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Writing about Wolves: Using Ecocomposition Pedagogy to Teach Social Justice in a Theme-Based Composition Course

Michael S. Geary

Abstract: *Elements of ecocomposition are employed to construct a course that uses the relationship between wolves and humans as a social justice metaphor. Students explore how mythmaking leads to dire consequences for any population being exploited. This approach to teaching first year composition allows students to acquire new knowledge about conservationism while focusing on developing their critical reading, writing, and researching skills.*

When my Composition I students enter my darkened classroom, they see stunning images of wolves chasing down caribou. They are perplexed. Are they late for class? Like patrons arriving late for a movie, they take their seats in silence, trying not to block anyone's view of the screen. The documentary *Wolves: A Legend Returns to Yellowstone* is being shown, and before I have even said a word about who I am or what the class will be about, they are having an "encounter" with wolves. This experience may seem fitting for a science classroom in the Western U.S. where the conflict between wolves and ranchers is front page news. Instead, this scene plays out in a writing classroom at Bristol Community College in Fall River, MA. We are far removed from the "wolf wars" of the West, so what is the purpose of bringing my students into this discussion? This course, which I have nicknamed "Writing about Wolves," came from my own interest in the design of thematic-based courses in composition studies as well as a lifelong passion for environmentalism.

I have always been interested in the idea of mythmaking and the role that it plays in shaping the way that people perceive the world. Particularly, I am fascinated by the way in which the written word persuades readers to adopt points of view that may often be inconsistent with the reality of the situation at hand. Given the current concerns about "Fake News," the study of mythmaking is all the more timely and relevant for first year composition students. While designing "Writing about Wolves," I wanted to create a course in which students could objectively examine the impact that written mythmaking has upon a particular population. As such, the class is divided into three segments that I have dubbed "Fiction," "Fact," and "Fallout." The "Fiction" section introduces students to the scope of the wolf mythology where they examine an assortment of stories from around the world. Here, we look closely at the way these stories are written with consideration given to the environment from which they come. The "Fact" unit explores writing done by biologists, naturalists, and scientists that represents what wolves are actually like in the wild. Close examination of these texts allows students to see how rhetorical conventions are used by professional writers and the way in which their writings speak to and against one another. The "Fallout" unit engages students in wolf conservation efforts and asks them to consider the value of beginning an effort in New England. Through this unit, students learn how to advocate for a specific population that is viewed negatively as a result of misinformation. For students, it is an opportunity to

consider themselves as social justice advocates, which provides them with a skill set that can be applied to other social issues that they will address in other courses and in society at large. Through academic research, students will come to see the value and relevance of engaging in this type of discourse.

One of the challenges that we face as professors of writing is how to bring engaging content into the classroom to sustain our students' interest. I am frequently met with comments by students that they only want to write about what they already know, and I always find that reaction to be troubling. After all, the whole point in coming to college is to acquire new knowledge about topics with which they are unfamiliar, right? Yet, I think that reaction stems more from a lack of awareness of how much knowledge is lying dormant, buried beneath a wealth of other life experiences that are more vivid to them. So when I introduce a theme to a class, especially something more abstract to New Englanders like the relationship between wolves and humans, I need to find a way to access this dormant knowledge.

In this article, I will advocate that there are significant benefits for students to engage in a theme-based composition course that may on the surface seem to have no apparent relevance to them. While the theming of courses is a longstanding practice in composition studies, I will reference recent scholarship that defines the best practices for selecting course themes. Further, I will show how ecomposition and its application for first year composition are vital for choosing these themes. Lastly, because of its ties to ecomposition, I will also talk about how a wolf themed class can serve as a mechanism to explore other social justice issues that follow a comparable pattern of mythmaking and conclusion-drawing that is detrimental to the population being studied.

Course Themes: Relevance and Breadth

When considering a theme for a course, it is important that the "breadth and relevance to the age range of the students" are closely considered (Friedman 80). Further, it needs to be clear why the theme has been chosen, which places the burden on the professor to justify the curriculum to the students. After all, "if a course theme engenders any student resistance or hesitation about the public spiritedness that guides it, that theme can potentially hinder their development as writers" (Sponenberg 544). To make sure that this hindrance does not occur, professors need to consider the essential questions that "frame the intellectual inquiry of the course" (Friedman 80). The more focused the course theme is, the better. Choosing a maximum of 3 or 4 essential questions seems reasonable for a standard 15 week class.

In "Writing about Wolves," those questions are:

1. How has written mythology defined the wolf?
2. What have professionals written about wolves in the wild?
3. What are the consequences when the wrong information is believed?
4. How do we use writing to reverse the damage done by misinformation?

These questions establish a specific link between written texts and the impact that those words have on society while exploring how to reverse damage that has been done as a

result of those texts. The course guides them from the mythical to the scientific to the political, social, and economic reality of wolves in the world.

While “Wolves” demonstrates breadth, there are many other popular themes that do so as well. “Monsters,” “Sustainability,” “Food,” “Money,” and “Happiness,” are all themes that are broad enough to create Friedman’s recommended 3-4 essential questions. I need to emphasize that “[n]o course theme for an academic writing course deserves priority as ‘the best’ or the only one that will facilitate transfer of learning” (Beaufort). In other words, there are different ways that written communication competencies can be achieved. Rinto and Cogbill-Seiders argue that “the literature recommends choosing themes that are flexible enough to capture the interest of an entire class of students and simplistic enough that little class time needs to be devoted to teaching the subject matter of the theme” (16). I am not at all comfortable with the notion of a theme needing to be “simplistic.” That might call into question the relevance of even selecting the theme in the first place. However, I would argue that in choosing a theme, professors need to be sure that they do not spend all of their time introducing the topic to their students. If they do, then not enough time is spent on the teaching of writing. Therefore, I want to define a “simplistic theme” as a theme that students have already encountered, consciously or unconsciously, and should have their pre-existing knowledge of interrogated, challenged, and expanded. Simplicity speaks to the relevance of the theme to the students taking the class.

Kimberly Moekle says, “if a writing course is designed around important themes in students’ lives, even a required writing course can offer a specific context in which to develop a rhetorical skill” (81). She agrees that the course content must be relevant, but sometimes it may not be obvious how it is. For “Writing about Wolves,” I ask my students to consider their first encounter with a wolf. One of the things that students immediately wrestle with is what an “encounter” with a wolf actually is. Given the fact that my students are from an urban area where wolves are not a part of the ecosystem, they are sometimes perplexed with how to connect with the topic. This past semester, my students kept referencing coyotes that they encountered in their backyards as the closest parallel that they could make. There is an analogy to be made between wolves and coyotes. Both are wild canines that serve as major predators within their respective ecosystems. Yet, my students had defined “encounters” too narrowly.

I define “encounter” as any interaction (physical, textual, or virtual) that the student has had with the population being studied. Most of them have likely heard at least one fairytale that has involved a wolf, but they have not interpreted that as an “encounter.” To illustrate that broader definition, I cite my first wolf “encounter” when I watched a film called *The Journey of Natty Gann*. In the film, a young girl flees an abusive nanny and travels cross country to find her father who is working for a logging company during the Great Depression. On her journey, Natty encounters a wolf that is being forced to participate in a dog fighting ring. She liberates the animal, and he becomes her fellow traveling companion until it hears other wolves in the wild. She encourages it to join them, but the wolf is hesitant to leave her. Ultimately, the call of the wild is too great, and the wolf runs off into the forest. At the end of the film, Natty finds her father, and in one of the final shots, the camera pans up to the wolf as he is witnessing the reunion of the father and daughter. Within the film, there are two different perceptions of this

creature. The first is that he is a vicious animal that should be relegated to dog fights. The second is that he is a loyal creature that reciprocates love when he receives it. I tell my students that when I first saw the film, the duality of the perceptions raised questions in my mind about the animal. Those questions would linger until I became a wolf conservationist in my teenage years. In sharing this experience with them, I have given them a blue print to consider their own experiences. Here is what my first wolf encounter did for me; what did yours do for you?

With that model in mind, students now have an easier time identifying a wolf “encounter.” With the additional prompting, students identify “The Three Little Pigs,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” *White Fang*, *The Jungle Book*, or *The Gray* as being their first encounter with wolves. When students begin to interrogate their reactions to these texts, they begin to realize the way in which the written word (including what has been written for the cinema) has influenced their perception of wolves. A number of them now identify their perception as being a negative one and link that to fears that they might have about coyotes in their own yard. While “Wolves” initially appeared abstract to them, through careful prompting and freewriting, students can unlock dormant knowledge and experience. By asking students to redefine what an “encounter” with a particular topic may be, professors can implement a variety of themes that challenge students to think more broadly about their experiences. This notion of the relevance of the theme is particularly important as we consider how ecocomposition can be applied to the selection of course themes.

The Role of Ecocomposition in Course Design

The concept of ecocomposition can be especially useful when engaging students with a theme that is unfamiliar to them. Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser’s *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition* provides a thorough overview of the value of ecocomposition as a framework for composition studies. Their text suggests that ecocriticism, cultural studies, ecofeminism, and environmental rhetoric all play a role in the shaping of this theory. While ecocriticism focuses primarily on the interpretation of texts, ecocomposition “is concerned with textual production and the environments that affect and are affected by the production of discourse” (24). Furthermore, ecocomposition has two facets: “one concerning the complex and dynamic relationships between a writer, audience, and issue, and the other concerning the role of place within discourse” (Moe). This pedagogy asks students to see how the writing that they do and the topics that they consider relate to the environment in which they live at the local and global levels. In other words, how the micro theme discussed is representative of a macro issue in the world around them. Ecocomposition asks writers to move beyond simply responding to texts that may be about environmental issues and for them to think about their writing as being an agent for inspiring change. As Dobrin and Weisser contend, “Encouraging students to be critical of the very environments in which they produce discourse and the effects those environments have upon their writing affects change” (26).

Dobrin and Weisser also suggest that there is a significant parallel between cultural studies, another popular topic in first year composition studies, and ecocomposition. They argue that cultural studies “often investigates and analyzes the ways in which

social forces and practices may construct a particular environment, environmental issue, or environmental moment such as a geographical, historical, economic, technological, racial, or other issue pertaining to environment" (28). While studies of race and gender are of significant importance, ecocomposition suggests that the environment that creates the foundation for those studies is more important. In other words, "environment precedes race, class, gender, and culture" (32). Ecocomposition rejects the notion that race, class, and gender are naturally occurring and concludes that "nature is a discursive construct" (33).

The authors further infer that ecofeminism plays an important role in the shaping of the theory. They say, "ecofeminism has provided important discussions of how environmental oppression are linked with oppression of women which underscores why environmental concerns are feminist issues as well as why feminist issues should be addressed environmentally" (35). The authors illustrate that an analogy can be made between environmental issues and other social justice issues. I will explore this analogy in more detail later in this article, but I want to emphasize here that ecocomposition contains elements of ecofeminism, which is an overriding philosophy in other theme-based composition courses. Like ecocriticism, "ecofeminists inquire into the ways in which literary, religious, theological, artistic, and other textual representations of women and nature often result in oppressive actions toward both" (39). Thus, there is a consistent value seen in interrogating the written word and the impact that it has upon the readers. As texts are products of the environment that produces them, we can explore the impact that the environment has on the texts and the texts on the environment.

Rhetorical studies, and environmental rhetoric in particular, also lay the foundation for the design of an ecocomposition course. Dobrin and Weisser argue that environmental rhetoric "raises student awareness of the ways that people use language to construct knowledge" (46). In doing so, "it allows students to see that language is a powerful tool that influences us, and in turn, can be used to influence others" (46). As a result, students can "better recognize ways in which different discourse communities structure the content, form, and rhetorical appeals of their language to better communicate with their intended audiences" (46). By environmental rhetoric, the authors are not just talking about arguments that deal with environmental issues, such as sustainability. Rather, they are arguing that any type of environment (cultural, geographical, social) uses rhetorical constructs to communicate its virtues and vices to those within and outside of itself. Environmental arguments (water pollution, deforestation, species endangerment, etc.) tend to be good sources for examining these devices because they are commonly products of the environment that is most impacted by the concern itself.

Dobrin and Weisser have a high expectation for what a true ecocomposition course should entail. While they agree that all of the aforementioned elements are a component of ecocomposition, they insist that students need to move beyond writing and interpreting texts and focus on the ways in which their own writing is constructed and influenced by the environments which they inhabit. Yet their theory does not fully take into consideration all of the factors that influence the way in which composition professors choose to structure their courses. First year composition courses that allow for developmental reading as a co-requisite course challenge professors to identify readings and writing prompts that are accessible for exceedingly diverse student needs. Further, the

need for assessment and the fulfillment of written communication learning outcomes also influences the way in which courses are structured. Also, as Peter Wayne Moe points out, "When much of ecocomposition theory advocates rewriting curricula, redesigning assignments, and incorporating service-learning into a course, instructors who do not have the pedagogical freedom to design courses cannot easily implement ecocomposition theory in the manner most scholarship recommends." Realistically, to achieve all of the goals of ecocomposition, it would need to be embedded into a writing studies program and extended into a writing across the curriculum initiative. As professors of writing, we need to be realistic about what we can accomplish in a mere 15 weeks that we spend with our students. If students begin to utilize the various facets of the ecocomposition pedagogy and realize how writing shapes their perceptions of the world, then a lot has been accomplished in one semester.

Unlike some other courses designed to focus on environmental and ecological concerns, "Writing about Wolves" is not by definition an ecocomposition course. However, I will say that it borrows elements of the genre and is, at its core, a class that situates writing as a product of its environment, considers the way in which writers use language to shape their rhetorical appeals, asks students to consider how their environment has shaped the way in which they formulate their ideas, and makes them consider how writing has influenced their perception of the world. Any topic related to environmental studies can follow the particular model that I used because of several common threads that will be discussed a bit later.

In order for this class to accomplish its goals, there needs to be a close tie between critical reading and writing. Given the diverse perspectives about wolves that permeate both written text and visual media, it is essential that I teach students how to be good readers and to see how other writers organized their thought processes. Can they see within and between texts how observations about wolves agree and disagree with one another? In selecting my texts for the course, I subscribed to David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's view: "Reading . . . can be the occasion for you to put things together, to notice this idea or theme rather than that one, to follow a writer's announced or secret ends while simultaneously following your own" (3-4). Their theory is consistent with the ecocriticism component of ecocomposition. In order for my students to be ecocritics, they need to think about the way in which they read texts and how their environment influences the way in which they do so.

Because students are reading a variety of sources (fiction, nonfiction, scholarly), they become critical readers by adopting diverse reading strategies in order to make the texts accessible. The environment that produces the text and the one in which they read it require them to adjust their strategies while making meaning of the language on the page. However, students need to be aware that they are shifting their strategies and should be able to articulate why they have done so. As Ellen Carillo states, "all reading approaches that are taught apart from a metacognitive framework intended to promote transfer are problematic" (108). For that reason, I endorse Carillo's theory of "mindful reading." According to Carillo, "mindfully reading involves enacting a theory of reading" (117). As part of this theory, students learn why and how a text works in a certain way and asks them to acknowledge when a particular approach is not working. When they read mindfully, they identify places within a text where they needed to adjust their

strategies (Carillo 117). This mindful reading allows students to track their evolving relationships with texts. As they challenge claims made in the writing itself and they examine the way in which claims are structured, students are asked to consider how their shifting views of texts impact the overall credibility of the arguments that they make. These reading skills are transferable to texts in other disciplines and lead students to consider the environments from which the texts have emerged. The most important part of the pedagogy is increasing student awareness about the situation in which they read the texts.

Early in the semester, my students examine stories about wolves from around the world. In doing so, students are not introduced to literary theory or the value of literary genres. Rather, they look closely at the way in which wolves are written about and consider what that tells us about the environment from which these stories emerged. For example, why does a Germanic story like “Little Red Riding Hood” depict the wolf as being a sexual predator that devours helpless women? Does the geographical isolation of members of that society influence the mythmaking? Putting the wolves to the side, what does it say about the way that women are thought of by that society? By examining how the author uses words to illustrate both wolves and women in the story, students are opened to broader questions about the environment that crafts these stories. As the length and complexity of these literary texts vary, students are asked to identify and critique their critical reading strategies and to consider other scenarios in which they may be applied. There do not necessarily need to be longer analytical essays that are written about the strategies that they use. Journaling or other forms of metacognitive reflection should be embedded in the daily routine in the course. So the classroom becomes the place for the written reactions and reflections to take place and, hence, an environment in which writing is produced.

As we shift toward nonfiction and academic texts, my students engage in a close analysis of environmental rhetoric by closely examining the appeals that are used by authors with diverse academic backgrounds. However, students are asked to consider how texts make both inter and intraconnections. In doing so, students get to see how writers influence one another and also how texts can function as part of a larger arena of argumentation. Bridging the gap between the fiction and the nonfiction is key. To illustrate, let us again consider the vicious wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood” that my students encounter first. When my students read Farley Mowat’s *Never Cry Wolf*, a text used for examination of rhetorical appeals rather than nature writing emulation, one of the first things that they discover about the small Canadian town that Mowat has arrived in is that the inhabitants believe that “wolves reputedly devour several hundred people in the Arctic Zone every year” (Mowat 24). The claim shows an alignment between the fairytale and the established belief of the population that deals with wolves regularly. As the memoir unfolds, Mowat’s experiences show that the wolf is not quite as threatening as its reputation says. Mowat summarizes his early encounters with the animal: “On three separate occasions in less than a week I had been completely at the mercy of these ‘savage killers’; but far from attempting to tear me limb from limb, they had displayed a restraint verging on contempt, even when I invaded their home and appeared to be posing a direct threat to the young pups” (76). Within Mowat’s text, students can see that there are different perspectives: one formed from a mythology and a second formed

from observation in the natural world. These points of view emerge from two different environments. Mowat is an outsider who objectively comes into the landscape to record his experiences while the townspeople are limited to the knowledge that has been passed along to them by others. Whereas Mowat is a seeker of information, the townspeople are consumers of what is offered. Students can interrogate the rhetorical situation in which these claims are made and supported. They see both an inter-connection between the literature and the memoir, followed by an intra-connection made between contrasting ideas within the text.

Further inter-connections are made when texts speak against each other. For example, in one of the selections from the Mech and Botani text, we are told “The book *Never Cry Wolf* (Mowat 1963), a mostly fictional work (Banfield 1964; Pimlott 1966; Mech 1970; Goddard 1996), was the first positive presentation of wolves in the popular culture” (Fritts et al. 294). Mowat acknowledges in the text’s “Preface,” which was written in 1993, that “Some dedicated wolf haters including the far-flung network of those who kill for sport, went so far as to claim it was an outright work of fiction. Others brushed it aside, claiming it was invalid because its author was not a bona fide scientist with at least a doctoral degree” (v). He then goes on to claim “that almost every facet of wolf behavior described by me has since been rediscovered by the selfsame scientists who called my studies a work of the imagination” (vi). While it is clear that Fritts et al. are not “wolf haters,” it is a curious thing that they reference a number of articles written decades before Mowat’s “Preface.” Further, is Mowat making generalizations about his opposition? Which of his claims have been proven, if any? This exchange allows students to explore the importance of sourcing, while also investigating the *ethos* of the authors. From this activity, students are empowered to question, rather than blindly accept, the statements made by more experienced authors. While Fritts et al. are published biologists who have extensively researched wolves, students should still question the information they provide and consider the rhetorical appeals used by the authors to substantiate their claims. Likewise, the agreeable nature of Mowat’s lighthearted prose should not prevent them from challenging what he claims to have witnessed as he is using rhetorical appeals differently than Fritts et al. are. In the era of “Fake News,” students need to learn the importance of asking questions of anyone who claims to be the authority on a particular topic. Under what circumstances were these texts written? How do the environments that shaped these authors influence the way in which they communicate their ideas? How do the ways that these authors write impact the way in which students make meaning of the texts? This is ecocriticism, and students need to respond as ecocritics to the texts that they encounter.

When selecting an appropriate theme for a composition course, professors should choose a sequencing of texts that approach the topic from wide perspectives. Choosing texts from across a set period of time and from diverse populations is key for students to fully analyze the ways in which authors use writing to make meaning of abstract topics. Any of the themes mentioned earlier can be addressed rhetorically with emphasis placed on how students read texts. Formal writing assignments in the course should ask students to articulate the ways in which these texts have shaped their reading experiences as well as the way in which they perceive the theme. The first step in creating an eco-composition course is to allow students to become ecocritics. However, while doing so,

professors also need to be aware of the transferability of the skills that they are teaching. Carillo's mindful reading is an essential part of teaching to transfer. Having addressed ecocriticism and environmental rhetoric that is embedded in "Wolves," I now want to turn to a more complex aspect of the pedagogy: ecofeminism and cultural studies.

Ecofeminism, Cultural Studies, Social Justice, and Wolves

As Farley Mowat says in his "Preface" to *Never Cry Wolf*, "We have doomed the wolf not for what it is but for what we deliberately and mistakenly perceive it to be: the mythologized epitome of a savage, ruthless killer" (viii). In my course, we explore the truth behind Mowat's statement, and we look at the way in which that "ruthless killer" is established and facilitated by society. "Violence" and "domination" are recurring aspects of the complex relationship between wolves and humanity. Fear of wolves led to their near extinction in the twentieth century, yet it is not just out of fear that they were hunted in mass numbers. It is also the fact that humanity encroached upon their territory and claimed it for its own. But in this configuration, facts that challenge humanity's assertion of power are repressed. As a result, if given the choice between the cattle industry and the preservation of a natural ecosystem, big industry will win out. That isn't just true about wolves and humans. We can also look at the pursuit of fossil fuels in natural preserves, over-fishing and whaling, and deforestation as other examples of how this conflict between the natural world and humanity plays out. Humanity will dominate the environment simply because it can. This dynamic between nature and humanity illustrates the ecofeminism and cultural studies pedagogies of ecomposition.

There is a clear analogy that can be drawn between nature as an oppressed entity and other oppressed populations in society. Dobrin and Weissner contend, "ecofeminism seeks to end all oppression and recognizes that any attempt to liberate any oppressed group – particularly women – can only be successful with an equal attempt to liberate nature" (34). In addition, ecomposition "agrees that the very power structures and ideologies which incur oppressions over women and other groups are responsible for the oppressive actions taken over nature" (37). In other words, if we want to understand why certain populations are oppressed and how those social structures are built, we should look at how we exploit the natural world. We can use our treatment of nature as a metaphor for our treatment of any minority population. Further, ecomposition, "pairs ecocolonialism with ecofeminism in its quest to undermine dominant paradigms that portray 'Nature' as an exploitative resource for human use and consumption" (37). If we seek to overthrow the social structures that allow certain populations to be oppressed, then we should start by considering the way in which we interact with the environment. We can mean this to be the natural world, but also the "environment" that surrounds the oppressed population. Paul Walker says when considering ecomposition, "The close analysis of environmental discourse . . . can provide students the opportunity to identify and critique the tacit societal values to which we adhere and how accepted language and labeling contribute to and inform the continuation of those values" (70). Therefore, through the close examination of the ways in which we label nature as something that can be dominated with violence, we can transfer our understanding of that labeling to other populations, particularly our fellow humans.

Because wolves have been labeled as a menace and representing the untamed natural world, their problematic relationship with humanity can be used as a micro metaphor for a macro environmental problem. Their exploitation parallels that of other environmental resources, which, according to ecofeminism, aligns with the way that women and other racialized and ethnicized minority populations have been exploited by society. We need to understand the social structures that allow the exploitation to occur. By considering the way in which one population is rhetorically written about, we create an entry way to extend our study across other populations. If we consider how myths are written and examine the consequences that they bestow, we can begin to find ways to rewrite the myths and attempt to end the domination of minority populations that are met with violence daily. Because wolves are more abstract, we can approach the study of their oppression more objectively rather than directly discussing racial discrimination. As professors, we should realize that not every student is going to feel comfortable discussing these race relation issues directly. Given the fact that race is a hot button issue today, some students may be less inclined to engage in the discussion out of fear of offending a classmate. Because the demographics of individual sections of courses will be different, if we select race relations as a theme, we are not sure about our students' attitude toward an especially polarizing issue. Thus, wolves become the "micro theme" to the "macro issue" of discrimination in society. Wolves, or the natural world by extension, become a safe space to discuss the same factors that contribute to the more controversial issues that impact our society today.

As part of the class, I introduce the notion that there is a metaphorical value for exploring wolves as a theme through critical reading of images. Near the beginning of the semester, I show my students a sequence of images that depict various interpretations of the wolf (vicious, kindly, etc.) The final image, originally published on a huntsman group webpage, shows a cohort of hunters whose faces are covered with white sacks with slits cut for eyes, nose, and mouth. One of them is holding the carcass of a dead wolf while several others are grasping shotguns. To the left of the hunter with the carcass, several others are holding up an American flag. We examine the rhetorical appeals of the image, and my students are surprised by the imagery used. The hunters remind my students of Klansmen, and a discussion about the role of the KKK in society today usually arises. The brandishing of the firearms and the American flag suggest that there is something patriotic happening here. Yet, my students view the image as the opposite of that. This activity introduces the idea of natural world as a metaphor for larger social issues. While I don't press the issue further, students will sometimes come back to this metaphor throughout the semester. For example, a discussion about the repression of women logically emerged from a discussion of Mowat's text when the Kavanaugh hearings were occurring. Activities like these allow students to ask questions about the information that they encounter and to consider how the texts that they are handed are products of the environments from which they emerge.

Dobrin and Weisser conclude, "Ecomposition seeks to overturn conceptualizations which demarcate natural environments as entities which may be mastered and ruled. In turn, ecomposition resists oppression of all living organisms – human or other – and their environments" (40). As such, the adaptation of the ecomposition pedagogy is to embrace the notion that social justice can be taught through writing.

The most important aspect of the pedagogy is for students to take their writing beyond the classroom. They need to start thinking about how their writing can have an impact on the environments in which they live. Furthermore, they need to perceive that the stances that they adopt have consequences. That is why students need to consider wider and more diverse audiences when they write in a composition class.

Considering Audiences beyond the Classroom

Students instinctively believe that any writing done in the classroom has a single audience: the professor. They tend to overlook the fact that peer reviewers, writing center tutors, or even family members with whom they share the writing are also members of their audience. Yet all of those individuals are part of a controlled population; they are immediately accessible to the writer. How can we get students to consider a wider audience?

Dobrin and Weisser suggest that it is best to have students compose documents that break the mold of the academic essay. They offer an assignment for designing a flier and another for designing a web page as ideal examples of true *ecomposition* (143-44). However, as previously mentioned, professors are typically bound by course outcomes, departmental assessments, and limitations on academic freedom which collectively make it difficult to implement less conventional assignments. At many colleges, fliers and web pages are inconsistent with the outcomes of a first semester composition course.

A compromise is to provide students with hypothetical scenarios of real world writing situations that target specific audiences. In "Writing about Wolves," my students engage in such a scenario with their end of semester research paper. They are asked to consider whether or not a wolf conservation effort in New England would be appropriate. To reach their conclusion, they need to identify the specific geographical area where the conservation effort should happen. I ask them to synthesize what they have learned about the needs of wolves and of the population that would be living with the animals on a daily basis. The intended audience for this paper is the governor of the state where the effort should commence. They are asked to make use of the rhetorical appeals that they have seen other writers use throughout the semester to advocate for their conservation movement. Conversely, students may also opt to argue why a conservation effort should not happen. While the scenario is hypothetical, it asks them to consider the implications of their advocacy and to determine what types of information a politician would need to be convinced that the cause is justified. Having discussed the role of rhetorical appeals during the semester, they are now able to show that they can apply them. Even though my students have never sent their essays to the governors of the states that they have identified, I have never discouraged them from doing so. As the class continues to evolve, that seems like an appropriate next step. If not sending a paper via e-mail to the governor, then the designing of the web linked documents referenced by Dobrin and Weisser definitely would be.

Conclusion

Designing theme-based courses is an engaging, challenging, and rewarding way to invest students in their first year writing experience. The elements of ecocomposition that I have referenced here are essential guidelines for achieving established course outcomes. A theme that is broad enough allows students to remain invested in a single concept and to see how their knowledge of it evolves over a period of time. Finding the relevance of the theme for the students is key. As Moekle says, "When students care about a topic, they are eager to participate in the discussions that characterize that field of study, and they want to have an impact on their audience" (81). One of the challenges we face is finding the right themes for our unique student audiences. As we all interact with the natural world in some way, starting with an environmental theme is a good option.

However, we also should remember that the natural world provides us with a safe place to discuss the violence and domination that humanity bestows upon the planet. Ecocomposition allows us to explore the metaphorical similarities between the natural world and exploited minority populations in society. It begins by teaching our students to be ecocritics. Dobrin and Weisser argue, "studying textual representation of nature is critical to understanding how textual production occurs" (41). When students consider the environments that help to construct the texts that they read, they can begin to consider how their own environment influences them.

"Writing about Wolves" is just a single example of how elements of ecocomposition can be employed to teach critical reading and writing strategies, social justice awareness, academic research, metacognition, and environmentalism. Using a theme-based approach while keeping the written products as the central goal of the class can both engage students in the course and help them to grow as readers and writers. If students can truly understand the mechanisms through which mythmaking impacts the belief systems of a society, then they are on their way to making sense of the "Fake News" era and the associated consequences of spreading false information. In the process, they may also learn how the environment that they live in now is primed for the spread of misinformation. In the end, that environmental awareness may help to relegate the "Fake News" era to the history books where it will hopefully never be repeated.

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