wanting the teacher to think what I write is good, and thus had a whole new approach to writing. . . . It is important to look beyond the obvious and seek deeper meaning when being asked to draw conclusions about any given situation. This applies even outside of class, when it comes to deciding what to believe in today's sustainable society.

Of course, some students struggled early in the semester with our pedagogical approach, finding it difficult to grasp the intricate concept of sustainability. The following examples show students' early-semester difficulties. In the second week of classes, Karen stated:

Sustainability has different definitions, to maintain, to experience, and to support. Why do they need all these different definitions? One word should have one meaning. To experience through maintaining and supporting.

Karen demonstrates dualistic thinking that seeks to simplify rather than complicate. Her statement, "One word should have one meaning," evokes Yagelski's reference to Plato's binary of the autonomous self versus the external world. Other students were more willing to accept the multifaceted nature of

sustainability but expressed uncertainty as to how to come to terms with it. For instance, in that same discussion session, Lorenzo stated:

As far as sustainability is concerned, my understanding here is that the earth will not be forever sustainable if the population keeps rising at the rate that it is. First and foremost we will simply run out of food. There is no way that food can be provided for that many people. In addition the land simply cannot support that amount of people as well. We are using land up and then basically it is just there taking up space. It sounds quite simple, but that's really what it is. Honestly I don't have a full grasp of the term sustainability. While these readings have helped me some I'm still not quite sure I fully understand what it means.

Clearly, it was not easy for students to think of sustainability through a variety of theoretical lenses, but even some of the most resistant students were motivated to do so once they realized, some with apparent relief and surprise, that such viewpoints and differences of opinion were actually relevant to teasing out ideas about the question What is writing? We addressed resistance and uncertainty by students like Karen and Lorenzo by overtly incorporating the idea of confusion into course design as a necessary learning component. An inherent component of a multiliteracy pedagogy is that it does not foster an autonomous literacy-as-outcome approach to teaching and learning. Guidance is built in, but more akin to Lev Vygotsky's notions of *scaffolding* which allowed students to begin working out their own ideas about writing and sustainability within the supportive structure provided by the four tenets of multiliteracy. We worked to reassure students through lecture and journaling that confusion and uncertainty were actually desirable as means towards critical reflection. We emphasized that much assessment of their work would value thoughtful participation and struggle to encourage them to challenge each other's ideas in the online discussion forums, to take even tentative risks in their writing, and to address ambiguity even if they chose to resist that notion—something many of them acknowledged were not aspects of their education experiences that had been previously encouraged. We kept returning to the question What is writing? to underscore connections between the activities and questions the students were engaging in and the goals of the course and to continuously resituate earlier observations and ideas by having students re-reflect on their own writing as artifacts for analysis. By the end of the semester, most students demonstrated a much more open approach to the complexities of defining sustainability. Compare Lorenzo's definition of sustainability in week two of the course (above) to this expanded one he offered in a final analysis of his coursework in week fifteen:

The definition of sustainability takes on a multi-faceted existence in my view. I see areas that include economics, social values and environmental. On an academic level, sustainability comes down to dollars and sense. Once an optimal balance is achieved, the highest levels of production can be maintained indefinitely. If levels are increased beyond this, the decrease in sustainability is often not proportional. In fact, it is most often tilted towards an overall loss of profit. Social sustainability is often hard to perceive. Changes in attitudes and policy are usually slow in coming. In most cases, social sustainability is only able to be judged from a review standpoint. Looking at past actions and adjusting current situations accordingly is the best way to achieve social sustainability. Environmental sustainability is the most easily definable of the three. By paying attention to natural resources and their limits, we as a society can gauge the ability of the planet to provide for us. Other factors such as waste and species detriment must also be factored in. By separating the three [pillars] of sustainability I have found it easier to define them. However, only by acting upon all three simultaneously, can effective means of obtaining sustainability be achieved. Leaving any of these factors out of any plan, policy or study leaves a gaping hole. Only with a complete picture can the issue of sustainability be recognized and dealt with.

In this extended definition, the student clearly recognizes a connection between human and natural systems and seems aware of what it may mean to become a citizen actively engaged in a sustainable lifestyle—the criteria called for by EETAP that could help enact meaningful social change. Students were also able to begin building a picture of what writing means to them and, perhaps more importantly, began the process of looking for questions about what written communication means in other academic contexts.

OBSERVATIONS ON WRITING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Overall, we were pleased with the outcome of the course based on our students' comments and the quality of their written reports. As they engaged in analyzing the materials we presented to them as well as their own texts, students demonstrated a willingness to grapple with the sometimes bewildering complexities and contradictions they encountered. Yagelski proposes a pedagogy of sustainability that

emphasizes experience in order to foster a self-awareness based on the notion of nonduality—a self-awareness that in turn

fosters just and sustainable ways of being-in-the-world. Such a pedagogy is not directly concerned with specific skills, bodies of knowledge, or theories so much as with how we experience ourselves and others in the world through literate activity.

Overall, our course design helped the students (and us) to foster such self-awareness about the concept of sustainability and connectivity with the world. It also helped them to foster self-awareness about writing as a dynamic rhetorical means of generating questions, encouraged them to grapple with ambiguities, and provided a forum for making material their values and perceptions about the world. Take, for instance, Michelle's observations on the course:

I have come to the conclusion that the purpose of this class is not to explain what writing is, but to lead us into a direction where we can produce our own personal definition and interpretation of the skill. Even though we all will have a somewhat different perspective on writing, that is what should happen. The only way we can label ourselves a sustainable society is if there is a presence of differing ideas, opinions, and viewpoints. If everyone in this society were to be cut from the same mold, we would ultimately go nowhere. The reason sustainable development has ensued is because of the continual generation of new ideas and theories. The ability to write gives a new sense of creating new knowledge necessary for maintaining a sustainable society.

A writing course focusing on sustainability does, in our experience, offer an effective learning environment for students to think both locally—in terms of the writing course itself—and globally—in terms of critical reflection and awareness of a non-dualistic view on being in the world. We are also realistic that our single, semester-long, general-requirement course does not offer a panacea to the world's problems. As Tarla Rai Peterson points out:

Sustainable development, as a rhetorical construct, does not offer the perfect solution to our environmental problems. It can provide a mask for traditional development patterns that threaten to destroy human life on earth. We still have difficulty remembering that sustainable development is about coordinating, rather than controlling, the relationship between humans and other life forms. On the other hand, it can provide a comic corrective to “business as usual” which does not require total destruction of traditional values. Sustainable development is worthwhile simply because it offers a participatory, community-based means for muddling through our current dilemmas. (185)

To varying degrees, our course did allow us and our students opportunities to address the goals we set for it: awareness of writing as grounds for citizen action; the promotion of critical self-awareness; an introduction to media literacy; an understanding of connectivity with environmental, social, and political forces of influence and change; and a challenge to duality. A first-year writing course designed on the concept of sustainability and multiliteracy clearly holds great potential as a component of a multi-disciplinary program or cluster on sustainability and as a springboard to continuing exploration and development in answering the call for a greater investment in sustainability in composition. Our experience in designing and teaching a writing and sustainability course illustrates not only the potential for pedagogical investment in sustainability for writing instruction, but also underscores the need for a constructive and productive means for composition instructors “to go out and take action.”

Tempe, AZ

NOTES

¹ The report names numerous international institutions and organizations and the various roles that they might play in the U.N.’s plan for implementation. Examples illustrating the range of concerns include: the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility, the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety, the International Maritime Organization, the World Tourism Organization, the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development, the Economic Commission for Europe, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

² The fall of 2003 marked the launching of the Learning Communities Project at this institution. Four clusters were offered and enrollment was low overall, apparently from lack of information and the novelty of such an approach for many first year applicants. Subsequent semesters have seen improvements in disseminating information about the Learning Communities Project and enrollments have increased. In other words, it may not be that students are not interested in sustainability but that they need to be better informed about the subject and its significance as a course of study.

³ Those who work within academic institutions are likely to be very aware that academia, like the rest of society, is anything but egalitarian. However, in our experience, many students (and faculty) appear to enter university society not only unaware that they are subject to and often contribute to the same inequalities and power dynamics that they encounter in “the real world,” but that they have expectations, likely based on social myths of academic freedom, de-centered learning, racial/gender/sexual/economic emancipation, and so forth, that the academic community is somehow more egalitarian.

⁴ Students' comments were gathered from course writing assignments and from online discussion board forums.

⁵ To cite a few examples: students examined the Arizona State University Student Services website to explore how and why the university presented a particular face for its student population through a digital media; students compared and analyzed weekly supermarket sales circulars to explore cultural assumptions about diet, language, economics, health, need, class status, and so forth, embedded in the texts and the material space of the advertisements; during field research projects, students collected textual artifacts (brochures, menus, letters, flyers, posters, etc.) to explore their place and meaning in their original settings. Copies of assignments and course syllabi are available from the authors on request.

⁶ All names have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the students.

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