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Placing Ourselves in Our Environment: Students' Perceptions of Their Writing and Role in Nature Following an Environmental Writing Course

Yasmin Marie Rioux

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PLACING OURSELVES IN OUR ENVIRONMENT:
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR WRITING AND ROLE IN NATURE
FOLLOWING AN ENVIRONMENTAL WRITING COURSE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2017

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In this dissertation, the author aims at gaining a better understanding of how taking an Environmental Literature and Writing course affects student writing while exploring how writing students view their own roles within their natural environments following the completion of the described course. Through the collecting and assessing of student writing as well as post-semester open-question interviews, the author seeks to understand how students are affected and influenced by being exposed to a place-based environmental writing class and how such experience informs their personal perceptions of their individual roles within their local and global environmental context. By using narrative inquiry, the author explores her own experiences with her changing natural surroundings to engage in the class experience in a reflective and meaningful manner.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND, PROBLEM, PURPOSE, AND RESEARCH

A long time ago in a faraway place, lived a woman who wished for nothing more but to have a tiny child. As she didn't know how to make her wish come true, she went to a witch to ask for advice. The woman was given a tiny seed of barley, which she was instructed to plant. The following day, the seed had sprouted into a beautiful little girl that was not much bigger than the seed that the woman had planted the night before. Since the girl was so tiny, like a thumbnail, the woman named her Däumelinchen. The girl and her new mother only spent a few days and nights together until an old toad kidnapped the girl as the toad found the girl to be a perfect fit for her bachelor son. To prevent her from escaping, the old toad placed Däumelinchen on a lily pad, which was like an island to her. There, she can still be spotted if one is very quiet, patient, and vigilant.

Background – Placing Myself

The story for my dissertation begins long before I was even aware of the existence of research, dissertations, or ecomposition. The story begins with my own space and place, the people whom I interacted with, the things I valued, things I loved, and cultures I identified with; who I was as a result of all these things. My first memories of my surroundings include the people I cared about most and our immediate place outside of the patio door, which led into a vast open space of pine and apple trees, ivy, long green grasses, and an algae-flooded pond, which was hidden under a blanket of resting water lilies. The sandbox neighbored an old Magnolia that bloomed at least twice a summer and was one of the first indicators that winter had passed. A large Mountain Ash with fiery orange berries measured how high we were swinging and those whose toes touched the Mountain Ash's leaves were recognized as winners in this fierce

competition. Even the musty compost pile that held the yard's decaying and life-giving "waste" was a site for wonderful experiences as it was a home to worms, roly poly bugs, daddy longlegs, even weasels and hedgehogs.

In spring, the crocuses, dandelions, buttercups, Märzenbecher, tulips, violets, and Gänseblümchen would form a thick and soft carpet of color underneath our feet. The frogs and ducks came from their winter hideouts to bring new life to our pond that was nestled so quietly underneath the large dark spruce tree that, when struck by the breeze, produced a sound like the circulating blood one can hear when pressing the ear against a sea shell. When the blackbirds started singing, we knew summer wasn't far and started to leave our shoes inside to strengthen our calluses that would allow us to run through the pine needles and mushrooms that inhabited the summer grass. Spring brought with it rain and storms that prepped the soil for the needy, non-native plants my mother planted along the patio and walls of our house. She would spend days picking out the dandelions and other Unkraut, or weeds, that slowed her flowers' growth and stole all the sunlight and the nutritious minerals found in our soil.

In summer, we kids spent every waking moment outdoors, running from one yard to another, eating tiny strawberries, dark raspberries and blackberries, bright currants, and sour cherries as we played. We climbed trees, observed snails and birds, pretended that our places were far off jungles or set at a time way before ours.

Some years later, as my family gathered for a meal at a restaurant, my grandfather decided to order venison ragout, an unfamiliar choice to me.

"Are you sure? It's all still contaminated," my mother pointed out.

"It's fine," he replied. "It's been so long."

“In the paper they just had another article about the high radiation levels in Bavaria. Anything from the forest is poisoned.”

I could tell that she was getting nervous and worried about her dad and his health. Maybe even beyond that, the health of our entire family and community because we were all bound to and dependent on our place and its inhabitants in one way or another.

“Doesn’t stop you from eating our Holunderküchle,” Grandpa said with his usual smirk that lightened up the situation a bit.

“Well, don’t let the girls try any,” my mother insisted, making the subject even more interesting to me and my older sister who were bewildered by the exchange.

Later that evening, my mother told my sister and me about Chernobyl, about the rain that had swept across Germany only days after the incident had taken place, leaving the country highly contaminated and irradiated. She described how everything, especially the forests where lichen and moss grew so abundantly, had such high levels of radiation that animals were born with scary deformations: two heads, hearts and other organs located on the outside of their skin, or faces with one eye. I was only 6 weeks old when a section of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded, eventually killing thousands through the short- and long-term effects of radiation. My mother explained how, a day after the incident, she and my dad scavenged the city’s supermarkets in search of baby food and formula that pre-dated April 26th, to secure my sister’s and my food supply. They emptied my grandparents’ basement to store bottled water from the French Alps, which ensured that it was pumped from a site whose water was about 10,000 years old and therefore certainly predated the Chernobyl disaster. Having the privilege of being able to access an American grocery store on the local military base, my family fully relied on foreign foods after that late April disaster. They fed us powdered milk from the United States

mixed with ancient French water, butter from Ireland, fruit from the US' West Coast states, meat from Argentina, vegetables from Mexico, but oftentimes our bread had to be bought locally from German bakeries, made with German grains that had grown from local soils.

By the time my mother told us, which was several years after the Chernobyl accident, it was hard to believe that our environment was still highly toxic. The rabbits and deer that ate the grass that grew from the soil that had soaked up the rain years earlier, were still inedible and affected? This frightening knowledge made me think differently about our environment, our role within it, and our responsibility for the things that had no voices. Could the Chernobyl accident have been prevented? Could it happen again? Who took care of the plants and animals endangered by such horrible things?

As a teenager, I volunteered at the pediatric oncological clinic in my hometown. So many children suffering from leukemia, spinal and brain tumors, cancers that were difficult to treat. My friend, Sylvia, died when she was 11. Several years later, I lost two more friends to leukemia and brain tumors. The rain of April, 1986, was still lingering in the soil, our water, the trees, grass, flowers, animals, and our air. Growing up, my place had always been the most beautiful spot on Earth: the Alps, glacial lakes, foothills, and vast fields of grain and poppy flowers. And it was highly contaminated, irradiated, toxic, and poisonous.

Research Problem: Our Place within the Global Context

It is the summer of 2015 as I am embarking on this journey of writing my dissertation. Twenty nine years have passed since Chernobyl and we, as a global community, still face dangerous and destructive environmental threats.

Currently, most media outlets bombard us with contradicting, frightening, even confrontational information regarding our environment. I read Lester Brown's *Plan B* (2008), in

which he urges us to recognize the harm we as human beings are causing the planet by contributing to resource depletion, soil erosion, the melting of glaciers, rising sea levels, deforestation, and the elimination of known and unknown species, all of which are and will inevitably affect our livelihood. On the other hand, I think of a newspaper article published earlier this year that stated Wisconsin Governor, Scott Walker's, plan to cut funding for the University of Wisconsin Madison's renewable energy program, which has been working on using wood chips, grasses, and other easily accessible materials to create new and sustainable energy sources (Content & Bergquist, 2015). Walker is concerned with budgets and money and how to build new sports arenas that will increase revenue. These starkly contrasting approaches between what we are doing to our planet and the ignorance thereof are surrounding me and us as members of our current times and reflect the larger disconnect between environmental and economic priorities; priorities of long-term, sustainable survival and short-term financial gain.

Further, our mainstream media numbs us with what under the given circumstances appears to be superfluous information about hair products, celebrity dating statuses, and leading sports teams. Then, here and there, we gain a glimpse on the news of incomparable heat waves in India, Great Britain, and Germany and unmatched floods and rains in the United States. What is beautiful hair if you have no planet to wave your ponytail on?

This is the status quo in which our students write and live: a constant inundation of information, images, altering realities and priorities, pro and con arguments of global climate change. A reality that is filled with "mass media and mass culture that threaten to blunt the mind's powers of critical thinking and reduce them to a state of indiscriminate conformity" (Bruce, 2011, p. 12). It is up to my students to sift through mountains of information, listen to peers and parents talk about what they should believe while learning things at school that might

not align with what they have come to believe at home. Who are our students within such a reality? Do they see themselves as responsible for our Earth's health decline? Do they see themselves as possible solutions? Or is the disagreement between climate change skeptics and supporters too loud for them to decipher a clear individual role? Do these questions even arise in their non-academic contexts? What about their academic ones?

In 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released their most current report on our Earth's climate; a realistic, sad, hopeful, maddening, scary, even desperate piece that highlights the environmental and therefore the social and economic status quo. Within its opening pages, the authors urge that

stabilizing temperature increase to below 2°C relative to pre-industrial levels will require an urgent and fundamental departure from business as usual. Moreover, the longer we wait to take action, the more it will cost and the greater the technological, economic, social and institutional challenges we will face” (IPCC, 2014, v).

The IPCC researchers describe the “warming of the climate system” (p. 40) as “unequivocal” (p. 40). However, my experiences with my students, who are members of what Owens (2001b) calls the “threatened generation” due to the impending climate and associated social changes they will face in their lifetimes, demonstrates that climate change is not as unambiguous and undisputable to them as it is to most scientists and those who believe in climate change. My students still grapple with personal positioning in regards to climate change and their role within their natural environments. Many of my students are majoring in the STEM disciplines, which might suggest that over time they will come to understand global “warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system” (IPCC, p. 56). Yet, this is not necessarily the case; students are oftentimes strongly influenced by and supportive of their social contexts and if their

surrounding is comprised of skeptics who oppose arguments for the existence of climate change, then my students are oftentimes doubtful and hesitant as well. The IPCC (2014) report further suggests that

many aspects of climate change and its associated impacts will continue for centuries, even if anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are stopped. The risks of abrupt or irreversible changes increase as the magnitude of the warming increases (p. 73)

If such drastic and assured statements do not ring true for some students, then perhaps the creative and exploratory powers of writing offer a more accessible path “through the fever swamp of human existence” (Wilson, 2014, p. 44) and the conflicting and contradicting ideas and realities our students are confronted with. The Humanities offer opportunities for students (and everyone else) to make “intimate contact” (Wilson, 2014, p. 56) with other humans to engage in rich and dynamic narratives, and to explore different ways of making meaning of and connecting with the world. Wilson (2014) mentions that “we are doing very well in science and technology. Let’s agree to keep it up, and move both along even faster. But let’s also promote the humanities, that which makes us human” (p. 60).

In the writing classroom, which itself can be seen as an “intricate ecological system where organisms interact with one another and their environment” (Connolly, 1989, p. 3), students can use writing to not only write themselves into their environments (Owens, 2001a; 2001b; Cooper, 1986), but also to explore various aspects of their natural surroundings to make meaning and knowledge. From an ecomposition perspective, where the writer, text, other writers, experiences, and so forth, are all interwoven, writing “requires a higher level of engagement, a higher level of interactivity” (Johnson-Sheehan, 2007, p. 13) than students can gain from simply experiencing an occurrence. Writing at times “allows writers to connect prior

conceptions to new conceptions” (Balgopal & Wallace, 2009, p. 17), which suggests that my students can explore who they are and what they believe throughout and following a semester of taking an Environmental Literature and Writing course. Writing is a “method of enquiry” (Park, 2013, p. 338) as writing offers student writers a way to reflect on themselves, to realize their thoughts, and to express themselves while experiencing this expression through their self-produced texts (Park, 2013; Ivanic, 1998).

In his process-oriented approach, Connolly (1989) states that writing can “clarify meaning and reinforce memory” (p. 2), and further that writing is “about language that is forming meaning” (p. 3) and a way “to help students acquire a personal ownership of ideas” (p. 3). Students write in order to learn and within our global context, this approach can help my students learn about their own positionality within our environment; a positionality that is theirs and not simply that of their peers and family. It is our societal and individual responsibility to acknowledge our place and our home, and our role(s) within the Earth’s ecosystems. In this dissertation I will look at how the aforementioned powerful attributes of writing, ecological knowledge, appreciation, and awareness can hopefully be attained through the use of ecomposition in an Environmental Literature and Writing course.

Violence to the Earth

In *A Peaceable Classroom*, Mary Rose O’Reilley (1993) asks “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” (p. 20). From her place and time, which was marked by the threat of the Vietnam war and the draft, this was a legitimate and extremely important question as it addressed the context of violence and anger that students were exposed to and experiencing. Unfortunately, violence is still one of the most debilitating conditions we, as human beings, must face within our societies (Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998; Hurlbert, 2012; O’Reilley,

1993). However, In *Composition and Sustainability* Owens (2001b) points out that students are “disappointed, discouraged, and bored with – and not infrequently, scared of – their places” (p.50). The conflicts that are oftentimes deeply embedded in our students’ lives and follow them into their classrooms and the writings they compose. Sometimes, we can find glimpses into their violence-laden realities through their place-based texts when student writers reveal what brutalities their places entail. Other times, their realities are reflected in their overall academic performance when we find students unable to mentally leave the violence of their places despite their relocations to the university campus.

Twenty years have passed since Mary Rose O’Reilley raised her crucial question and now, we are faced with yet another, perhaps even larger problem: violence against our home, our collective place, the Earth. Central to ecocomposition is the idea of interconnectivity between the writer, the environment, community, physical and spiritual spheres, culture, and language (Cooper, 1986; Owens 2001a; 2001b; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002a; 2002b; Dobrin, 2011; Cahalan, 2008; Hothem, 2009; Ingram, 2001; Mauk, 2003). Further, ecocompositionists value “place” as integral component of a writers’ writing and composition process. Based on this approach, we cannot separate the writer’s place, what occurs there, what and how a student writer writes, and our overall shared communal spaces. This dissertation therefore reformulates O’Reilley’s essential question to broaden its scope and incorporate a context that transcends societal boundaries. Now, in 2015, it is time to ask “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing our planet?”

In this first chapter, I will provide an overview of my dissertation’s overall context, including the general student population and the role of writing classrooms in a world where we have accepted the violence we commit against our natural environment. Further, I argue that we,

as writing instructors, have a responsibility to promote environmental awareness in our classrooms instead of leaving such matters to the hard sciences. I then outline the purpose of and need for my study in relation to the presented context. Lastly, I briefly present my methodological approach, research questions, and a rationale for these research questions.

Placing Our Students

I think back to the place that was most influential to my sense of self and the attitudes I have developed since then towards nature. I think of Augsburg, Germany, and am flooded with a sense of peace and tranquility, safety and bliss that flowed through my early childhood. I can immediately recall thousands of tastes, scents, feelings, memories, colors, and experiences that I made in my backyard, the two rivers that frame my hometown, and the meadows, mountains, and woods in which we used to hide and play. I realize that I was uniquely positioned to have grown up so closely entwined with nature and that my sense of who I am has always been interwoven with my environment. I am also aware that my place played a role in the other places I have experienced and the place in which I find myself today (Reynolds, 2004, p. 11). I consider myself privileged to have lived so engaged with my natural surrounding that I was able to fall in love with it, getting to know it as closely as I got to know my sister. Kalvaitis and Monhardt (2015) observe that “young children’s relationship with nature is a starting point for all future human interactions with the natural world” (p. 2). I was able to live my love for nature and to explore and experience the wonders, mysteriousness, and awe that nature provides. This early life also enabled me to view myself as an inextricable part of nature as many children do, who are able to surround themselves with nature, do (Kalvaitis & Monhardt, 2015).

Now, twenty-some years later, after having changed locations several times, I find myself in another place, one that makes me think of my students, especially those who come from

alternate positions: those who grew up surrounded by depressing shades of grey, drab concrete structures, rusty playgrounds, trash-filled parks, and old cement sidewalks that may become the site of a determined dandelion once a year. What about the students whose places, which have been crucial to their development, cause them fear, hopelessness, despair, and desperation (Owens, 2001b; Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998; Hurlbert, 2012)? Places where there is simply no room for nature and the thought or action of taking care of our environment, let alone taking care of their own well-being and survival? In 1984, Wilson published *Biophilia*, in which he explains that humans have an innate disposition to appreciate and love their natural surroundings. He argues that this affinity is a part of our human genetic make-up, which is in place to ensure our own survival within our environments and that of generations to come. Although *I* feel this love and profound appreciation towards our environment, our students, who might come from the abovementioned settings, may not be in touch with this disposition due to lack of exposure with their natural environments.

In a lecture about one of her many places, North America, Gertrude Stein describes Americans as “cruel” because they have “no close contact with the earth such as most Europeans have” (Owens, 2001b, p. 70). It is true, from my own Euro-North American experience, that the attitudes that most Europeans hold in regards to nature are different from the ones found here, in my new place. However, I do not want to accept Stein’s statement. I feel challenged by it, compelled to argue that we must transcend the artificial boundaries (Cahalan, 2008; Brown, 2008) we have created in order to focus on the human mind and identity that connects us and that we share. I want to argue that most of our minds are fully receptive and capable of formulating new ways of engaging with nature and perceiving it in a more sustainable and responsible way despite our places.

The Place of the Writing Classroom

1987 marks the year after I was born, the year after Marylin Cooper (1986) published “Ecology of Writing”, the year after Chernobyl exploded. That year the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development released a report titled, “Our Common Future”. In it, the delegates wrote “humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Owens, 2002b, p. 22). Now, we face a situation where “our habitat – the planet – is in deep trouble” (Bruce, 2011, p. 12). We still find ourselves affected by unprecedented environmental threats and circumstances and have to find new ways of negotiating meaning while living in a politically, economically, environmentally, and consequently, socially and ethically changing place (Anderson, 2014; Anderson, 2005; Brown, 2008; Tremmel, 2012; Rowland, Millner, Hill, Towne, Wohlpart, 2014; Birnbacher, 2012; Johnson-Sheehan, 2007; IPCC, 2014; Bruce, 2011). Owens (2001b) states that “we have a responsibility to design a pedagogical ethic informed by the need to think and act sustainably” (p. 27), one that is holistic, pervasive, and most of all, sustainable in itself. Bruce (2011) agrees that “we must begin to teach English to show respect both for human life and for our environment” (p. 13). It is our human and pedagogical responsibility to create spaces for students to explore the Earth and themselves in relation to our planet. The writing classroom offers the opportunity for the creation of this space. Klahr (2012) contends that

over the course of the next few decades, every academic discipline will have to respond to the paradigm of more sustainable life practices [...] As our students make their way through this emerging world, they will encounter challenges springing forth from this paradigm shift, and they will demand that every academic discipline demonstrate

substantial relevance to these challenges. Indeed, any academic discipline that fails in this regard may find itself ultimately unsustainable (p. 19)

The demand for inclusion of sustainability in the academic setting is increasing (Owens, 2001b; Goggin, 2009; Bartels, 2012; Hothem, 2009; Ingram, 2001; Cahalan, 2008; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002a; 2002b; Dobrin, 2001; Dobrin, 2011; Klahr, 2012; Lake, 2012; Rowland et al., 2014; Bruce, 2011; Johnson-Sheehan, 2007). Sustainability is no longer a thing of the hard sciences only because we are becoming more and more aware of the effects our environment's changes have on us all and the role each discipline plays in the education of future generations. Limiting the study of such global phenomena to only one field would constrain progress just as not addressing the environment with our writing students would hinder their ability to make conscious choices about their environment. "Because an understanding of sustainability requires an awareness of the interconnectedness of what are traditionally considered separate academic fields" (Owens, 2001b, p. 4), it is our collective responsibility to ensure that a bridging between the disciplines becomes possible. Scientist and writer, E. O. Wilson (2014) argues that "studying the relation between science and the humanities should be at the heart of liberal education everywhere, for students of science and the humanities alike" (p. 40), because "the most successful scientist thinks like a poet – wide-ranging, sometimes fantastical" (p. 41).

We, in any discipline or from any background, can no longer "function as if we were independent entities moving arbitrarily through or remaining at rest within whatever environments happen to surround us" (Owens, 2001b, p. 149). The term "composition", derived from Latin, combines "ponere", to place, and "com", together (Moe, 2011, p. 6), which suggests that a communal and place-based approach fits well with writing instruction. Bruce (2011) beautifully articulates the role of our planet within the composition classroom:

As English teachers, we may not think that we have direct power to reform these [current] systems. However, it is well within our capacity to help others understand the ethics that support either “man against nature” or a reciprocal interdependence of human nature, the land, and nonhuman species [...] it is well within our capacity to think about human character as environmentally or ecologically embedded rather than immune. And it is well within our capacity to introduce students to writers that can open minds to the notion that human actions affect the ecosystem we depend on” (p. 14).

Also, since Composition is not only central to most English departments, but also often regarded as providing the writing courses that “justify their [English department] relevance to the institution” (Owens, 2001b, p. 5), the composition classroom “can play an influential role in imagining and developing curricula that promote awareness of sustainability” (Owens, 2001b, p. 4). Dobrin and Weisser (2002b) concur that “it is only natural that composition studies recognizes its affiliation with ecological and environmental disciplines” (p. 3).

Following my first encounters with ecomposition, I was eager to implement it into my composition classrooms. Starting with brief discussions of fundamental texts such as Cooper’s “The Ecology of Writing” (1986) or the more contemporary “Suburban Studies and College Writing – Applying Ecomposition” by Hothem (2009), my units grew and expanded to allow my students to engage with their places and those of their peers more deeply and thoroughly. I asked my more advanced composition students to create a multigenre piece on their places to emphasize the complexities these locations held in relation to their sense of self. I assigned place-based narratives in which students were asked to reflect on how they presently see themselves and how they think their places have informed their perceptions. My students told me

how useful this assignment was as it did not only help them write out and think about their current perceptions, which oftentimes were laden with feelings of homesickness and a sense of dislocation, but also see how they already possessed a plethora of knowledge and information that was valued in their academic setting.

I arranged for my developmental writers to perform research in the university's archives to understand how the idea of place has been integral to humans' sense of identity. We sifted through stacks of antique letters, notes, court documents, and maps to understand how locals from the 1800s related to the environment and viewed themselves in relation to it. The texts we found primarily presented views from recent immigrants who tried to make sense of their new places and understand the land in order to grow crops and sustain their livelihood. The documents also shed light on homesickness and the human urge to stay connected with close relations such as siblings or cousins who had become "displaced" and lived in another country or state. My research got accepted to the Conference of College Composition and Communication in 2014, which further strengthened my belief in the need for ecomposition in the collegiate composition classroom.

"You're like a hippie teacher," one of my developmental writing students tells me after a class in which we addressed our responsibility towards the environment and how we, as writers, are part of an intricate system of interconnectedness.

"I can take a compliment!" I tell her.

We want to change the world. We're supposed to change the world. No one can change the world. Our students must go "out" and change the world. Our children will change the world. Having children and teaching others has already changed our world. It's too

hard to change the world. Education should change the world. We must get out of the way so those who can will change the world. We are among those who are changing the world. It's too late to change the world. It's too early to stop changing the world (Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998, p. 1)

In their book *Letters for the Living*, Michael Blitz and Claude Hurlbert (1998) describe the need for composition to be a safe space where honest exchanges about reality and life can occur. Since “writing and living and teaching are not separable” (p. 2), we must take the opportunity and use our writing spaces to give our students platforms from which they can write themselves into their environments and seek to create and comprehend the interdependence that connects our places and peers. One reason we write is in order to understand that we are not separable, solitary, and isolated, but part of a large web, “in which anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole” (Cooper, 1986, p. 370). We are inextricably linked and connected to the entirety of our environment: its cultural, social, natural, physical, psychological, spatial, spiritual, linguistic realities. Gertrude Stein (1965) reminds us that:

After all anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high, the air heavy or clear and anybody is as there is wind or no wind there. It is that which makes them and the arts they make and the work they do and the way they eat and the way they drink and the way they learn and everything (Stein, p. 45)

So how can we approach our students in a world that is faced with disconnected systems, ideologies that exclude environmental protection, climate fluctuations, pollution, and the resultant effects of population migration and poverty (Anderson, 2014; Anderson, 2005; Brown, 2008; IPCC, 2014)? How can we ensure that students leave the university having at least encountered and thought about crucial questions that pertain to our collective future? Questions

such as: what is our role within nature? What does this role imply? Am I acting as a responsible human being within my ecosystem that is also everybody else's ecosystem?

Placing My Approach

It is important to point out that my study is also place-bound and place-based. As mentioned, I was born and raised in Germany, traveled the European continent and parts of Eurasia extensively, and lived in the Netherlands before fully moving to the US. Despite my explorations of places and locations, I must be realistic about my own limitations regarding how much one can actually take in when traveling. Of course I was always eager to become embedded and engrained in the culture of my temporary habitat and refused to stay at resorts that would dissociate the traveler from a location's reality. It was important to me to meet local individuals who identified with the place I visited and to gain a better insight into the actualities of a location through these locals. By partaking in their experiences I hoped to accumulate knowledge and become familiar with different ways of knowing things even if such interactions were limited to a night at a train station. In these instances, language and nonverbal communication becomes a vehicle or bridge to gaining insight into the lives of others but language can also devolve into the primary obstacle. Time presents another issue when attempting to become genuinely involved with another being's perceptions of life. How could I understand even the slightest concept of someone's life-based experiences within a matter of weeks? I've lived in the United States for almost 12 years now and still do not feel like I can fully comprehend local ways of doing things and the reasoning behind actions.

For my study, I must accept that I can only represent my Western background that has shaped and influenced how I see the environment, our natural surroundings, and how we, as humans, position ourselves within our places. I am fully aware that this place-based disposition

will only allow me to share a miniscule piece of insight into our current status quo and that I cannot and will not attempt to incorporate cultural-based environmental realities of which I do not know enough to write about with confidence and full understanding. There is no clearer and more humbling way to conceptualize the inability to fully comprehend another's life than through Rushdie's (2006) quote from *Midnight's Children*:

Who am I? My answer: I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I", every one of the no-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow the world (Rushdie, 2006, p. 440).

Of course my background shapes the way I teach my Environmental Literature and Writing course, how I design and set it up, what readings I select, and what questions I ask. This dissertation is as place-based as the texts I ask my students to write but I can and will address the tensions that accompany my disposition in greater detail in chapter 4 when answering my research questions, especially the third question, which addresses my own evolution as a teacher, course designer, and researcher throughout a semester of teaching Environmental Literature and Writing.

And Now? - Purpose of the Study

The existing literature thoroughly addresses various aspects of ecocomposition, its implementation in the composition classroom, ways instructors have and are using it in their contexts, and its benefits within our changing world (Cooper, 1986; Owens 2002, 2001, 2001b; Dobrin, 2011; Dobrin, 2001; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002a; 2002b; Bruce, 2011; Cahalan, 2008;

Rowland et al., 2014; Johnson-Sheehan, 2007; Connolly, 2001; Fleckenstein et al., 2008; Hurlbert, 2006; Hurlbert, 2002; Hothem, 2009; Ingram, 2001; Mauk, 2003; Johnson-Sheehan, 2007). Yet, there is minimal research on how students perceive ecocomposition ideas, how they respond to an Environmental Writing course or how they feel their perceptions of our natural environments have been affected by taking such a course. This is of utmost importance because as our students are the next generation, they are the ones who will not only be affected by the increasingly dramatic effects of climate change but are also those who will have to come up with ethically, socially, environmentally, and economically viable and fruitful solutions to maintain a livable Earth.

Methodological Overview and Research Questions

In order to exemplify my narrative methodology and the elements of place and interconnectivity as described through ecocomposition, I will employ these traits throughout my dissertation. As language and place are interconnected, my narrative includes certain German words that, due to my own place-based identity, only exist in German in my recollections of childhood memories. Aligning with ecocomposition's concept that language and place are interdependent and inform one another, my language is dependent on and reflective of the place that I am referring to.

Some narratives are stories of life which can be chaotic, non-linear, abstruse, and challenging to our temporal orientations. Similar to other existing narratives, my dissertation also entails such narrative characteristics, which are described in further detail in Chapter 3.

By using an overall qualitative design that employs narrative inquiry, evaluating Environmental Writing students' written assignments, their final student publication, as well as performing interviews, this dissertation aims at exploring students' responses to the integration of ecocomposition into the writing classroom by answering the following research questions:

- 1) Does the students' writing exemplify authority and powers of expression after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course? Further, does students' writing demonstrate that they have become agents of their work who seem to take responsibility for their places?
- 2) How do students place themselves in their natural environments after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course? What do they think their role is within their environments following the completion of the class?
- 3) How do I, as the teacher, course designer, and researcher evolve while teaching a semester long Environmental Writing course?

Rationale for the Research Questions

Research Question 1: Being a writing instructor, it is my role to help students become better writers, to develop their writer's identity, and to, if I'm very successful, help them to enjoy writing. There is little research on how students perceive their own writing following the completion of an ecocomposition class. Also, minimal research explains if students' place-based writings present what theorists have claimed should result from writing in the ecocomposition course, namely texts that reflect "authority" (Owens, 2001b, p. 36) or "powers" (Hothem, 2009, p. 43), as well as the overall notion that the student writers see themselves as "agents" (Mauk, 2003, p. 216), who are willing to take "responsibility" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 11) of their places and environments. Aside of not knowing if these elements are an inevitable result of writing in the ecocomposition classroom, we do not know if students perceive these aspects to be present in their work, or how they perceive their own writing following the completion of an environmental writing class. I seek to answer RQ 1 by conducting student interviews, reviewing assignments and the final student publication after final grades for the class have been submitted. Research

Question 1 seeks to find out how students perceive their writing following the completion of the Environmental Literature and Writing course.

Research Question 2: As I seek to create a space and class in which students can position themselves not only rhetorically but also regarding their environment(s), this question, which will be addressed through interviews with former students, will allow students to explain and explore their personal perceptions of their environmental surroundings and their role within it following the completion of my Environmental Literature and Writing class. This question will then shed light on the perceptions students have in regards to nature and whether or not the class was an effective part in their reflection on their environmental attitudes and their roles within the environment. In addition, the question aims at understanding whether students find the environmental writing classroom to be a positively challenging and effective sphere for students to create meaning in regards to their environmental positioning.

Research Question 3: Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Mishler (1986), and Giampapa (2011) make it very clear that the researcher's role is multifaceted, complex, and subject to change within and throughout the research process. I therefore want to know how I, as the researcher, teacher, and creator of the class, will change and develop as part of teaching the Environmental Literature and Writing course and interacting with my prospective student participants.

Summary and Preview

In this first chapter I provided a background for my study: my personal affiliations with nature, my beliefs regarding nature, and my research interests. I also described my current and extended research context that describes our overall shared, global setting to demonstrate how my study does not only fit into our status quo but also how it is paramount at times that are marked with unprecedented environmental threats and problems. To further contextualize my study, I explain

how the writing classroom is an effective site for environmental awareness as it allows students to write themselves into their environments while learning about the interconnectedness that runs through all our places. In this chapter, I also discuss the purpose of my study, my research questions, and the rationale for these questions.

In the following chapters I will explain how this dissertation will address the research questions in a more thorough manner. Chapter two provides a comprehensive review of the literature by discussing relevant definitions and concepts of sustainability, ecocomposition as theoretical and pedagogical approach, and the idea of “place” as a means of connecting students to their writing and environmental surroundings by providing an authentic and relevant setting. Further, I will explain how current research provides minimal insight to how students perceive their writing and perceptions of the environment following the completion of an Environmental Writing course. Also, Chapter two provides insight as to how this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge within ecocomposition, and address the study’s methodological and pedagogical contributions to the overall topic.

Chapter 3 offers an overview of the methodology, the research context, data collection methods, participants and selection of participants, as well as a description of my, the researcher’s, role in this research process and my positionality in regards to my approaches.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation seeks to address how the writing of students of an Environmental writing course evolved as part of having taken the described course. Also, this study aims at shedding light on how the students' perception of their environmental surroundings changed after having been enrolled in a semester-long Environmental Writing course.

In this review of the literature, the concept of “sustainability” is situated in the Humanities. Over the past years, sustainability has been viewed and defined through various theoretical lenses and has, primarily, been defined and approached from a “hard” scientific perspective (Goggin, 2009). However, Goggin (2009) has revised and refined the term to take into account the focus on the human experience, which underlies the philosophical assumptions of the Humanities, to create a definition that works well within this setting.

After discussing sustainability, I will then move on to explain the theoretical approaches and assumptions of ecocomposition and identify its primary theorists and scholars, primarily Cooper, Owens, Dobrin, and Weisser. Within this section, I will address the concept of interconnectivity and interrelatedness that Cooper (1986) has identified as “web”, in which writing takes place as a result of the writer and all of her/his surrounding cultural, social, physical, environmental, and linguistic elements.

As the concept of “place” is crucial for various ecocompositionists, I will devote a section to explaining elements of place-based writing and its pedagogical implications for students and their rhetorical approaches. Further, I will address how place-based writing is frequently viewed as integral to the students' ability to connect their writing with their places,

which appears crucial when attempting to increase their awareness of their own role within their environments.

The section, “Ecocomposition on campus” explores various scholarship and pedagogical methods instructors have applied to implement ecocomposition into their collegiate writing classrooms. I mention ecocomposition in the academic contexts of Writing Centers, classical rhetoric, literature, research and teacher education, which leads to my conclusion that there is a need for further research that incorporates students’ voices and perspectives in regards to ecocomposition in the writing classroom.

Then, I will expand on the need for student insight and describe how, despite its pedagogical and theoretical effectiveness, existing research does not give insight into students’ perceptions of ecocomposition courses or how they view the various implementation ideas and usefulness of such methods. I therefore call for further research that I propose with the current study.

Finally, I will briefly address how my study will hopefully contribute to the field of ecocomposition from a theoretical and pedagogical perspective.

Even before I started writing my dissertation, I faced the challenge of an existing duality and tension between the generic conventions that bind the writer to adhere to certain ways of writing a Literature Review and my own epistemological belief in the power of stories.

I see my students and some friends outside of my classrooms struggle with academic writing or the “deciphering” of such pieces. The numerous rereading of sections, use of the Dictionary App to research the various unknown words, and the apparent inability to make sense of consecutive paragraphs, which can cause the reader’s wrongful sense of being unintelligent; a sensation that

creeps up like a potato vine on the trunk of a dead tree and at times leads to frustration and eventual abandonment of a text. I did not want my literature review to be the root of a reader's despair and overwhelming sense of confusion. I wanted my dissertation to be accessible and readable and ensure that my readers could engage with it in a symbiotic rather than parasitic relationship where the reader feeds on the dissertation as the text blooms as a result of being read. The subjects of this dissertation appear too important to me and isolating potential members of my audience based on disciplinary background seems limiting and counterproductive.

It was always my intention to write an engaging dissertation that, in the very sense of ecocomposition, transcends artificial, human made boundaries created to separate rather than integrate various populations. During my three chapter defense on December 3, 2015, I was fortunate to have my reader, Dr. Porter, mention that my literature review seemed a bit out of place, even dislocated, as it lacked the narratives that ran through the remainder of my dissertation. It was the stories that complemented my theoretical information and that allowed my readers to gain a complete and comprehensive understanding of my topic, experiences, and personal relations with these. In order to alleviate the tension between academically prescribed genre conventions and my belief in the need of stories as basis for sense-making and understanding, I drove back to my writing place, Iowa, to dive into my chapter two revisions. I felt like I had been given another piece of silk to my web that now allowed me to weave new strands and revise in accordance with what I truly felt and could support epistemologically.

Sustainability

The term “sustainability” will be referred to throughout this dissertation. As the term’s increased use over the past two decades has led to a plethora of differing definitions (Owens, 2001b; Orr, 1992; Goggin, 2009; Christensen, 2009), it is important to clarify which definition will be used throughout this dissertation.

Christensen (2009) describes that in its basic form, the word “sustainability” stems from “sustenance”, “which means to subsist, to nourish, to provide, and to endure” (p. 176), and, suggests the need for “a symbiotic circulation of understanding and action between the self and the earth” (p. 176). Owens (2001b) explains that “hastily defined, sustainability means meeting today’s needs without jeopardizing the well-being of future generations” (p. 1). The idea of including future generations in matters pertaining to sustainability, development, and other human endeavors is not new but has a long history in various indigenous cultures (Owens, 2002; Orr, 1992; Eckersley, 1992). As our environmental choices will inevitably affect those who will inhabit this planet after us, this temporal orientation will be maintained in association with the term sustainability throughout this dissertation.

Sustainability is still frequently associated with the studies of ecology, environmental science, or other “hard” sciences (Goggin, 2009; Owens, 2001b; Klahr, 2012). To provide a definition that functions within the Humanities and reflects the importance of its place within the Humanities, Goggin (2009) presents the following:

Philosophers, rhetoricians, historians, theologians, and gender/sexuality scholars are examining the “human side” of sustainability: the politics and ethics behind sustainable and unsustainable practices; the varied impact of sustainable technologies on racial,

ethnic, and gender groups; the social implications of a changing climate; the impact of human societies on the natural environment; and a host of additional, timely topics (p. 4)

Since this definition relates to Composition and therefore ecocomposition, it appears fit for use throughout this dissertation. Goggin's (2009) integration of various human elements of life in his definition align with my dissertation's focus on my students' role within our environments. In addition, it is important to bear in mind that "sustainability is not a goal, but an endless process of implementation, assessment, and readjustment" (Klahr, 2012, p. 20) as the environment and the associated issues, are not static and inflexible but rather fluid and dynamic, and approaches, therefore, require constant reformations. It is also important to remember that due to the complexities of our overall status quo, "every decision regarding sustainable life practices is a compromise not a solution" (p. 20).

"We didn't inherit the Earth from our parents; we borrow it from our children"

This Kenyan proverb seems surprisingly popular and well known. Originally, someone must have translated it from Swahili and somewhere along my travels I've seen it translated into German and Dutch, its message sticking with me from place to place. It seems to move something inside of us. In the US, where I have been writing and teaching, the statement perhaps echoes familiar sentiments found in some Native American traditions and cultures where a clear understanding and consideration of how present choices affect future environments and individuals appear more common (Owens, 2002; Brown & Cousins, 2001). Despite some exceptions, our overall Western philosophies and approaches to nature seem to lack concern or thought about our upcoming generations. What will happen to our children if we make a certain choice or take action? What about those people who haven't even been born yet but who will

live in a world that we have influenced and acted upon? We are making a bed for an unknown visitor.

In the early 1990s, my dad got a hold of the independent documentary, *Koyaanisqatsi*. After having listened to the film's soundtrack on our Volkswagen's tape player over and over again, my dad mentioned that,

“*Koyaanisqatsi* means something like ‘life out of balance’ in Hopi.”

Being an eccentric hydrologist, he proceeded explaining how nature exists in and relies on a delicate balance that is made up of various interconnected systems. He proceeded explaining that this balance can be disrupted and therefore destroyed and that we, as members of a Westernized society, have done so much to damage our Earth and so little to work with it as many Native American cultures have.

“It's horrible. Absolutely horrible”, he mumbled after realizing that his audience was not capable of following additional information. At times he seemed to forget that my sister and I were young children who had absolutely no science background and were not a group of like-minded adults. Perhaps in some ways he was trying to impart knowledge onto the future generation, which in this case was represented by my sister and me. Despite the complex content of his explanations, my sister and I recognized the serious tone and made sense of the minute pieces of information that we could comprehend. We left that car ride somewhat disillusioned and shocked about our species' apparent recklessness in regards to our planet.

Ecocomposition

In his most recent book, *Postcomposition*, Dobrin (2011) provides a brief yet comprehensive overview and definition of what we describe as ecocomposition:

Ecocomposition is the study of the relationships between environments (and by that we mean natural, constructed, and even imagined places) and discourses (speaking, writing, and thinking). Ecocomposition draws primarily from disciplines that study discourse (chiefly composition, but also including literary studies, communication, cultural studies, linguistics, and philosophy) and merges the perspectives of them with works in disciplines that examine environments (these include ecology, environmental studies, sociobiology, and other “hard” sciences). As a result, ecocomposition attempts to provide a more holistic, encompassing framework for studies of the relationships between discourse and environment (p. 122-123).

Bruce (2011) adds that “ecocomposition is a way of looking at literacy using concepts from ecology” (p. 18) and enables writers to transcend the usual social contexts we commonly associate with writing, to include our places, nature, and environmental surroundings.

An integral element of ecocomposition is the idea of interrelationships that are similar to ecological systems or webs in which all elements affect each other and are completely interdependent (Cooper, 1986). As the writer belongs to other components of this web that transcend the writing classroom, writing becomes a social activity, which is “dependent on social structures and processes not only in their interpretive but also in their constructive phases” (Cooper, 1986, p. 366). In other words, the writer is always not only a result of the social and physical surroundings, but contributes to the maintenance, evolution, or alteration of these through the act of writing as writers place and write themselves into their surroundings and reflect their environments in their writing. The described web is not only concerned with the act of writing, but also the various constituents that are affected by the writer and that resultantly also affect the writer.

The writers' associations include semiotic relationships as well as cultural, societal, and economical elements (Fleckenstein et al., 2008). This interconnectedness, that involves and entails all surroundings, systems, and environments, occurs in spite of a writer's possible physical solitude when composing, suggesting that interrelationships are natural and inevitable with or without an individual's awareness of such belonging (Cooper, 1986).

Based on the ecological metaphor of writing, suggested by Cooper (1986), "writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems" (p. 392). Furthering the importance of the incorporation of language and writing in ecomposition, Dobrin (2001) explains that the ecomposition classroom has to be viewed as "the place in which ecology and rhetoric and composition can converge to better explore the relationships between language, writing, and discourse; and between nature, place, environment, and locations" (p. 12). By exploring their environments, students can also explore their discourse communities and languages, which allows them to create rhetorical positions as well as contexts for themselves and their texts (Hothem, 2009).

By describing the interconnectivity of language and ideology, students can recognize the interdependence of the two (Faircough, 2001) and examine how their own places have influenced their language(s), writing, and sense of self that are likewise reflective of one another. Expanding such ideas to include culture, Dobrin and Weisser (2002a) explain that "while ideology and culture map our thinking, our environments shape the application of that thinking" (p. 576), and that "every living organism and every aspect of every environment is in some degree imbricated with the development and continuation of culture" (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b, p. 32). The investigation of one's environment might then allow us to gain a clearer picture of our cultures and subcultures as well.

Dobrin and Weisser (2002b) describe that ecocomposition “explores the relationships between individual writers and local environments as well as ways in which populations interact with environments” (p. 18). These descriptions emphasize the various intersecting and individual constituents of writers and their effects on spaces and places that are also linked to the writer’s culture and society that, in turn, affect the individual writer and their place. Dobrin and Weisser (2002a) also mention that “ecocomposition is concerned with rhetorical analysis of environmental/political issues, the effects of language on those issues, and the ways in which ongoing debates or conversations affect the ways in which writers write” (p. 579). Here, ecocompositionists might ask student writers to locate an interesting environmental problem, perhaps one that relates to their local place. Writing students can then analyze how such an issue is presented throughout various media outlets, how it is written about over time, and how, or if, developments and changes regarding the issue affect the writer’s choice of words or style. This allows students to gain a more thorough understanding of an issue’s rhetorical situation and perhaps their own position within the issue’s context. Since so many of our global issues today are concerned with our environments, research into these topics is important for our students’ understanding of their place within their world, which is also the place in which their writing occurs (Dobrin, 2001; Owens, 2001a; 2001b). Ecocomposition views the question of how different environments affect writing and the writer as central since environments play a crucial role in the production and maintenance of the social, cultural and economic settings which the writer, and consequently the writer’s text, are part of (Dobrin, 2001; Owens, 2001a; 2001b).

Ecocomposition situates the writer within a larger environment that is dependent upon the same systems that affect or depend on the writer, who in turn depends on these systems to exist discursively as well as physically (Dobrin, 2001; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b). According to

Cooper (1986), “all the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the systems” (p. 368). Supporting the notion of connected writers, texts, and systems, Fleckenstein, Spinuzzi, Rickly, Papper (2008) point out that “actions of the participants create in part the environment that, in turn, creates the participants” (p. 393) and that “from this perspective, writing consists of a complex web of ideas, purposes, interpersonal interactions, cultural norms, and textual forms” (p. 393).

All writers and individuals are elements of other systems that are affected by all that occurs to various parts of the symbolic web (Cooper, 1986). Therefore, writers also have the ability to “shake the web” (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b, p. 21) and affect various elements of other interconnected systems. Writers write about and describe their places and in turn become elements of such places. It is important to note that the idea of environment is not synonymous with context. Here, Cooper (1986) distinguishes that context is static, limiting and limited as it disallows fluctuations and fluidity, whereas the environment, as viewed from an ecological but also composition standpoint, is something dynamic and flexible within interconnected systems that determine and describe the activity of writing.

These fluid and related environments, as well as the products of such, then become further constituents of interdependent systems. Acknowledging this, ecomposition also asks that we examine relationships with other texts, discourses, other organisms, environments, and locations, that is, ecomposition posits that writing is an activity that affects not only other writers and readers, but the total relations of discourse both to its organic and inorganic environment (Dobrin, 2001, p. 20).

An individual's words and texts are therefore products of a place while laying foundations for further writings as all are interconnected in discursive systems.

As mentioned, the incorporation of sustainable practices in the academic institution calls for cross disciplinary approaches, which itself exemplifies interconnectivity. Dobrin and Weisser (2002a) support Wilson's (2014) call for increased collaboration between disciplines and explain that

ecocomposition draws from disciplines that study discourse (primarily composition, but also including literary studies, communication, cultural studies, linguistics and philosophy) and merges their perspectives with work in disciplines that examine environments (these include ecology, environmental studies, sociobiology, and other "hard" sciences)" (p. 572).

Ingram (2001) also addresses the efforts at increasing the teaching of sustainability in our academic institutions by utilizing various methods such as service-learning or interdisciplinary studies. She describes that, "the more diverse the (course) components, the richer and more effectively functioning the (classroom) environment" (p. 217). Regarding her students' place-based assignments, Ingram observes that "writings from different disciplines and from interdisciplinary perspectives give students a broad-based introduction to environmental studies and to a variety of rhetorical models to emulate" (p. 217). Experiencing the environment and one's place through various lenses and approaches enables writing students to gain a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of places and disciplines which they are part of.

Place

Place has come to be a significant component of ecocomposition, thereby resembling the importance of place in Ecology (Evernden, 1996), where one can explore organisms that are

inextricably linked to their places and cannot survive outside of such. From this scientific perspective, Evernden (1996) describes the pigeon's profound connection to a place and incredible ability to find its way back to its place following its dislocation:

it moves to correct its feeling of placelessness, a defect that will only be corrected when it reaches its roost. The bird is carried by a swirling mental vortex toward the center of the vacuum left by its displacement from its place in the environmental collage, to that small slice of environment in which it fits and by which it is defined (p. 100)

Similarly, the human sense of "self" and the ability to define the concept of "self" is also almost impossible without the ability to relate to a place as an interrelated being within such a place (Evernden, 1996).

Place is not simply an arbitrary location that one defines as home or vacation spot but rather a meaningful and significant component of one's identity. A person's sense of place influences their perception of who they are as place provides fundamental elements of this sense of self. Through place-based associations, memories, and stories we create a sense of reality as we create ourselves in relation to a physical space. Places have the ability to "evoke powerful human emotions" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 2), which strengthen our sense of being a part of a place, allowing that location to influence who we become.

The belief that locations and places are crucial elements of a writer's writing and textual outcome, is integral to ecomposition. It is seen as important to understand and incorporate a writer's "where", as in location, in order to understand "how" they write (Reynolds, 2004). In our Composition classrooms, we are accustomed to discussing gender, class, or race when talking about writer's identities, but "geographic identity is often ignored or taken for granted" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 11). This appears to limit our understandings of ourselves, ourselves as

writers, and our students in the writing classroom because our locations and places are so integral to who we are: they determine our discourse communities, the activities we engage in, the people we surround ourselves with, and so forth.

Using a place-based writing approach in the ecocomposition classroom acknowledges this traditional deficit and views all elements of the writer's place as crucial. This inclusion is one aspect in ecocomposition that exemplifies this approach's ideas of complete interdependence and interconnectivity within and beyond the classroom.

Owens (2001b) states that "an awareness of sustainability cannot exist without a developing awareness of the conditions and limitations of one's immediate environment" (p. 37), and joins other ecocompositionists in the focus on *Place* within the ecocomposition classroom. Dobrin (2001) describes how the idea of "topoi" (p. 19) in general composition studies already denotes the importance of location as it means "place", therefore implying the significance of the writer's place or environment. As Owens (2001a; 2001b) points out, places refer to the physical or non-physical locations in which writing occurs. Owens emphasizes the students' need to be aware of such surroundings in order to gain a better understanding of the ecological and environmental components of the student's immediate sphere. He therefore recommends that writings about a student's places must be implemented into the ecocomposition classroom, as the writing about locations offers an ideal sphere to "reflect on issues directly and indirectly related to sustainability" (Owens, 2001b, p. 30), such as importance of a local species, renewable energy sources in a specific location, or carpooling plans for a group of students.

Cahalan (2008) suggests the teaching of "place" in the writing classroom, remarking that the students must comprehend that "every place on the globe is also local" (p. 251). The focus on global settings allows for the combining of places: the students' home or place of origin and the

current location where the student is enrolled in the course. The combining of places does not only allow the student to evaluate and perhaps juxtapose home and a current place, but also raises awareness of the importance and interconnectivity between individual student places. Since we are facing environmental issues that are based on global systems that affect all organisms as well as ecologies, our current issues must be addressed from a globally-aware and locally-engaging perspective. Combining places also encourages the students' recognition of relationships and interrelations between their places. It allows our students to eliminate the binary-enforcing boundaries that mark traditional non-academic and academic places and to view the former as academic as well (Mauk, 2003). Once students recognize the interconnectivity between their non-academic place and their sense of who they are, they can hopefully realize that they come to the writing classroom already equipped with knowledge that is necessary for their success within the academic place. This awareness and recognition helps break down the boundaries that formerly separated the academic and non-academic places for writing students, allowing them to combine their places (Mauk, 2003). Adding to the idea of eliminating the artificial boundaries between academic and non-academic spheres, Owens (2002b) remarks that we model such binary thinking and the resultant disconnect between the two spheres to our students. He emphasizes that our "local places that students, staff, and faculty go home to after leaving the university behind remain largely invisible, supposedly unrelated to the activity of the academy" (p.70). By combining places through writing, we give our students the opportunity to eliminate these borders, which is central to ecocomposition.

Incorporating writings about place offers students an opportunity to not only connect their academic writing to something that is interesting and relevant to them, but also to recognize their interdependence with various environments (Owens, 2001a; 2001b; 2002). Further, "we

need to recognize the spatial complexities that define our students' lives [...] to include them in our understanding of how to write" (Mauk, 2003, p. 214) instead of maintaining the idea of detached and unrelated places, and consequently, ignoring how place affects our students' writing. As "students are genuinely interested in learning about each other's communities" (Owens, 2001b, p. 36), a place-based approach to ecocomposition exposes students to other places while emphasizing how systems are related and connected via geographic features, such as watersheds, or similarities that exist between student places, i.e. plants, weather patterns, and so forth.

Echoing Owens (2001a; 2001b), Hothem (2009) suggests that ecocomposition classrooms should ask students to write about their places in order to have learners explore how such environments have affected their identities and how they, as students and writers, have or are still affecting these places. Hothem (2009) further states that "treating students' personal experience as an object of knowledge encourages them to explore implications for critical perspective and self-fashioning in their writing" (p. 38), while allowing them to "shape a rhetorical position for themselves" (p. 35). In addition, the ecocomposition classroom encourages writers to view their writing processes and writings from an environmental perspective, which leads them to "acquire a sense of context with which to gauge their relationship to their surroundings, their backgrounds, their education, and hence their future" (p. 38).

Orr (1992) combines ecocomposition with, what he calls, "ecological literacy" (p. 85) to suggest that if students can understand larger ecological ideas, such as food webs, carbon cycles, resources, etc., then they may be able to consider their own place within their environments more realistically. He also mentions that the awareness and knowledge of local ecological systems contributes to students gaining a sense of their place, which is critical to our environmental

education approaches. The appreciation of a student's place, according to Orr (1992), is done more effectively when students can gain a sense of aesthetic value for all living things in their places and this world. Additionally, Orr (1992) states that "knowledge of a place – where you are and where you come from – is intertwined with knowledge of who you are" (p. 130).

Place then becomes a central component of the writing process instead of a coincidental, insignificant, or arbitrary factor. Dobrin (2001) points out that

our academic, professional lives, cannot be separate from our daily lives, from the places we live those lives, that is, ecocomposition asks that we consider our own roles and the roles of our environments in larger systems alongside all others rather than, for instance, simply continuing the age-old practice of identifying students as objects of study as well as objects of teaching (p. 15).

Additionally, Hothem (2009) suggests that "the more our inquiries reflect students' lives, the more forthcoming they are with their ideas, the more included they feel in the production of knowledge, and the more comfortable they are with exploring their positions as writers and thinkers" (p. 41). Also in support of place-based writing, Owens (2001b) points out that "students can speak with authority about how their neighborhoods make them feel" (p. 36), which allows them to effectively write themselves into their current environments and position themselves rhetorically (Hothem, 2008).

Lastly, to further emphasize the idea of fluidity and interdependence between systems, places, and individuals, ecocompositionists call for a metaphorical and physical removal of the separation and division that we have created for the places in which we write and live. They press toward the elimination of artificial boundaries that separate our spheres discursively as well as physically (Reynolds, 2004). In an effort to eliminate the idea of anthropocentric and limiting

human-made borders, Cahalan (2008) suggests that “lands are best demarcated not by state and national borders, but by rivers and mountains and other parts of the natural world” (p. 255), which can be done symbolically in the Composition classroom through ecocomposition.

When I returned to teach after my last summer of doctoral coursework, I entered a new and disconcerting landscape. I had left in May, knowing that statewide budget cuts were underway and that some courses might get eliminated or that some unknown, face-less individuals somewhere far away would potentially lose their jobs. Wisconsin’s Governor, Scott Walker, had been threatening to reduce funding for the University of Wisconsin system for some time but the imminence of the problem was not apparent. Upon my return in August, the faculty and academic staff at my institution were informed that new budget cuts had been implemented and that we would have to find ways to eliminate 1.2 million dollars from our departmental budget. Soon, the climate on our English floor changed. Where offices were once open and inviting, hushed conversations took place behind closed doors. Friendly hallway interactions were overshadowed by gossip and vagueness. The atmosphere was laden with doubt, uncertainty, and insecurity and the air was heavy with distrust and whispers. The little information that was reliable offered the perfect soil for rumors and speculations to sprout. No one wanted to lose their jobs or classes but what we did lose along the way was our collective identity.

At one point, our department chair posted Yeats’ famous lines from “The Second Coming” to her Facebook wall: “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Those words held more truth than many things we had come across during that semester and they rang in my ears as I, too, tried to see new lands in form of answers or other opportunities in other locations or at other institutions.

What happened and affected us in one place, our department, silently followed some of us into our other places, such as our classrooms. In early October, I received an email one Friday afternoon, stating that one of my developmental writing students had gone to the Dean to complain about me imposing my liberal agenda as I had disallowed them to use Wikipedia and FoxNews for a rhetorical analysis. While the student could have taken a look at the syllabus to find that all sources would be allowed for the upcoming assignment and that this current assignment was unique, I was faced with a new set of fear: would I lose my job over this? Was someone counting our “strikes”? Did other students feel the same and would they complain to the Dean? In an email, I explained the situation, the pedagogical approaches that underlined my assignment, that I would address the issue on Monday, and that it was not my intention to impose my liberal agenda. Unfortunately, this fear bled into my Environmental Literature and Writing course. While I had seen our current year as a perfect one to discuss contemporary political views on environmental policy as proposed by potential presidential candidates, I decided against bringing up anything evidently political. What if my Environmental Literature and Writing students would complain to the Dean just as my developmental writing student had? Compared to that student, the Environmental Literature and Writing students had a better foundation to argue and I less room to defend as the discussion about environmental policies was clearly political.

By the end of the semester, I had received an offer from another institution. Although I was torn because I loved teaching at my current place, I had to make a decision to eliminate the stress of uncertainty from my present life. The larger context of Wisconsin government had influenced how I behaved in my local context and to ignore the significance of place would be to

ignore reality. Place dictates how we act, perceive ourselves, and relate to others. It determines us but we can also determine it.

Ecocomposition on Campus

We can see that ecocomposition has been established and theorized quite thoroughly over the past decades. To take advantage of the focus on holistic, inclusive, and broad approaches and perspectives that ecocomposition offers, it has been adapted for several academic settings and campus locations.

Regarding these institutional implementations, the tenants of ecocomposition have been studied in Writing Centers to help tutors encourage tutees “to see that they are, indeed, entering a place or environment” (Devet, 2014, p. 4) by entering their disciplines through writing. Devet (2014) argues that ecocomposition offers tutors a way to demonstrate to students, who are oftentimes frustrated by the idea of writing in an voice that is foreign to them, that they influence their discipline’s language and writing just as much as these factors are influencing, and bothering, them. She states that the importance of ecocomposition in Writing Centers lies in its ability to point out the interconnectivity between writer, place, and language. Devet states that “ecocomposition stresses that rhetors are immersed in the environment, interacting with it even as it interacts with them, creating a cooperative mutualism that is supportive and, yes, even web-like” (2014, p. 5).

In another article Devet (2011) examines how Writing Centers exemplify tenants of ecocomposition and can be analyzed through the use of such theoretical framework. She states that Writing Centers present a “rhetorical space or locality” (p. 7) that is unique to the college setting as it allows students, or clients, to create an interdependent relationship with writing

consultants. These two individuals then gain insights, knowledge, and understanding from one another, which resembles the idea of interrelations in ecocomposition. Further, Devet (2011) suggests that language and language variations that are so frequently seen in Writing Centers can be viewed as place-reflective aspects of the client's identity with which they write themselves into the academic setting.

In the classroom, Cahalan (2008) uses Google Earth to allow students to explore their places and later research these locations to compile a personalized paper. Cahalan describes taking his classes on virtual fieldtrips where all students' places are visited via Google Earth and narrated by the students as they go. Doing this allows students to add their own voice to their places and sharing their knowledge with their peers who might be able to see connections to their own places. By focusing on the local elements of places, Cahalan aims at increasing his writing students' awareness of the interconnectedness of all locations while breaking down the anthropogenic boundaries that we have set up to set us apart. As many students use their homes as places when asked to identify with a specific location, Cahalan establishes that etymologically the term "home" entails a group of people, suggesting that one's place is such in relation to other people and things. He remarks that home is "collective" (2008, p. 258) and can therefore "not belong to us as individuals" (p. 258). Further, Cahalan emphasizes the linguistic features of all places by presenting students with recordings of local dialects. This should further the students understanding of the significance of place in relation to various features of their identity and reality, including the way they communicate and speak.

Moe (2011) describes using ecocomposition alongside classical rhetoric as a way to bring students into the academic discourse community and beyond. Describing his background as a worker within the court system, Moe creates a comparison between legal interactions in a

courtroom with academic writing and the demands writing students face when entering the college writing classroom. Moe describes these similarities “between petitioners seeking the protection of the court and students seeking degrees from the academy in that each strives to obtain something from a power structure embodied by a discourse community” (p. 3). He mentions that the concept of place can be found in elements of the composition classroom discourse as it has served here as an effective metaphor. Moe suggests that remarks such as “[...] this paragraph is out of place” (2011, p. 5), or “I don’t know where to begin” (p. 5), suggest the presence of place-related metaphors, where things can be dislocated or the writing student can perceive a sense of disorientation. Further, Moe describes the importance of understanding one’s physical and symbolic place when analyzing the rhetorical situation of a writing. He emphasizes the importance of the students’ recognition of interdependence between a writer, or in Aristotle’s setting the speaker, and the audience as both determine and influence the outcome and process of writing (and speaking). Moe articulates that using an ecological model and place in the college composition classroom “is an accessible way to introduce rhetorical awareness to writers stepping toward literacy” (p. 15).

Hothem (2009), Owens (2001b), Dobrin & Weisser (2002a; b), and Mauk (2003) describe using place-based writing in their courses to allow students to explore their surroundings while writing themselves into their environments, see interconnections between places, and write with the authority that comes with writing about something they care and know about.

In his article “Suburban Studies and College Writing”, Hothem (2009) explains that he appreciates place-based writing assignments because “students generally enjoy exerting their powers of expression on offbeat places that they know intimately” (p. 43). Having students who

primarily define their places as suburban locations, Hothem accepts this middle ground between nature and urban, modern America and writes that suburbia offers a fantastic physical space that can be viewed as “textual entity” (p. 37) that we often interact with and that therefore influences how we write and read. Also, Hothem suggests that “in reexamining the suburban experience and conceptions of normalcy it has come to represent, students can refine their sense of place and reevaluate the language in which they express it” (p. 37). He suggests that place-based writing within a setting allows students to write about something they know and can relate to. The products of such assignment are oftentimes saturated with idiosyncratic descriptions, unique stories, and a variety of linguistic features. Hothem remarks that students feel confident in their place-based writings and that such assignments enable student writers to “translate their familiarity with environmental observation into renewed awareness of their educational and personal environments” (p. 54), which suggests that students can use this type of writing assignment as bridge between their non-academic and academic spheres.

Following the traditional approach of incorporating environmental issues into the English department via literature (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b), Johnson-Sheehan (2007), Ingram (2001), Rowland, Millner, Towne, Wohlpart (2009), and Bruce (2011) describe coupling ecocomposition with literature to create a rich experience of reading and writing. They find that reading Thoreau, Carlson, Leopold, Muir, and other prominent nature writers enables students to understand connections between writing and places. Also, the reading of the given texts can help students understand the conventions of nature and place-based writing, presenting them with textual models for their own writing.

In his article “Composing Nature”, Johnson-Sheehan (2007) offers several techniques and questions for classroom use that should prompt students and instructors to engage in his

ideas. He suggests that nature writing gives students the opportunity to understand how “to write visually” (p. 6) by presenting existing readings that demonstrate this detail-focused way of writing. Also, Johnson-Sheehan mentions that famous nature writers such as Dillard or Thoreau exemplify tropes that are integral to composing an effective place-based piece. Some of these include the use of similes and analogies, metaphors, and the use of onomatopoeias. Johnson-Sheehan notes that in order to write effectively about a place or nature, the student writer must be immersed in the environmental surroundings. Through “situated learning” (p. 11) writing can take place in our natural contexts as, according to Johnson-Sheehan, “students learn best by being immersed in the activities, communities, and contexts in which they want to participate” (p. 11). His learning-by-doing approach should help students become part of their writing as their writing becomes a part of them as writers and individuals.

In her article, “Greening English: Voices Howling in the Wilderness”, Bruce (2011) extends her ecocomposition approaches to include ecological literacies, which Dobrin and Weisser (2002a) describe as an approach to teaching that sees “the students’ awareness of the importance of place as a central goal of the course” (p. 581), and focuses more on the critical thinking skills of the writer than other components found in ecocomposition classrooms, such as classical rhetoric or literature. She argues that our environment requires us to act immediately and incorporate ecocomposition or other forms of ecological literacy into our writing classrooms. Bruce states that this approach is “about developing the habits of mind for looking closely, thinking critically, thinking by analogy, changing scale, and theorizing” (p. 15) about our natural surroundings and doing so, becoming aware of it and our role within this setting. Further, Bruce mentions that it is crucial for secondary education writing instructions to address our “love of the natural world” (p. 17). This can be attained, amongst others, through the readings of green texts

as these writings allow students to comprehend their connection to the natural spheres that they are part of.

Adding a quantitative component to exploring ecological literacies in higher education, Balgopal and Wallace (2009) study how writing to learn can help elementary education students increase their ecological literacy in an Exploring Biology course. Relying on Orr's concept of Ecological Literacy, Balgopal and Wallace outline the significance of the students' understanding of ecological concepts as this enables them to "step back and consider their own place in the ecosystem" (p. 14). Using a mixed-methods approach the researchers analyzed the writings of 24 elementary education majors enrolled in an Exploring Biology course at a Midwestern University, in order to analyze whether the use of guided writing activities would affect their attainment of ecological literacy. For their study, Balgopal and Wallace collected three concept maps and three two-page papers in order to explore the participating students' understanding of ecological systems and misconceptions thereof. Further Balgopal and Wallace describe that "most students obtained a higher degree of ecological literacy" (p. 22) through the use of guided writings. Also, their findings suggest that writing positively affects the students' ecological literacy and ability to identify with complex topics. As this article describes elements of writing from an ecological perspective, I will describe it in further detail in my methodology section in chapter 3.

Fleckenstein, Spinuzzi, Rickly, Papper (2008) describe how an ecological approach with its "triad of interdependence, feedback, and diversity" (p. 405) should provide scholars with a strong foundation to engage in ongoing research. The ecological approach can offer "teacher-scholars the hope of making a difference in the material conditions of one's reality" (p. 406) as it grounds the research and all its interdependent elements (methodology, etc.) within a concrete

context. This context, which is interrelated with the research's rhetorical situation, can contribute to actual change within the researcher's surroundings and environment.

Heidi Stevenson's (2010) doctoral dissertation, *Finding Our Places, Defining Our Places: Service Learning And EcoComposition in the First-Year Composition Classroom*, offers insight into an approach to ecocomposition that couples its ecological writing metaphor with service learning. Stevenson's focus was to investigate how students think service learning impacted their writing within the university setting, which lead to insights into students' perceptions of her course. Although Stevenson's work includes the students' perspective on her course and writing, her focus was on service learning, which my study does not include, leaving the question of how students perceive an Environmental Writing course and their writing following such course, unanswered.

In an effort to integrate my own approaches and write myself into ecocomposition, I wrote a multigenre paper arguing for the benefits of such untraditional approach for collegiate ecocomposition students (Rioux, 2016). In my piece, "A Love Note to Iowa: Multigenre Writing in the Place-Based EcoComposition Classroom", I explain how traditional genres appear limiting and restrictive as they not only disallow but discourage the writer to explore the complexities of their places in a thorough and meaningful way. Following some semesters of teaching ecocomposition, I came to realize that in order for students to comprehend the convolutedness of their specific places and the surrounding intertwined environments, they must be given the opportunity to write in a manner that calls for the exploration and incorporation of such complexities. Multigenre papers allow students to navigate their places with all elements and facets in mind while producing a piece of writing that is unique and therefore more accessible to a broader audience (Rioux, 2016).

In my article “Teaching Ecomposition in the Multilingual Classroom”(2016b), I argue for the need to include place-based ecomposition in the collegiate writing classroom as such approach does not only allow students to place themselves rhetorically within their current setting but also allows for students to recognize the interconnectivity between all existing places despite geographic location (Rioux, 2016b). In addition, the inclusion of ecomposition in the multilingual classroom enables us to address a global concern from a global perspective as the richness that diverse students bring to the classroom offers a strong foundation for possible conversations about our planet, its future, and our relation to the environment to occur. Due to the complexities of certain place-based assignments, the incorporation of ecomposition in the described setting can also aid multilingual students in the practicing of writing and reading scientific texts (Rioux, 2016b).

Aside from addressing and using ecomposition in writing classrooms, these writings have one more thing in common: they do not focus on students’ responses, reactions, and perceptions of the described implementations and pedagogical approaches. While all texts offer extremely valuable theoretical ideas and pedagogical suggestions these studies do not address or provide actual student feedback, which, as Fleckenstein et al. (2008) state above, should be considered a central aspect of an ecological approach to writing and researching.

What About the Students? – The Need for Further Research

“I see the health of the Earth as primary, for we are utterly dependent upon the healthy planet for survival” (Lovelock, 2009, p. 36).

As Lovelock implies, our temporal context is congested with environmentally destructive and neglectful behaviors (Anderson, 2014; Anderson, 2005; Brown, 2008) and calls for awareness of the ethical, social, and communal responsibilities we as human beings have

(Anderson, 2014; Tremmel, 2012; Johnson-Sheehan, 2007; Klahr, 2012; Rowland et al., 2009). Amongst others, we are faced with global food shortages, rising sea levels, changes in the ocean's salinity, changing seasonal patterns, changing wind and animal migration patterns, soil erosion, increased an extreme floods and droughts, and unparalleled heat and cold waves (Anderson, 2014; Anderson, 2005; Brown, 2008; Lovelock, 2009; IPCC, 2014). As one system is affected, all others are affected and need to respond, adapt, and readjust. Our oftentimes ignorant behaviors of contributing to detrimental environmental effects by littering, wasting energy resources, polluting rivers and lakes, using unnecessary chemicals in our daily lives, we fail to see the immediate nature of the world's environmental problems.

We therefore need a pedagogical approach which “seeks to educate an awareness that we have reached an age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems” (Connolly, 2001, p. 180). In regards to our students, Owens (2001a) asks “what are the most important things for them to read and write about? Of all the information out there in the world, what is absolutely crucial to their intellectual, spiritual, economic, and physical survival?” (p. 35). The recognition of personal responsibility toward our common place and the awareness of interdependence and interconnectivity between all students' places and lives seems to answer this question (Johnson-Sheehan, 2007). Students must see how they too are simply an element within a larger structure and therefore have the responsibility and agency to prevent the destruction of our habitats by living more environmentally sustainable lives. Humans must feel that their behaviors affect other people and organisms beyond the immediacy of their actions and places.

Responding to the need for the inclusion of sustainability measures in academic settings, Klahr (2012) draws attention to the fact that

in the next few decades, any institution of higher education that neglects to equip students with the mental flexibility to segue between disciplines will fail in the broadest sense regarding its responsibilities towards its students because colleges and universities that fail to truly inculcate the trans- and inter-disciplinary mentalities within their students will lose market share to those academic institutions that do (p. 21).

Due to the nature of our global problems and the wide-ranging complexities thereof, it is our academic and human responsibility to respond and help our students formulate and realize their roles and obligations within such contexts. As a compositionist, I see it to be my responsibility to incorporate ecocomposition into my classroom to ensure students are mentally prepared to envision their lives as a part of a larger ecosystem instead of apart from it.

Most ecocomposition literature (Cooper, 1986; Owens 2002, 2001, 2001b; Dobrin, 2011; Dobrin, 2001; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002a; 2002b; Cahalan, 2008; Rowland et al., 2014; Johnson-Sheehan, 2007; Connolly, 2001; Fleckenstein et al., 2008; Hurlbert, 2006; Mauk, 2003; Hurlbert, 2002; Hothem, 2009; Ingram, 2001; Johnson-Sheehan, 2007; Rioux, 2016; Rioux, 2016b; Bruce, 2011) addresses pedagogies and teachers' perspectives on ecocomposition. However, minimal research has investigated the outcomes of ecocomposition on the development of student writers and how students themselves perceive their writing after having taken an ecocomposition class and how taking such a class might influence students' perceptions of their natural environments and their roles within it. Since ecocomposition aims at engaging students, viewing them as essential participants in regards to addressing, dealing with, even solving our environmental issues in their future, we must understand how they perceive an Environmental Writing class. Consequently, there is a need for further exploration of the students' perceptions of

ecocomposition, their writing in such a course, and their development of an environmentally aware perception of natural surroundings.

Theoretical Contribution

This study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge of ecocomposition by shedding light on how such theories work in an Environmental Literature and Writing course at a STEM-oriented, Midwestern institution. This study will also provide insight into how students perceive their writing and how it has been affected by completing an Environmental Literature and Writing course. Regarding students, we know little about their perceptions of nature after taking such courses and this study will address how students' feelings and attitudes towards nature may or may not have changed based on taking the given class. I seek to understand if students have gained greater appreciation of nature after having completed an Environmental Literature and Writing course. Do they feel a greater or stronger emotional connection toward nature? How about agency? Do they feel that they have some form of responsibility to their environmental surroundings? Their places? Do they recognize their roles and their responsibilities toward nature and write with Owens' (2001b) sense of "authority" (p. 36) and Hothem's (2009) "power" (p. 43) about their places?

Pedagogical Contribution

The results of this study can help instructors identify new ways of implementing, adjusting, and adopting elements of my course while keeping in mind how students responded and reacted to the course and its elements. Further, the results of this dissertation should help teachers design and create courses and course materials that help students challenge their current roles within natural environments. Also, this study aims at signifying to my institution and other institutions,

the need for implementing further courses that bridge the humanities and sciences while responding to ongoing climate change and preparing students for their future.

Considering our students, ecocomposition can allow and provide for them a sphere in which they can carefully consider, re-think, re-imagine, re-envision their role within nature and their current and future places (Klahr, 2012; Owens, 2001b).

I take my children out into nature every day, hoping that they'll attach joy and love to memories of being outside, surrounded by wild things. Hoping that they will assign some intrinsic value to our environment and don't question their responsibility toward it. I tell them to smell things, to take in the scent of the trees and brush and to feel the Earth on their hands. If they can associate nature with pleasure and peace, maybe they'll seek such feelings again once they're grown up and try to preserve what will remain of our environment. This is my chance to instill the values of environmental appreciation as well as environmental protection in them. If I fail them, I fail the future.

We roam through the woods, look at tracks and plants, sometimes we even see deer or a raccoon. At times, we pick up sticks for the family stick and rock collection, or find a dead beetle that we can look at under the microscope. At other times we go down to the river or creek and see what rocks yield the greatest ripples when tossed into the water. Perhaps the unquestionable acts of involvement, appreciation, and preservation can take on a sense of tradition or the satisfaction linked to routinized traditions, like celebrating Christmas on a daily basis. Maybe then, when my children ask me one day what I did to help them when we were made aware of global climate changes, I can at least say that I tried to teach my students (the next generation) to be involved with and aware of their role within our environment. I can tell them that I tried to instill in my

children the ongoing love for our Earth that was and is so desperately needed to promote the preservation of our home and see the Earth as living entity, which we've relied on for so long and that, in their past, needed us to rely on.

Summary and Preview

In this chapter I provided a relevant definition for “sustainability”, as grounded in the humanities. Further, I explored the pedagogical and theoretical implications of ecocomposition, its focus on place-based writing, and shared aspects of current scholarship to present ways in which ecocomposition has been employed in collegiate composition classrooms. I highlighted the need for my study within the existing literature and emphasized the need for students’ perspectives and insights into their perceptions of Environmental writing classes.

In the following chapter, I will describe the methodology used to perform my research. I will explain Narrative Inquiry, its implications for my study, and its relation to ecocomposition. Further, I will explain my researcher positionality within my study context as well as the research context, which includes my research site and prospective student participants. I will also address my data collection methods and data sources and how these will help in answering my research questions.

In chapter 4, I will present and analyze my data and answer my three research questions. I will detail how I used the data, as described in chapter 3, in order to better understand my students’ writing following the completion of my Environmental Literature and Writing course. I will describe how my rubrics aided in the attainment of this understanding and explain how my students’ writing exemplified, or did not exemplify, the elements of environmental awareness in writing as described by Owens (2001), Mauk (2003), Hothem, (2009), and Reynolds (2004).

Also, I will explain how my data allowed me to gain a better understanding of how my students' place themselves in their natural environments after having taken my course. I will describe how my interviews with students allowed me to further my understanding of how my students view themselves within their environments. Lastly, I will describe how I, as the researcher, course designer, and teacher changed and evolved as part of having taught the semester-long Environmental Literature and Writing course.

In chapter 5, I will outline implications and limitations that arose as part of the research process and outcomes. I will also describe other questions regarding my research that came about as I was working on my dissertation.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Not far from my house was a vast green meadow that seemed to have been forgotten by the rest of the world. Even though we lived close to the city – 3-5 kilometers – the meadow existed in its own little untouchable, almost forgotten space where no one disturbed its growth and the growth of buttercups, corn flowers, wheat, and Gänseblümchen. Rabbits and squirrels lived there and would run to hide in one of the close patches of hardwood trees when we arrived to play there.

When the grass was in full bloom, one could stand fully erect without being spotted and in the fall, after some unknown, invisible farmer turned the dried grass into massive hay bales, we would spend hours climbing and jumping off of the colossal structures. Then, when I was 9 or 10, some friends and I overheard that the meadow had been sold and that the mayor was planning on building a new four lane bypass to alleviate some of the congested city streets. Within a few days we contacted the mayor's office, asking for an immediate appointment to discuss our displeasure with the situation, with the fact that our secret meadow was being eradicated without consideration of all that existed there, including us! The mayor did meet with some of us, and assured us that he'd leave enough space for running and playing.

Before long, large bulldozers and backhoes lined the field, like soldiers ready for battle and destruction. Within a few years, the meadow was destroyed, the majestic old trees had been cut down, the animals had disappeared, and what was left was an area big enough to park the excavators that had seemingly been forgotten. The grass along the road was always neatly cut, young, skinny trees were planted to replace the thick longstanding ones; our place had been discovered and eliminated. We tried to save it; we failed because we were only children and had

no influence on political and financial decisions. I realized that I was not just a jumper, climber, hider, and runner on that meadow but its protector, its voice. Just as nature had been silenced and robbed of its vocal cords in our society (Manes, 1996), I had no say in this matter either.

This early experience impressed upon me the notion that all is in flux, malleable, and inconsistent. I view the world as a changing, evolving, dynamic, fluctuating place that is filled with dichotomies, contradictions, understandings, misunderstandings, and so forth. I also view this world as a product of intricate systems that work together and against each other to maintain some form of homeostasis or balance. Just as an ecosystem that may appear to be chaotic and random to the onlooker, it functions in perfect balance: an interplay between elements and components of such interdependent systems.

My experience in teaching and through interactions with students, I remain convinced that, despite inevitable conflicts, humans, myself included, are capable of understanding varying perspectives. I also believe that we are all in need of and thrive on intellectual and mental stimulation and interactions in order to progress and make sense of the surrounding non-physical and physical world. People continuously co-construct themselves, their perceptions of self and of self within a group and community, and their roles within different settings, including their natural environments. Meaning and knowledge then are created through ongoing construction and co-construction between individuals, groups, societies, places, locations, and varying contexts, and can therefore be effectively understood through narratives and other forms of qualitative inquiry that call for the richness and depth of the human experience. Based on such a social-constructionist view, then, I believe that students can learn and change their perspectives on the world. Especially in our current global state, where upcoming ethical, social, and environmental changes must be addressed, assessed, challenged, and coped with, it is paramount

to ensure our students' exposure to their natural surroundings and their comprehension of personal relationships with and roles within their environments.

In the previous chapter, I addressed and discussed the relevant literature that pertains to the answering of my research questions:

- 1) *Does the students' writing exemplify authority and powers of expression after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course? Further, does students' writing demonstrate that they have become agents of their work who seem to take responsibility for their places?*
- 2) *How do students place themselves in their natural environments after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course? What do they think their role is within their environments following the completion of the class?*
- 3) *How do I, as the teacher, course designer, and researcher evolve while teaching a semester long Environmental Writing course?*

I also suggested that current research does not provide ample knowledge to help answer my questions, which suggests that there is a need for my study.

In this third chapter, I will describe how I discovered Narrative Inquiry and decided that this was the best fit for my research questions and my overall research interests. I will continue by explaining what narrative inquiry is, what it does, how it works well within my given research and how it aligns with ecocomposition. Also, I will outline the study context by describing the focal course and elements thereof, and the prospective student participants.

The data collection processes will include descriptions of routine teaching practices such as journaling, anonymous evaluations, and the collecting of student writings, which will aid as

data for the current dissertation. Also, student writers' journals, notes from the rotating student class note-taker, evaluation of student writings, and follow-up interviews will be described more thoroughly in this chapter.

In order to address potential ethical issues that may arise throughout my study, I will provide a section to examine these risks and ways in which they can be addressed before data collection takes place and throughout the overall research process.

I will begin by addressing an ideological conflict I encountered while starting my research process, which is well before the writing of this dissertation even began.

Positionality – The Ideological Conflict and Stance

The topic of my study is important and dear to me because as an environmentalist, compositionist, mother of children of the next generation, and human within our current environment, it is my responsibility, obligation and duty to create atmospheres in which the discussion of our collective future, our roles within our environments, and our responsibilities regarding future generations and the environment can occur. In her article “Greening English: Voices Howling in the Wilderness?”, Bruce (2011) calls for the type of classroom I envision for my students and their future:

Let us establish an embrace of environmental and human peace as a permanent concern of English teaching to help instill in our students and ourselves a sense of concern about the fate of the earth, for each other, and for all the other species with whom we share this lovely watery planet. Let us embrace our responsibility to act on that awareness and to use the power we have to imagine change and spread the love through our passions for words, poems, and stories that might make a difference (p. 24)

As a writing instructor, it is my responsibility to help students become better writers and I believe ecocomposition allows for students to position themselves rhetorically while writing about something (place) that they can not only relate to but that is relevant to their lives and the lives of others (Owens, 2001b; 2001a; Hothem, 2009; Cahalan, 2008; Bruce, 2011).

I moved from my original place, my home in Germany, to this new place, the US, in order to study Environmental Science. I wanted to study a “hard” science because I wanted to work outdoors while helping to find solutions that would preserve and protect our environment. I wanted to be surrounded by nature every day for the rest of my life and I wanted to contribute to the maintenance of the place that meant so much to me. It was my desire to be part of the solution to our environmental issues and to live life in a way that supported the passion that influenced my environmental philosophies.

Then came Thoreau. I was introduced to an extensive Transcendentalist reading list in college and the emotions, beauty, and actions the writers, specifically Thoreau, were able to convey with mere words was captivating. The writings instantly felt “warmer” than my lab reports and numbers and resonated with something inside of me. Could I contribute to the saving of the world by writing beautiful words and teaching others how to do the same?

A few semesters into my college experience, I switched majors to English and Communication, which only heightened my passion for nature. I continued studying and exploring nature in my immediate places or in foreign locations and was finally able to combine my two passions of writing and the environment through ecocomposition.

After having taught Freshman Composition at the Community College level and my current institution for approximately 3 years, I was given the opportunity to develop a January-

Term course titled, *Writing and Your Environment* for my Alma Mater. A few months later, this class was also adopted by my full-time institution, where this study takes place.

When I started teaching Environmental Writing courses, however, I was faced with an ideological dilemma: how do I maintain my distaste for ideological impositions and enforcement in the writing classroom while teaching environmental writing, which is laden with personal beliefs and assumptions? Due to my overall ontological positionality and belief in a reality that is fluid, flexible, and constructed within settings, I have always found it difficult to prefer one truth over another or to assign more value to one interpretation of reality over another. I realized that it was necessary to examine my dispositions and I found myself taking two very different approaches to teaching Freshman Composition 1 & 2 and Environmental Writing.

In her essay, “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching”, Hairston (1992) argues that the Composition classroom should not be viewed or act as a site for the instructor’s dispersion of ideological beliefs. She states that the new model of teaching Freshman Composition appears to place “dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student” (p. 180). Further, Hairston calls this approach “regressive” (p. 180), threatening, and potentially silencing for our students. She explains how the Freshman Composition classroom has become a “tool” (p. 180), or vehicle for the advancement of teachers’ ideologies, which, according to Hairston, is detrimental to the students’ writing experience and contradicts the notion that the writing classroom should be “ a low-risk environment that encourages students to take chances” (p. 189). In all my writing classes, I try to foster inclusive and open dialogues, clarify what peer-responses are supportive or at least neutral in student discussions, and encourage students to communicate in the classroom

and small groups. I see the writing classroom as a writing and writers' space not an arena for politics or ideologies.

Further, Hairston (1992) states that the imposition of teachers' ideologies causes the introduction of artificial, often irrelevant topics with which some students tend to struggle. I agree with Hairston (1992) for my Freshman Composition classes and support the idea that students come equipped with a wealth of insight and experiences that are suitable for topics within this classroom. Hairston (1992) backs this notion by stating that "we know that students develop best as writers when they can write about something they care about and want to know more about" (p. 189). Sharing her belief, I do not assign topics for my Freshman Composition students and I challenge them to examine what interests them, to explore what they care about, and to decide what they want to learn more about since I want them to develop as writers and not emulate my thoughts. However, in my Environmental Literature and Writing course, a special topics course, my student writers will be asked to write about their places, respond to existing environmental texts, and to engage in the conversation of sustainability and our role within the environment through writing. As mentioned, this approach is quite common (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b), yet it challenges what I have come to believe to be right in the composition classroom, which is the omission of personal ideologies.

I agree with several aspects of Hairston's argument and am supportive of the idea of not imposing my ideological agenda onto my students in the Freshman Composition classroom. However, when it comes to my Environmental Writing courses, I feel challenged in my usual writing classroom approaches because I perceive a pressing temporal factor and see the overall environmental situation as serious, uncertain, and in dire need for action.

In an argument for the inclusion of ideological stances within the writing classroom setting, Knoblauch (1988) argues that

we are also compelled to review our choices and monitor our commitments, scrupulously, not in their abstract sufficiency, but in their consequences as we exercise them in the world. We are obliged to announce ourselves so that, through the very process of self-assertion, we grow more conscious of our axioms and submit that awareness to public debate. The quality of our lives as teachers depends on our willingness to discover through struggle ever more fruitful means of doing our work. The quality of our students' lives depends on the cogency and the humanity of the decisions we make (p. 139)

The contradictory approaches in regards to inclusion or omission of personal ideologies in the composition classroom, clearly identify my personal contradictory approaches to my two distinct writing classrooms: on the one hand, I do not like impositions. I do not like imposing my views on others, especially not in the classroom where power relations complicate matters even further. However, when it comes to my Environmental Writing courses, I am driven by the idea of reviewing my “choices” (Knoblauch, 1988, p. 139) as the consequences I “exercise in the world” (p. 139) may lead to the students revisiting their attitudes towards our environment and perhaps hinder impending climatic catastrophes. For my Environmental Writing courses, I believe Knoblauch is right: the incorporation of a sustainability-and preservation driven focus and potential recognition of the students’ and our shared responsibility for the well-being and “survival” of our planet are high on the agenda. My texts for these classes are selected based on my environmental ideologies and my goal of having students lead more environmentally friendly, appreciative, and aware lives is clearly outlined on the syllabus. Am I turning my

course into a “political territory” (Hairston, 1992, p. 183)? If the environment must be viewed as a political issue, which it inevitably has become, then absolutely.

In an attempt to come to terms with my new pedagogical approach in the Environmental Writing classroom that so starkly contrasts my usual classroom disposition of avoiding ideological inclusions, I was pleased to find Elbow’s (2000) claim that we as writing teachers “have an obligation to knowledge and society” (p. 54), and that “knowledge and society only exist embodied” (p. 55). These notions support the claim that under given circumstances, where present social and related environmental ideologies threaten the preservation of society and our future generations, we must encourage our students to confront their beliefs. We need to help them learn about the value of their common places while equipping them with the knowledge of sustainability methods and preservation that make them agents of change rather than perpetual proponents of an ideology that has brought us to this dire point in the first place. Berlin (1988) states that, “ideology provides the structure of desire, indicating what we will long for and pursue” (p. 479); my hope is that my students will, realize the common desire to become and remain active and positive components of their places and pursue what is necessary for our global survival.

In early October, my students and I engaged in a discussion about human responsibility towards nature and other human beings. We had just finished reading Susan Futrell’s “Prairie Skin” (2010) in which the author raises points about the human role in nature. The class discussed the idea that we have come to believe that nature is an economic element within our capitalist society and that humans, especially within our Western mindset, view nature in regards to its financial value. I asked students to identify ways in which we may be violating the Earth

and its inhabitants by perceiving it through such a financial lens. One of my female Soil and Crop Science majors brought up Monsanto and how, in her opinion, the public has come to misinterpret their mission. She stated that Monsanto's goals and objectives are thoughtful and altruistic as they attempt to combat potential food shortages that may result from the ever-growing world population. My student also mentioned that the company always keeps several original seeds as a backup plan in case their genetically modified versions fail. Another student, a female Criminal Justice major, responded by commenting on the ethically questionable financial agenda Monsanto has, which is based on capitalizing on the poorest of the poor. This student described how Monsanto sells genetically altered seeds to third world countries where the plants grow well despite harsh soil conditions. While this aspect sounds charitable and socially conscientious, Monsanto only sells seeds that grow for one season, requiring the farmers to buy new seeds every year and thereby placing an extreme financial burden on them. I raised the point of long-term studies, which are still scarce but which are necessary to shed light on the potential health effects the consumption of GMOs entails. As always, I emphasized that we are having a conversation, that our opinions are equally valid and valuable, and that the objective of the course was to explore different views on the roles of humans in nature and our interconnectedness with one another, including nature.

A few nights later, I discussed my Environmental Literature and Writing class with a friend who also teaches composition at another local university. My excitement about the class and my students was undeniable as I praised their engagement, contributions, and open-mindedness with which they join the overall conversation.

"I love these students!" I exclaim. "They bring up fabulous points and are very respectful of each other's views!"

“What if they leave your class and start working for Monsanto? Will you still love them as much as you do now?” my friend asks.

I think back to our Monsanto discussion in class. I see my Soil and Crop Science student in all her sincerity and conviction. I envision her nodding head as my Criminal Justice student raises the point of Monsanto’s questionable objectives in regards to other human beings and my question about long-term studies.

“Yes,” I answer.

“All I’m asking my students to do is to be open to other views and accept the exposure to questions that we all need to ask right now: who are we in relation to nature? Who am I in relation to my environmental surroundings? And, what is our responsibility towards nature? I know some of my students will work for large corporations that have missions and agendas that I don’t agree with. But at least I can hope that they will have based that decision to work for such companies on more than just financial gain. I can hope that my students will have listened and learned from our class and be informed about how they are affecting their planet and co-inhabitants through their choices. It’s not my goal to convince my students that I’m right; it’s my goal to ensure their exposure to an environmentally-informed perspective and to learn what types of questions to ask.”

Eureka! - Locating Narrative Inquiry for my Dissertation

Teaching writing is more than a job to me. I am passionate about it, I love it, and I love transmitting that emotion to my students. When I got accepted to Indiana University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate Studies in Composition & TESOL program in the spring of 2013, I was ecstatic to further my own knowledge of the field, to work with professors whose work I had

read, and be part of a progressive intellectual community. During my second summer, I signed up for Dr. Gian Pagnucci's "Technology and Literacy" class, which led me to acquire some new knowledge on the course subjects, but more importantly, to my life story, it led me to Narrative Inquiry. Following the class, I ordered Pagnucci's *Living the Narrative Life* (2004), and soaked it up in a few weeks.

"This is it", I decided. "This is exactly the methodology I need for my dissertation because my piece has to be readable and enjoyable for an audience beyond the academic setting. It has to reach people who have no idea about Composition and might not care about it! But they can care about the narrative. They can care about the stories I have to share that deal with places, sustainability, writing, and our lives."

Since it has been so important to me to show the world the potential of ecocomposition and to inform others of the significant role we, as scholars, play in bringing sustainability into the disciplines, I wanted this dissertation to help me "gain a voice for [my] narrative within the academy" (Schaafsma, Pagnucci, Wallace, Stock, 2007, p. 299) because this is more than just a story of my teaching. It is the story I have been waiting to tell from the beginning, from the time that was marked by touching the Mountain Ash with our feet while swinging. Pagnucci (2004) states that "from the beginning, we are telling stories to figure out who we are and where our place is in the world" (p. 68). Teaching writing with our natural environments in mind is my place in this world; I have been part of this story since its beginning in March of 1986 (Schaafsma et al., 2007).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative Inquiry has been a research methodology in various fields, including sociology, anthropology, composition, or English education, for more than two decades (Schaafsma et al.,

2007, p. 282; Alvine, 2001; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011) and is as complex and wide-ranging as the term “sustainability”. In fact, narrative as “autobiography was one of the first methodologies for the study of education” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This methodology has taken many unique approaches and formats but central to the use of narratives in research is the idea of “exploring the world by telling a story about it” (Schaafsma et al., 2007, p. 282).

Overall, Connelly & Clandinin (1990) describe narrative inquiry as “the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2), and narrative as a way of “characterizing the phenomena of human experience” (p. 2). Further, Clandinin & Connelly (2000) present the idea of narrative being “a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, with temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third” (p. 50). As a part of such approach, Clandinin & Connelly (2000) list a set of terms that address elements of narrative inquiry, which will be discussed in greater detail with my study in mind throughout the following paragraphs:

- Personal and social aspects, which describe the interactions that take place as part of a narrative
- Temporal aspects of past, present, and future as narratives reflect “continuity” (p. 50), and move through time in some manner
- Place, or the place and places in which a narrative is located (p. 50)

Directionality, time, and ecomposition. In addition, directionality is crucial in Clandinin & Connelly’s (2000) approach to narrative inquiry. Here, the terms “inward” and “outward” are used to describe the “internal condition, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (p. 50), whereas outward denotes “the existential conditions, that is, the

environment” (p. 50). The emphasis on one’s environment, temporal components, as well as inward conditions, such as hope, are also reflected in approaches to ecocomposition. While place is clear, ecocomposition implies a definite temporal stance, which includes past (reflections on identity and development in the past), present (where am I writing now; who am I now), and the future (we must envision ourselves in future places and think of future generations in a more sustainable manner). We have to “meet ourselves in the past, the present, and the future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60) because our stories are temporally dependent: what we tell now is influenced by our past stories, and both influence what our narrative will become. Wilson (2014) furthers the notion of temporality within narrative by stating that, “we are devoted to stories because that is how the mind works – a never-ending wandering through past scenarios and through alternative scenarios of the future” (p. 43). In addition, it must be our disposition as ecompositionists to find a balance between realities and see the needs in our environments, but also remain hopeful that change is possible, which reflects Clandinin & Connelly’s (2000) inward dispositions.

The power of stories. The “belief in the meaning-making power of stories” (Pagnucci, 2004, p. 48) is important when engaging in this type of research, for stories convey reality and life, which are never easily understood even while living such experiences. Other ways of presenting knowledge or facts oftentimes limit our ability to really understand what is being said, but narratives allow the telling and retelling of events and therefore present a more realistic impression of the convoluted and complex nature of reality. Therefore, by using narratives, we can not only create the meaning of our own stories and our lives but also convey that knowledge and experience to others (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pagnucci, 2004).

Narrative inquiry, boundaries, and linguistic accessibility. Compared to other, especially quantitative, research methodologies and their written accounts, narratives have the ability to transcend discourse communities that have oftentimes been separated by discipline-specific language varieties and were inaccessible to those outside of a given field (Schaafsma et al., 2007). Compared to narrative, traditional academic prose within institutional boundaries oftentimes “celebrate not clarity but obfuscation” (Pagnucci, 2004, p. 17) causing such texts to be reserved only for members of the given discourse community, thereby creating symbolic, textual barriers between academic and non-academic environments. Language use in narrative inquiry is purposeful, intentional, and deliberate (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 61) and as ecomposition aims at transcending human-made boundaries, it seems natural to use narrative inquiry for this dissertation and thereby increase audience comprehension by using language that is also accessible to those outside of the field of Composition.

Moreover, narrative inquiry addresses boundaries that exist “within” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.45) the writer as internal challenges, and that must oftentimes be overcome and addressed throughout the narrative writing process. The use of autobiographical narratives as methodology for educational research has therefore become accepted and legitimized as solid research method (Hurlbert, 2012; Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Owens, 2001b; Alvine, 2001; Pagnucci, 2004; Klahr, 2012; Schaafsma et al., 2007; Whitenack & Swanson, 2013). Language matters and often “isolated facts and numbers are not enough to explain the world. Instead we wish for thick stories that capture events in their full detail” (Pagnucci, 2004, p. 48). Connelly & Clandinin (1990) point out that “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). This contributes to the idea of a narrative’s ability to be broadly understood by various audiences and the audience’s

reciprocated ability to engage with narratives and narrators, which then furthers the stories themselves through the retelling and reconstruction thereof. This leads to another important element of Narrative Inquiry where the researcher and researched people are interdependent: both are affected by, contribute to, and eventually may change as part of the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Complexities of life and nature. Cooper (1986) states that “people move from group to group, bringing along with them different complexes of ideas, purposes, and norms, different ways of interacting, different interpersonal roles and textual forms” (p. 373). Further, Connolly (2001; *Ecocomposition*) explains that because of ecocomposition’s focus on the complexities that underlie not only human relationships but also the environment, our role within it, and our effects on one another, ecocompositionists can help students understand “society as an immensely complex global system, in which power, matter and ideas interact [and] include the natural world” (p. 180). Narratives give us the ability to explore such complexities and make meaning that takes into account various perspectives, experiences, and ways of seeing life (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2007; Schaafsma et al., 2007; Pagnucci, 2004).

As humans, we are all familiar with stories. We use narratives to connect with others, to share experiences, and to make sense of our world and our changing and unique realities. We depend on stories to create our identities and gain an understanding of who we are and who others are (Pavlenko, 2007). Hardy (1968) describes our relationship with stories by explaining that, “we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (p. 5). Individuals live through stories and experience their lives through stories. Their narratives can be created, co- and de-constructed, and re-told from a different point in time or a different perspective. Narratives allow

people to make meaning of their lives, their social and environmental contexts and roles within them, their realities, situations, and environments. Investigating stories helps us “make connections within [our] frameworks of understanding and provide the ground on which communication with others is possible” (Pagnucci & Abt-Perkins, 1992).

“Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes” (Whitman). In this favorite quote, Whitman, most likely unintentionally, points to an integral part of the power of Narrative Inquiry: it’s ability to incorporate and take into account life’s realistic convolutedness. Life is messy, complicated, non-linear, and dynamic, therefore, narratives, which simulate life, also simulate such “messiness” (Pagnucci, 2004, p. 52). Narrative inquiry can be infused with “ambiguity, complexity, difficulty, and uncertainty” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 55) that are also found in the environmental webs which we are part of. Pagnucci (2004) points out that “narratives can address contradiction, confusion, and complexity without offering any concrete answers, which is, upon consideration, exactly what life does” (p. 52).

Further complicating matters is the construction and subjective meaning of narratives that oftentimes need to be re-formulated, restructured, and retold in order to make sense of them over time and for differing audiences (Pagnucci, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). At times, we “ask others to read our work and to respond in ways that help us see other meanings that might lead to further retelling” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60), which expands the multitude of stories and possible interpretations and meanings even further. Narrative inquiry must be seen as “relational inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60), where reinterpretations, re-imaginings, and retellings are paramount (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Pagnucci, 2004; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a research method, narratives might

“not measure up to the exacting demands of the scientific method” but still offer us ways “to deal with overwhelming complexity, to handle a cacophony of thoughts and ideas” (Pagnucci, 2004, p. 53). This further suggests that this method is just as rigorous and robust as, for example, quantitative methods because it provides in-depth and detailed descriptions of experiences, thereby shedding light on the multifaceted diversity of subjective human lives.

The function of complexity then is not only central to Ecocomposition (Cooper, 1986; Mauk, 2003; Connolly, 2001; Fleckenstein, et al., 2008; Kahr, 2012; Owens, 2001a; 2001b) but also an integral element of narrative inquiry (Pagnucci, 2004; Schaafsma et al., 2007; Schaafsma & Vinx, 2007; Pagnucci & Abt-Perkins, 1992; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The environment presents a complex system and narrative inquiry relies on complex systems as platforms for meaning making.

Objective and subjective realities. In our human efforts to seek truth or identify reliable concepts of reality, we have collectively identified various ways and methods to investigate our surrounding environments. Bruner (1991) describes:

Surely since the Enlightenment, if not before, the study of mind has centered principally on how man achieves a "true" knowledge of the world. Emphasis in this pursuit has varied, of course: empiricists have concentrated on the mind's interplay with an external world of nature, hoping to find the key in the association of sensations and ideas, while rationalists have looked inward to the powers of mind itself for the principles of right reason. The objective, in either case, has been to discover how we achieve "reality," that is to say, how we get a reliable fix on the world, a world that is, as it were, assumed to be immutable and, as it were, "there to be observed." (p. 1)

Too often are narratives rejected “because they are personal rather than objective” (Pagnucci & Abt-Perkins, 1992, p. 55), but it is this personal aspect that allows us to genuinely engage with other human beings who will hopefully recognize elements of themselves in our stories because narratives take into account the convolutions of existence and therefore, narratives allow us to understand reality (Schaafsma et al., 2007; Pagnucci, 2004). When comparing objective science to personal writing, Wilson (2014) points out that the personal writer

conveys often obliquely by abstraction or deliberate distortion, his own perceptions and feelings he hopes to evoke – about something, about anything, real or imagined. He sees to bring forth in an original way some truth or other about the human experience. He tries to pass what he creates directly along the channel of human experience, from his mind to your mind (p. 41-42).

The human experience and our collective understanding of what it means to be human is better presented through stories because such form of transmitting knowledge is reflective of and conducive to a shared human experience.

Interdependence. The interconnectivity that is present within the described narrative-building relationship is similar to the principle of interdependence in ecomposition that addresses the mutual relationship between the writer and her/his environment, culture, society, place, the “modern world broth of cultures and ideas” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 56).

Place and self. Another component of ecomposition and narrative inquiry is the recognition of place as being something crucial to the development of self and therefore, a fundamental component of the development of narratives (Schaafsma et al., 2007; Bruner, 2004). Bruner (2004) states that “place is not simply a piece of geography” but rather “an intricate

construct, whose language dominates the thought[s]” (p. 703) of those who narrate. Therefore, as Cooper (1986) proclaims, language and place are not only representative of one another but also part of the larger web in which the writer is situated. Through our narratives, we give insight into our thoughts that are influenced by our language, social affiliations, environments, and cultures. As mentioned above, ecocompositionists Dobrin and Weisser (2002a), address these connections and observe that “while ideology and culture map our thinking, our environments shape the application of that thinking” (p. 576). Using our own language(s) in our narratives, therefore, mirrors our culture that is imbedded in our environments; a concept that mimics what ecocompositionists strive to convey to their writing students as part of the extended context (Cooper, 1986).

It becomes clear that the environment that we inhabit, our stories, our places, and our lives are all intertwined and incredibly complex. Since narrative inquiry allows us to explore such complex relationships, it lends itself perfectly for my dissertation topic as the implied ideologies of narrative inquiry and the content of my research align in various ways.

I teach my students to connect with their environments, their personal places where they grew up, hoping that the love they feel towards a location that defined them will transcend the artificial boundaries we’ve created and translate into love for the planet, for our collective home. We write ourselves into our environments and seek to recreate the interconnectedness with our places and peers that we can so clearly see within nature among all organisms. We try to write in order to understand that we too are simply organisms within a larger web that is fully interdependent. We discuss arguments and seek honesty and reliability. And sometimes we waste time debating which reality is real: the one where we are not in control, the one where we

comfortably remove our agency and seek solace in the “fact” that humans are not involved in the inevitable environmental changes around us. On the other hand, there is the less pleasing truth, the one that needs to be addressed this second, the one in which our Earth is begging us to respond.

The Study Context

The data for this study will be collected from a midsized, Midwestern University, which I will refer to as *Southwestern University* throughout this dissertation in order to protect its privacy and the privacy of its students, faculty, and staff. The institution is heavily STEM oriented with a large number of students working towards earning degrees in engineering, biology, mathematics, or physics. All students must pass or test out of Freshman Composition 1 and Freshman Composition 2 and take an additional writing-intensive course. The site for this study is such a writing-intensive course, which I designed as an opportunity to bridge the Humanities and Sciences and offer students a way to view our environment and nature not only as areas for scientific inquiry but also spaces that can be experienced and felt (Evernden, 1996) through a literary lens. Teaching ecocomposition alongside with Literature is a common approach in current English Departments as this combination allows instructors to address ecological thinking through elements of composition and literary studies (Dobrin, 2011; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002a).

Researcher Validity – My Place As Researcher

I have been employed at the described institution since August 2013, and have been teaching Developmental Writing, Freshman Composition 1, and Freshman Composition 2. Starting in the fall of 2015, I will also be teaching my self-designed Environmental Literature and Writing course. Although my employment at the institution allows me to enter my study as somewhat of

an insider, I am fully aware of the inevitable dialogical construction and re-construction of this self-ascribed insider identity, which might occur once I interact with my prospective student participants (Giampapa, 2011). Giampapa (2011) points out that being in the field emphasizes our “multiple identities” (p. 136) and challenges us to renegotiate these as our participants most likely will do by identifying us through their individual lenses.

I will be entering the field first as writing teacher, then as researcher, while always keeping in mind my other identities of being a mother and Ph.D. student. How will I be perceived by my students when “changing” from teacher to researcher? Will the interviews, which will likely take place in my office, be different from classroom conversations because they will occur after the students have finished their coursework? Will they perceive me differently? Will they “accept” me in my researcher role? Or be so focused on being a student participant that they will not notice that I am, in those instances, not their teacher.

The idea of construction, co-construction, and negotiations of identities coincides with elements also found in my methodology. As narrative inquiry allows meaning to be continuously negotiated through the interactions of the researcher and the researched (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mishler, 1986), I will enter this research process aware and welcoming of the potential developments and changes it might bring to me as a researcher.

As a researcher, it is also my ethical responsibility and role to ensure that my students’ are protected. Therefore, in order to avoid coercion, I will not begin collect student data until grades have been finalized following the completion of the course in mid-December.

Positionality and place. As briefly stated in chapter 1, I must also keep in mind my own limitations considering my place-based identity, experiences, and perceptions of reality. I am a German-American who has lived in various countries and states but whose perceptions are

heavily influenced and marked by Western traditions and ways of thinking and sense-making. I have lived in Western countries that have exposed me to Western approaches to viewing and interacting with the “reality” of things and that have in some ways indoctrinated me into Western ways of seeing nature and our role within it. Emphasizing the immense impact one’s perception of the world has on the experiences we associate with our surroundings, Cronon (1996) points out that “the way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated” (p.25). I cannot rid myself of my own place-based identity and must therefore accept that my Environmental Literature and Writing course is also influenced by my perception of environmental matters. The awareness of my limitations and the place-based philosophical foundations of my own environmental approaches inevitably affects how I view myself as researcher, course designer, and teacher of the described course and will therefore be described in greater detail in chapter 4.

The Focal Course and its Data Components

The realization of the course, which will aid in my data collection for this dissertation, has been a dream of mine since I came across ecocomposition in 2013. Following extensive theoretical research, reflections on my writing teaching practices, and discussions with students about their perceptions of nature, I started the process of creating my course by inserting units on ecocomposition and place-based writing into my Freshman Composition and Developmental Writing courses to gain a better understanding of the students’ likes, dislikes, dispositions, and perceptions of environmental units and their place within the writing classroom. Following these units, my student writers and I would engage in extensive discussions about their needs in a writing course and their thoughts on the effectiveness of place-based writing in relation to their identification as an active part of their environments.

In January, 2014, I finally created and taught a January-term course titled, “Writing and Your Environment”, which was not only a fantastic experience for myself as a writer, writing instructor, and individual, but was also well received by my students who, as I learned through their comments and course evaluations, enjoyed the course and felt it effectively addressed their place within our larger environmental context.

After this successful experience, I proposed an extended version to my fulltime institution, Southwestern University. Following an extensive review, the course was accepted pending the addition and incorporation of literature. The idea of combining literature and ecocomposition and teaching it as a “special topics” (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b, p. 117) class is a common approach in higher education institutions as it successfully combines composition studies and literature (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b). The course, now titled, “Environmental Literature and Writing”, was then adopted as a writing-intensive, special-topics English class, and was going to be taught for the first time in the fall of 2015 (Appendix B).

The central questions that this 16-week course, which meets twice a week, is centered around, are explicitly stated in the course syllabus in order to help students focus their thoughts and approaches to the course and its assignments. These questions are as follows:

- What is the relationship between humans and nature? Historically? Contemporarily?
- What is our position within nature?
- What is the purpose of nature?
- What is the purpose of humans?
- What are conflicts and tensions between humans and nature?
- What are our responsibilities towards nature?

Once the course was accepted by the Curriculum Committee and listed in the course catalog, I received an email from the Director of Reclamation, Environment and Conservation program, who expressed great interest in integrating my course into his program as a way to bridge the Humanities and Sciences, which, due to his academic background, was extremely important to him. He told me that although his science students tended to be wonderful inquirers, researchers, and blossoming scientists, they lacked a *feeling* for nature (Wilson, 2014; Evernden, 1996). They oftentimes viewed nature as an inanimate object that could be used as a site for human experimentations without consideration for the Earth as a living being.

The process of adding a new course to an existing curriculum is lengthy and I therefore can only hope, at this point, that his projections of offering my course every semester will come to fruition as future students could only benefit from learning about the environment from this course.

Text selection. As stated, the text selection for a “green” writing classroom requires discernment and care (Johnson-Sheehan, 2007; Bruce, 2011) because “reading green [...] can help us to explore our relationship to the environment and the role literature can play in shaping cultural responses to environmental realities” (Bruce, 2011, p. 16). In order to keep in mind the place-based component of the course, which is also crucial to the students’ successful completion of the below mentioned writing assignments, my selected readings are also place-relevant (Appendix C).

In order to challenge students’ Freire-based and ecocompositionist-endorsed, “critical consciousness” (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b, p. 116), we will begin by reading excerpts from Blanche’s (1989) *Native American Reader: Stories, Speeches, and Poems*. This selection should challenge students’ assumptions of canonical placement as Native American authors are

oftentimes overlooked in American literature courses. Further, the contents of these readings are very place-based as several texts in the reader describe natural occurrences and entail descriptions of places. We will also spend some time with Tigerman's (2006) *Wisconsin Indian Literature*, which further localizes our efforts of gaining insight into our current place.

In an effort to explore how the North American view of nature and our human place within it has changed, we will read selected texts by early European settlers, such as William Bradford, John Smith, or Mary Rowlandson, before advancing to Thoreau, Catlin, Whitman, Marsh, Muir, Roosevelt, Zahniser, Austin, and finally Leopold, who presents a "local celebrity" due to his involvement with the Midwest.

I selected Caplow & Cohen's (2010) *Wildbranch: An Anthology of Nature, Environmental, and Place-Based Writing*, to move the students toward contemporary place-based writing by various authors who write about their unique environments, memories grounded in their locations, and thoughts of the future generations. The reading of contemporary texts will be furthered by the students engaging in Sanders' "Stillness" and "Mind in the Forest", which I selected based on their descriptive details, tone, and underlying appreciation of nature's aesthetic features, which are central to Environmental Literature (Johnson-Sheehan, 2007; Bruce, 2011).

In order to prepare students for their place-based final paper and publication even further, I selected Rulesh's (1993) *Harvest Moon: A Wisconsin Outdoor Anthology*, in which authors describe typical Midwestern outdoor activities, local natural phenomena, such as bird migrations, and places, which students from the Midwest will most likely be familiar with. This allows students to not only identify with the authors, who are all Midwesterners, but also with the places they write about.

Before delving into basic theoretical aspects of ecocomposition, I have selected Herndl's (2014) *Sustainability – A Reader for Writers*, which presents texts that address pertinent issues regarding global climate change. The texts, which are written more scientifically than the previous readings, should aid students in placing themselves into our overall context before engaging in their own place-based writings for the final publication.

Lastly, I have selected a few theoretical pieces that describe fundamental components of ecocomposition. Although I do not require students to read all five texts – Cooper (1986), Fleckenstein et al. (2008), Cahalan (2008), Hothem (2009), Dobrin & Weisser (2002) – I believe that the reading of perhaps one to two of the mentioned articles will help my students understand “place” from a theoretical perspective, which will be beneficial to the writing of their final essay and publication.

In-class writing and assignments. Environmental Literature and Writing student writers will engage in various in-class writing activities as well as writing assignments that will be completed throughout the course. Student writers are asked to compose two essays, one final paper which would be published via JooMag.com, and to keep a journal. Also, each student will be asked to be the class note-taker at least once a semester. I will review all of these documents for each of my student research participants.

Essays. The first two assignments are reflective of the literature aspect of the course, meaning that “environment and nature are the subjects about which students write” (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b, p. 116). Similar to other issues, mainly social or political in nature, oftentimes discussed in writing courses, the students in my Environmental Literature and Writing course are asked to write about the environment, nature, and the way these are discussed in the literature. As ecocomposition focuses on composition, it is important to continuously emphasize writing,

student writers, place, and the interrelations between these components (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002b) throughout the course.

Final paper. The final paper urges students to understand their own discursive approaches, their relations to their individual places, and the potential connections their places have to their peers' places. It asks student writers to compose their own place-based writing in which they reflect on their role within their environment. Students are also asked to position themselves within nature and discuss what role they and others should play within their environments. Lastly, students were asked to address the central class questions (mentioned in "The Focal Course") and answer these from a place-based perspective.

Similar to an ecosystem, where all individual parts constantly work together to create a functioning system, the final paper asks students to compile their individual place-based writings into a comprehensive text that will later be published via JooMag.com or Lulu.com. Dobrin & Weisser (2002b) remark that it is "the teacher's responsibility to ensure that students are placed in situations where their writing can reach real audiences for real purposes" (p. 144). By writing and publishing their work, students can transcend the classroom boundaries to share their work with an actual audience, thereby enabling the audience to partake in their writing, places, and experiences. Students may use gender reflecting pseudonyms if they feel uncomfortable using their actual names in the publication.

Journals. As stated, writing is a way of clarifying concepts, thoughts, and overall reality while helping student writers make meaning (Connolly, 1989). Journal writing allows students to practice their writing, develop it, and monitor their own progress (Elbow, 1998). In the Environmental Literature and Writing classroom, journaling also allows student writers to place themselves into their environments by writing (Owens, 2001a; 2001b; Cooper, 1986) and

creating rhetorical spaces for themselves (Hothem, 2009). Freewriting spaces, such as journals, allow students to brainstorm, develop points, and express themselves as they try to formulate and re-formulate themselves as writers (Murray, 2009). Student writers learn to relate to their written texts, view themselves as writers, and “thus come to understand their discorsal selves, thereby developing the authority to identify themselves as the author of their texts” (Park, 2013, p. 339). As with all my writing courses, I will not grade or evaluate these journals in order to allow them to develop organically and without pressure (Elbow, 1998).

In order to maintain focus on the course’s questions (noted in “The Focal Course”) and to try to use the journal as a way of experiencing themselves as writers within a place and environment while trying to make meaning of this new reality, I will ask students to keep in mind the place, our writing classroom, in which they are writing.

Student note-taker. In order to gain insight into students’ perceptions of the course and to understand what they view as crucial and important throughout each meeting, I will assign a different class note-taker each class. This will allow students to express their perceptions of the course using their own words and language, thereby giving them voice. The notes will then be uploaded to the course’s D2L (Southwestern University’s learning management software) site, allowing students to monitor the class, review what we did, and to increase their abilities to reflect on themselves throughout the semester by having access to each day in written form. I will review and use these class notes as data for my study.

The following table outlines what information each writing assignment in the Environmental Literature and Writing course provides in regards to my research questions.

Table 1

Writing Assignments and Corresponding Information

Assignment	Information
Essays	Illuminates student progress throughout the course; presents insight into students' development throughout the semester: place-based writing, tying theories/literary text to place and self, focuses on central course questions (Appendix B)
Final	Examines students' place-based writings; utilizes rubric (Appendix D) to help address RQ 1
Journals	Shed light on students' development and progress in regards to writing and their reflections on their past and current roles in nature; provides a written account of students' meaning making process (of course and environmental role) throughout the course
Student note-taker (rotates from class to class)	Gain insight into students' perspectives on the course, procedures, elements; enables students to use their own words and languages, giving them an additional voice in the classroom

The Student Participants

Currently, seventeen students are registered for Environmental Literature and Writing. The table below lists my prospective student participants by year, department/major, and gender.

Table 2

Overview of Student Participants

Year	Department/Major	Gender
Sophomore	Liberal Arts and Education – Criminal Justice BS/Forensic Investigation	F
Sophomore	Engineering, Math and Science – General Engineering	M
Sophomore	Bus, Inds, Life Sci, Ag – Business Administration	F
Sophomore	Bus, Inds, Life Sci, Ag – Accounting	M
Junior	Engineering, Math and Science – Mechanical Engineering	M
Sophomore	Liberal Arts and Education – History BA	M
Sophomore	Bus, Inds, Life Sci, Ag – Business Administration	F
Sophomore	Liberal Arts and Education – Undecided LAE BS	M
Junior	Bus, Inds, Life Sci, Ag – Recl, Envir, Conservat/SEJ	F
Sophomore	Bus, Inds, Life Sci, Ag – Soil & Crop Science	F
Sophomore	Liberal Arts and Education – Elementary Education/Early Childhood	F
Sophomore	Liberal Arts and Education – Elementary Education/Early Childhood	F
Sophomore	Liberal Arts and Education – Geography	F
Senior	Liberal Arts and Education – Music BA	F
Sophomore	Engineering, Math, and Science – General Engineering	M
Sophomore	Bus, Inds, Life Sci, Ag – Agricultural Education	F
Sophomore	Liberal Arts and Education – Forensic Investgtn BS	F

This group of students is comprised of a rather eclectic mix with students majoring in many fields within the Humanities and Sciences. The prospective student participant sample

contains more female than male students, as the course consists of eleven females and six males. None of the seventeen students is a Freshman, fourteen are Sophomores, two are Juniors, and one student is a Senior.

After my prospective student participants, who are listed above, have completed the Environmental Literature and Writing course, I will contact these former students to ask for participation in my study. I will then conduct interviews and collect any class writing assignments they have (described in greater detail in “Data Collection” section below). In order to avoid coercion, the students will **not** be contacted before I have finalized grades and submitted the grades to the registrar at the end of the fall 2015 semester, which is by December 15, 2015.

Data Collection and Data Sources

Connelly & Clandinin (1990) explain that “narrative is situated in a matrix of qualitative research” (p. 3), which suggests the need for various qualitative methods in narrative inquiry. In order to answer my research questions, I will therefore combine my usual routine teaching practices that apply to all my writing classes and supplement these with student work, interactions, and student interviews.

Teaching – Routine Practices as Data

As stated, teaching writing is incredibly important to me and my story. It is not a footnote in my life but a constant text that runs through the other, fundamental stories of my life, such as raising my beautiful children, my family life, and my social and athletic involvements. Being a composition instructor is something I want to be good at and therefore, I continuously try to improve my teaching, course content, and pedagogical methods and approaches. I engage in reflections, journal and write about my teaching experiences, hand out anonymous course evaluations at least twice a semester, and make changes accordingly. I try to listen to the subtexts

and back-channeling in my classes to hear what students enjoy or dislike; before and after class I make sure I'm available for any questions or concerns my students might have, and all students have my cell phone number so they can text me at any time (until 11pm). I also have made it a habit to collect and keep as much of my students' work as possible to monitor their progress, see how they respond to a given assignment, and evaluate whether the course objectives are being realized by my students.

For my dissertation, I will continue using the following as ways to gain insight into my students' experiences in my Environmental Literature and Writing course as well as my own progress and development:

- My teaching journal
- Anonymous class evaluations
- Collected student writings

Student Writer Data

All assignments referred to in this section have been discussed and explained in greater detail in the aforementioned "In class writing and assignments" section.

In order to gain a better understanding of how students perceive my Environmental Literature and Writing course, I will assign a student note-taker for each class session, which will count towards the students' participation grade. This will shed light on the students' perspective of the course, what they feel is worth writing down for our collective notes, and what goes unnoticed. In addition, my students always spend at least 10 minutes freewriting in their journals when class begins. This should help students practice writing, getting accustomed to and more comfortable with writing, working on their voice in writing, and journal what they are learning about their writing.

In order to emphasize the interconnectivity between student places, students will write their own place-based piece and eventually compile a book, which will present all places combined while focusing on how they are similar either geographically or by other characteristics, such as culture, flora and fauna, weather patterns, demographics, etc. The book will then be published using JooMag, an online publishing company, which offers print or online magazines. To protect my students' identities, I will give them the option of using gender-reflective pseudonyms if they feel uncomfortable having their real names associated with the print publication. I will use the published book to perform a document analysis, or close study of the writings of my students to help answer my research questions.

Following the semester, when final grades have been turned in, I will contact my former students who were enrolled in my Environmental Literature and Writing course in the fall of 2015. I will ask them if they'd be interested in discussing the course with me, their writings, and their current perspectives on nature. Also, I will ask them to bring their writings (assignments, journals, notes, etc.) from the Environmental Literature and Writing class so we can talk about them together and I can analyze their pieces for my research. Once the students have given me permission, I will record and transcribe the interviews to collect data for my research questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 55, 57). Students will therefore be asked to provide the following for my data collection:

- Student note-taker (rotating each class)
- Journals
- Interviews after final grades have been turned in to avoid coercion
- Texts from publication/class book (www.Joomag.com)

The concept of interconnectivity is lived out in my Environmental Literature and Writing

course: I rely on my students and the course to write my narrative and compose this place in time as they will rely on me and the course in order to write their narratives and experience our shared space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Evaluation of Student Writing

In order to evaluate my students' writing, I have created and will use a rubric (Appendix D). The rubric should aid in my assessment of students' writing following the completion of the Environmental Literature and Writing course. Specifically, I am interested in seeing if my students' writing exemplifies "authority" (Owens, 2001b, p. 36), "powers of expression" (Hothem, 2009, p. 43), and if student writers having become "agents" (Mauk, 2003, p. 216) who have taken "responsibility" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 11) as a result of having taken the Environmental Literature and Writing class.

While evaluating student writings in a Writing to Learn science class, Balgopal & Wallace (2009) mention levels of authenticity found in the student writings and classified these as follows: "superficial/subjective", "objective", and "authentic" (p. 22), which I adopted and modified for my current study.

Table 3

Overview of Modified Writing Rubric

Category	Description	(Fictional) Example
Superficial/subjective	Students write clearly about personal experiences relevant to the topic but do not successfully express an understanding of their role within the larger environment	“My family had a big farm and last year’s flood ruined our entire barn and all the wheat that we stored there. Our loss was so big that my mom had to take a part-time job in order to make ends meet. I realized that my whole life would change because of what had happened”
Objective	Students understand issues and concepts pertaining to their larger environment but cannot incorporate personal connections to the material	“According to scientists, flooding in the Midwest has increased by X% over the past decades, ruining farmable land and causing economic hardships for numerous family farms.”
Authentic	Students successfully combine the knowledge and awareness of the larger environment, which they are part of, and “make personal connections to their role” (p. 21) within the environment	“Over the past decades, flooding in the Midwest has increased by X%. Floods have ruined farmable lands, causing millions of dollars in damage for the farmers and consumers. When my family farm was hit by last year’s flood, we lost everything. My home, which had always been my place of refuge, was destroyed and my family hasn’t been the same since.”

In addition, authority and power in the students’ place-based writings will be evaluated through the students’ clear demonstration of identifying with their place and therefore having successfully placed themselves rhetorically as writers within an environment. Student writings should exemplify place-based research and reflection in a manner that allows them to write

confidently about their self-selected place. The features of agency and responsibility will be addressed by evaluating student writings based on the students' awareness of their active role within the environment, that they perceive responsibility for their places, and the environment beyond.

Interviews

As the researcher plays a primary role in qualitative research, I am using semi-structured interviews in order to answer my research questions (Galletta, 2012). Semi-structured interviews allow for greater flexibility throughout the interview process as the interviewer and interviewee engage in reciprocally created and lead interviews by allowing the possibility to digress from the questions if necessary in order to provide more details or insights or by adding probing questions where more clarification is needed (Galletta, 2012; Mishler, 1986; Seidman, 2006). In regards to co-construction of meaning within such interviews, Mishler (1986) appears to mirror assumptions also found in narrative inquiry and notes that “the discourse of the interview is jointly constructed by interviewer and respondent” (p. 52). Further, he describes how interviews are a co-construction process in which interviewer and interviewee “try to make continuing sense of what they are saying to each other” (p. 54).

Mishler (1986) points out that through interviews, we can gain further insights into our participants', in my case student writers', ideas, thoughts, and opinions on topics we are investigating. I am interested in understanding my students' subjective perspectives on the Environmental Literature and Writing course after they have completed it, to understand more fully how they perceived the course in regards to their writing and reflections on their roles in our environments. By doing interviews, students are able to express themselves using their own words and language, therefore presenting a realistic insight into their reality.

When describing narratives and stories that can emerge as part of interviews, Mishler (1986) remarks that interviewees are likely to provide lengthy and specific accounts to “specific questions if they are not interrupted by interviewers trying to keep them to the ‘point’” (p. 69). Seidman (2006) agrees and mentions that by providing interviewees with “enough openness” (p. 20) within the interview setting and process, they are more likely to tell their individual stories.

I will be using semi-structured interviews (Berg, 2009; Galletta, 2012; Seidman, 2006) since this type of interview structure includes specific questions that are expected to be addressed while still providing enough flexibility for interviewees to fully share their experiences and stories and digress from the question (Berg, 2009). In this process, the interviewer is able “to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared standardized questions” (Berg, 2009, p. 107), providing flexibility to interviewee and interviewer.

Seidman (2006) identifies a three-interview process, which should maximize insight into the participants’ experiences, lives, and ways of making sense of these. While the first interview aims at a broad understanding of the participant’s life by asking a general question about the participant’s biography, the second interview gives the participant an opportunity to focus on a specific, lived experience or routine that creates an experience. The purpose of the second interview is to “reconstruct the myriad details of our participants’ experiences in the area we are studying” (p. 18). During the third interview, interviewees are asked to make sense of their experiences by reflecting on the meaning(s) of such lived experiences. The last interview asks the participants to contextualize their experiences and to “look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” (p. 18-19). Seidman (2006) uses a broad to narrow approach, beginning with questions that elicit a broad sense of the interviewee’s life and experiences and ending with very specific questions that seek to understand how the participants

make sense and meaning of their current situations and experiences.

Although Seidman (2006) explains that this three-phase interview set is effective as it allows the interviewer and interviewees to focus on only one topic at a time, I must keep in mind that my prospective student participants are very busy in their academic and non-academic lives. From my experience at my institution and with the local students there, most undergraduates are involved in clubs, sports, study groups, organizations, and other activities that occupy their time. Some students even go home after the day's coursework is completed as their help is needed on the family farm where their chores continue despite their enrollment in school. Most STEM students are required to participate in study-groups or science clubs, leaving them with little time to do other things that are not related to their areas of study. Also, Seidman's (2006) well-justified timeframe of approximately 90 minutes per interview, is not logical or feasible for my study context due to the time constraints my students encounter during their semesters. I understand that it will be kind and generous of my students to give me some of their time and set aside a few hours of their busy lives to partake in our interviews. I have therefore modified Seidman's (2006) interview questions, question sequence, time frame, and meeting times in order to be more suitable for my study and to accommodate my student participants. I will be meeting my student research participants for one interview which will last between 60 and 90 minutes. The questions are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4

Interview Questions – One 60-90 Minute Interview per Student Research Participant

Question	Focus	Purpose
How have you viewed yourself as part of the environment throughout your life?	Broad – life experience; Past to present	Understand the student within environmental context; view student within their lives and how they have constructed their roles and themselves within nature and made meaning of themselves as part of nature (or not) prior to taking Envs. Lit & Wr.
How has taking Environmental Literature and Writing affected your perception of your role within the environment?	Broad – Narrow; Past to present	Understand Envs. Lit & Wr. as experience and as event that has affected their perceptions of role within nature
How do you see your role within the environment now, after having taken Environmental Literature and Writing?	Narrow; Present to future	Student explains experiences within environmental context; connecting experience to meaning of current/new role
How did you establish this new role for yourself?	Narrow; Past to present	Student reflects on meaning making; making sense of experience
What aspects of the course contributed to this new meaning of yourself within the environment?	Narrow; Past to present	Understand what elements of the course were impactful and challenged the student to review their role within their environment; connecting concrete event and experience to meaning of current/new role
How do you see yourself as a writer (within an environment) after having taken Environmental Literature and Writing?	Broad-Narrow; Past to present	Understand how writing in the Envs. Lit & Wr. course has affected student writing
How did writing help you create your current understanding of your role within the environment?	Narrow; Past to present	Understand how writing aided in the establishment of currently held environmental role

Following Seidman's (2006) suggestions, the questions are listed from broad to narrow, allowing me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the students and their relationship with and within nature. Also, as temporal orientations are integral to stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I have listed which time in the interviewee's life each of the questions may seek to address. Unlike Seidman (2006), I will not meet the students three times because, as mentioned above, such time impositions will not work with my student population. Also, I aim at one 60-90 minute interview session instead of being fixated on the 90 minutes that Seidman prefers.

My first question will aim at understanding my students' overall life story in relation to our natural environments. Seidman (2006) points out that "how" questions are more likely to yield answers in which participants "reconstruct and narrate a range of constitutive events in their past" (p. 17), instead of simply listing information (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Further, "how" questions elicit "stories and narratives that tell us about relations among things" (Bernard & Ryan, 2010, p. 36), which is what I am aiming at for my overall research study.

The first question, *How have you viewed yourself as part of the environment throughout your life?*, seeks to contextualize the student, therefore allowing me to make sense of their lived experiences within or without nature. This will allow me to gain a better understanding of the students' interests and dispositions towards the environment up until the present moment. The answer will contextualize the student within his or her environment and environmental experiences.

The second question, *How has taking Environmental Literature and Writing affected your perception of your role within the environment?*, will then focus on a more concrete experience, namely, taking Environmental Literature and Writing and the students' development throughout the course and beyond. The question also seeks to frame taking Environmental

Literature and Writing as an experience and event, which has played some role in the student participant's perception of their role within their environment.

The third question, *How do you see your role within the environment now after having taken Environmental Literature and Writing?*, aims at the students explaining their specific experience within their environmental context by connecting experience to the meaning of their new role within the environment. Although similar to question number two, question three focuses on a more solidified, concrete answer that focuses on the presence, present perception of the experience, and the presently lived experience of having a potentially new role within nature. Also, the question seeks to understand how students might take this currently lived experience into the future with them and how they negotiate its meaning in their future.

Question four, *How did you establish this new role for yourself?*, asks my students to reflect on their meaning making process, what factors played into their process of making sense of a new experience and role.

The most concrete question, which I would like to have answered in a list or list-like fashion, is number five, *What aspects of the course contributed to this new meaning of yourself within the environment?*. This interview question will help students connect concrete occurrences with their meaning making process of potentially establishing their new role within the environment. Also, this question will help me understand what students find effective, what aspects of the course challenged their perceptions of their roles within the environment, and what simply did not work in attaining this course goal.

The last two questions, *How do you see yourself as a writer (within an environment) after having taken Environmental Literature and Writing*, and *How did writing help you create your current understanding of your role within the environment?*, address writing within the given

course. Question six asks student participants to reflect on how their overall writing experience has been affected by having completed Environmental Literature and Writing. Question seven can help in my understanding of how writing within the course helped students create their current role within the environment or challenge a formerly existing one.

All questions are designed to further my understanding of how students perceive their roles in their natural environments after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course and if the course actually did affect their understating and development of their current roles within our environmental surroundings. Also, the questions will help me understand what role writing played in the Environmental Literature and Writing students' establishment of their current perception of their roles within nature. All interview questions are therefore aimed at answering my first and second research question.

Although I will most certainly allow students to digress and perhaps clarify or follow up on some answers by using additional probing questions (Berg, 2009) and thereby going over the given time, I will state the approximate interview length of 60-90 minutes at the beginning of the interviews in order to remain focused on the questions (Seidman, 2006).

Regarding the wording of the questions, which plays a crucial role when trying to elicit data (Berg, 2009), my fall 2015 students and I shared the 16-week Environmental Literature and Writing class and met twice a week for 88 minutes. Most terms used in the interview will have been addressed in class through discussions, readings, or through conversations. In addition, as listed below, students who are interested in participating in the interviews will receive the questions before meeting, allowing them to brainstorm their positions and to ask clarifying questions if necessary.

Interview procedures. Following the end of the course and my submission of all final grades to the registrar, I will contact my former Environmental Literature and Writing students via email (Appendix E) to invite them to my research interviews. As student schedules will vary, I will leave it to them when they would like to meet. I will offer students to meet in locations on or around campus that are convenient for both of us, such as student study rooms, common areas in dorms, and so forth. If students have no location preference, interviews will take place in my office on campus, which students will already be familiar with due to our conferences that took place there throughout the semester. In an effort to make the interviews as effective as possible and giving the students an opportunity to prepare for the new discourse event, I will email the interview questions to students who send me replies and express interest in partaking in the interviews, prior to our meeting. I will also ask students to bring whatever course writings they have to our interview meeting. Following the interviews, students may, at any time, see the transcriptions prior to my finalizing them.

Participant Protection – Ethical Considerations

Including students or any participants in one's research can always pose some risks. Although the risks of the proposed study are minimal, I have considered various proactive measures to minimize the risks for my students as much as possible. First, all students will be fully informed about the study and its components and goals. All students who agree to participate in the interviews and bring with them whatever written materials they have from Environmental Literature and Writing will be asked to sign an Informed Consent form (Appendix F), and receive a copy of the form for them to keep. Further, students already have my cell phone number, email address, and office location information, which will allow them to choose from several communication channels to ask questions or raise concerns at any given

time. Also, before we begin the interviews, I will again ask for any questions they might have.

Potential risks. My students might find themselves struggling to come up with interview answers that they find effective or that sufficiently address the question. Further, my students might face instances in which they are confronted with ideological questions regarding their previous or current assumptions considering their roles within nature, matters of sustainability, and the environment as overall system. Some students might feel uncomfortable answering the first interview question as it seeks to contextualize the students within their environment throughout their life. Reflecting on their life might be uncomfortable to students, leading them to feel awkward and unsure within the interview process. My students might also be concerned about their privacy and who will see the interviews.

Protection against risks. In order to address my students' potential feelings of nervousness about the effectiveness of their responses, I will emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers to the given questions and that all answers are valid and acceptable within the context. If questions are unclear, I will clarify them prior to the interviews. I will ensure that students may pause the interview at any time, if they feel uncomfortable, unsure, or need further clarification.

Regarding ideological challenges, I will also emphasize that no questions are better than others and that there is no right or wrong answer. I will try to further alleviate any distress regarding the confrontation of ideological beliefs by providing an open, trusting, and safe interview space and environment.

Similar to the potential of students' uncertainty regarding answers, I will inform them prior to the interviews that they may stop, pause, or interrupt the interviews at any given point if they feel uncomfortable, would rather not answer some of the questions, or would like to end the

process. This information will also be given at the beginning of the interviews.

I will also address any issues and questions of privacy in my initial email, which will be sent out following the course grading and completion and in which I will seek prospective student participants. In order to protect my student participants' privacy, I will ensure them that they may review the transcriptions at any point prior to my turning in the dissertation. Also, student participants may use a self-chosen, gender-reflective pseudonym, which will not only be referred to throughout my dissertation but that will also be used on the transcription sheets. The students' actual identities will never be revealed at any time before, during, or after my dissertation work.

Research Questions and Corresponding Data Sources

The following table outlines what data sources will be used in order to answer the research questions.

Table 5

Data Sources

Question	Data sources
1) Does the students' writing exemplify "authority" (Owens, 2001b, p. 36) and "powers of expression" (Hothem, 2009, p. 43) after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course? Further, does students' writing demonstrate that they have become "agents" (Mauk, 2003, p. 216) of their work who seem to take "responsibility" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 11) for their places?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collecting of student work - Writings found in the published book (final class publication) - Student interviews - Journals - Anonymous course evaluations
2) How do students place themselves in their natural environments after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course? What do they think their role is within their environments following the completion of the class?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student interviews - Journals - Anonymous course evaluations - Student produced notes (during class) - Interviews
3) How do I, as the teacher, course designer, and researcher evolve while teaching a semester long Environmental Writing course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teaching journal - Interviews - Anonymous course evaluations

Methods of Data Collection Procedures – A Timeline

The flowchart and accompanying list below outline how I will go about conducting my research in order to effectively address my research questions.

- 1) During the fall semester of 2015, I will teach my self-designed Environmental Literature and Writing course for the first time. I will engage in my usual routine teaching practices, which will allow me to narrate my experience in later chapters of my dissertation.

- 2) As stated, my Environmental Literature and Writing students will turn in a final paper that will be published using www.Joomag.com or www.Lulu.com in early December. The writing within this publication will be used to answer my research questions, particularly, research question one, which seeks to address how having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course affects student writing. In order to be sensitive towards my students' privacy, they may use pseudonyms for the publication if they feel uncomfortable publishing their composed texts.
- 3) Following my three chapter defense, which will most likely take place in January, 2016, I hope to receive IRB approval to continue with my study.
- 4) Spring 2016: I will then start recruiting former Environmental Literature and Writing students from the fall, 2015 semester in order to conduct interviews as described earlier. I will give myself and my students several weeks to ensure I can complete as many student interviews as possible and gain a thorough understanding of my participants' perceptions of their writing and role within the environment. The interviews will also aid in the answering of my research questions, specifically, research questions one and two.
- 5) Following the completion of the interviews, I will transcribe the data using a headset and laptop. As discussed earlier, I will ask students who agree to conduct interviews, to bring writings (assignments, journals, notes, and so forth) from our course as these will also aid in my efforts to understand my students in regards to the Environmental Literature and Writing course and resultantly, answer my research questions.
- 6) Following the collection of all my data, I will synthesize the acquired information in order to answer my research questions. This will allow me to then compose chapters four and five of my dissertation, which will address the findings, provide conclusions and

discussions, and offer suggestions for future research that may arise along the research process.

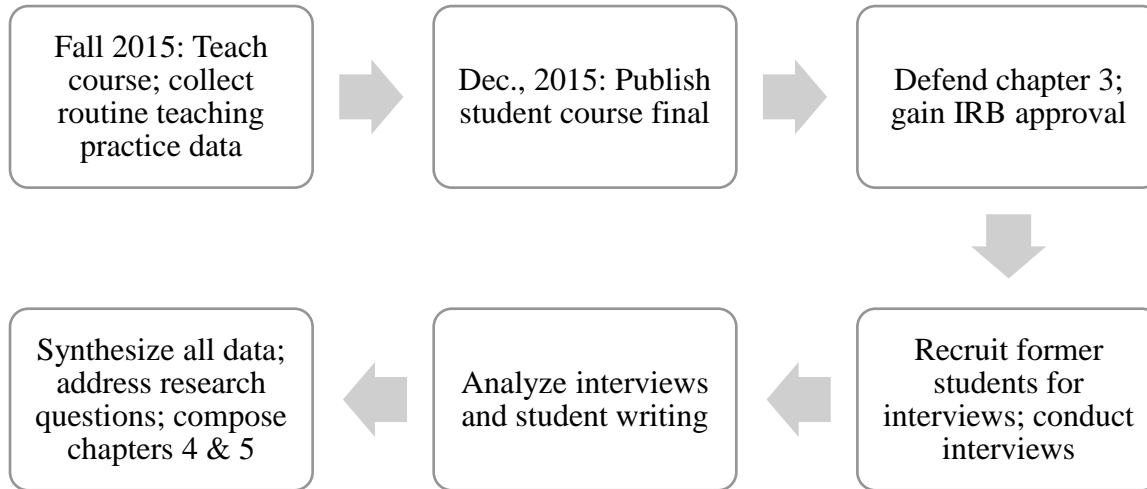


Figure 1. Flowchart of research and data collection.

Summary and Preview

In this chapter, I described my researcher positionality, conflicting ideologies I encountered when approaching Environmental Writing, and how these challenges have been addressed. I outlined my methodological approaches and how these will aid in the answering of my research questions. This chapter also entailed descriptions of prospective student participants, the focal course, writing assignments and their purposes within this course, and my routine teaching practices, which will all contribute to the answering of my research questions. Also, I provided an overview of potential ethical issues that might occur in regards to my prospective student participants and ways in which I will address these in order to protect my student participants.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, I provided an overview of my dissertation's methodology. I described components of Narrative Inquiry, how it works well as methodology for my dissertation, and aligns with ecomposition and my overall epistemological attitude towards perceptions of reality, personal experiences, and individual procedures of sense and meaning making. Further, I described what data I will use and collect to answer my three research questions, and what potential risks my study entails for my student participants and how I will address these throughout my dissertation. Also, I provided an approximate timeline that should allow for a more detailed understanding of my procedures.

In the current chapter, I will present my data and analyze it in order to answer my research questions. I will describe how I used my data to gain a better understanding of how my students' writing exemplifies types of authority, agency, and responsibility after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course. Further, I will explain how my data contributed to my increased understanding of how my students place themselves in their natural environments and what they perceive their roles to be within such environments after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course. Lastly, I will address how I, as the designer of the course, teacher, and researcher, have evolved through having taught the described class.

By mid-December, my Environmental Literature and Writing students had completed all required aspects of the course. All assignments were turned in, the last note takers had submitted their notes, and our readings had been read and discussed. We had spent the last few weeks peer reviewing and brainstorming their final essays and discussed the theoretical framework of

ecocomposition quite thoroughly. Although most were not too thrilled about the Fleckenstein et al. (2008) text, most explained that reading Dobrin & Weisser (2002), Hothem (2009), and Cahalan (2008) had helped them to better understand the importance of place in writing. Regarding Cooper (1986), my students enjoyed the metaphorical framework her text creates but also mentioned that it got a bit lengthy after a while. I was, however, impressed with the students' willingness to engage with these rather complex texts and to try to find meaning in them in relation to what they were asked to do for their final paper.

My students published their final class piece via Joomag.com on December 10, 2015, and were noticeably excited about their progress and their publication. We had held our last class day on December 8, 2015, but I asked for three volunteers to meet again the following Thursday in order to finalize the layout and design of the student publication. To my surprise, seven students attended that last day and we spent the 90 minutes preparing their book for publication, reflecting on the semester, and planning a reunion. After we had proudly hit the "publish" button, several students came up to me to see how they could purchase a hardcopy and to inquire about the English Department's willingness to buy a few copies for them. As my students knew I would be taking another position at a local college, they asked me for my new email address so we could more easily stay in touch or exchange the newest updates on how our publication was being received by various audiences. I received several hugs and repeated requests for staying in touch, both of which are always the most rewarding compliments one can receive after completing a class.

I sent out an email later that afternoon, thanking the seven volunteers for their efforts and time and felt quite sad to know that I wouldn't be returning to our smelly basement classroom where I would be awaited by a group of sixteen individuals struggling to arrange the chairs in a

quasi-circle each Tuesday and Thursday. I would miss their inferences, thoughtful insights, conscientious contributions, ideas, thoughts, and questions that electrified that dingy old room that we had called a cave, a dungeon, and a hole throughout our time inside its rectangular, yellow stained walls. At times the room felt so small and stuffy with the large wooden double doors, that we had to keep open to feel like there was a possibility for ventilation.

On the evening of December 10, 2015, one of my students sent me an image of a wooden plaque that presented a “Prayer of the Woods”. The plaque read,

I am the heat of your hearth on the cold winter nights, the friendly shade screening you from the summer sun, and my fruits are refreshing draughts quenching your thirst as you journey on. I am the beam that holds your house, the board of your table, the bed on which you lie, and the timber that builds your boat. I am the handle of your hoe, the door of your homestead, the wood of your cradle, and the shell of your coffin; I am the bread of kindness and the flower of beauty. Ye who pass by, listen to my prayer: Harm me not.

She stated that she liked the perspective the writing offered and how she wished she would have seen it earlier to incorporate into her final essay. She and I went back and forth a few times discussing where the sign may be found or who the author might be. Knowing that some of my students were thinking about our course even after the class had officially ended made me feel hopeful for them, our environment, and our future.

Research Question 1

Does the students' writing exemplify authority and powers of expression after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course? Further, does students' writing demonstrate that they have become agents of their work who seem to take responsibility for their places?

Agency

I would like to problematize the idea of agency before presenting my data as the term itself can at times be misleading or interpreted differently depending on the context in which it arises (Thomas, 2015). Therefore, clarifying what I mean when I refer to students as “agents” or what I had in mind when composing this research question, appears crucial.

The foundation for my third research question lies in Mauk's (2003) *College English* article “Location, Location, Location: The “Real” (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking in Composition”, in which he describes the influence place-based writing can have on writing students' agency. He suggests that by giving students place-based writing assignments, we give them an opportunity to bridge academic- with non-academic spheres and lives, thereby allowing them to use “academic tools within their nonacademic lives” (p. 382). By “picturing students as agents of academic/intellectual work [we] may help cast writing as a transformative exercise” (p. 382). We can give students opportunities to take control not only of their education and learning but also their places, which they inhabit. Students who write about the places they know so intimately are given the opportunity to produce and deliver “socially useful knowledge” (Trimbur, 2000, p. 191) instead of abstract and non-personal writing assignments that they oftentimes feel dissociated from lack of interest in (Mauk, 2003). In other words, I want to see if my students' writing suggests that they have successfully bridged the artificial boundaries between their academic and non-academic lives by using knowledge and insights about the

environment and apply such to their individual places. In the grading rubric (*Appendix D*) that I created to evaluate the students' final piece of writing in our course, this sense of agency is described as "Student writing suggests that student is aware of her/his active role within the environment, that she/he has responsibility for her/his place, and the extended environment beyond." In order to receive a "present" as opposed to an "absent" on this evaluation point, the student's writing must exhibit elements of the larger environment in which their place is located and demonstrate that they understand their active, contributing, and impactful role within all of these natural surroundings.

Further, agency is deeply embedded in and dependent on context (Thomas, 2015; Mauk, 2003). Mauk (2003) says that "Individual body and particular location form a context that is mutable, dynamic. The individual is the intersection of place and practice, and is the here and now of the place" (p. 375). Similarly, Thomas (2015) suggests that agency is malleable and changes depending on historic, social, and economic factors that mark a specific place and time. Considering my Environmental Literature and Writing students, our natural status quo marks their individual as well as collective contexts as they seek to make sense of their own realities within the interconnected and interdependent systems of which they are part.

Agency is oftentimes associated with concepts such as "individual actions, choices, motivations, and intentions" (Thomas, 2015, p. 2), or a person's ability and capacity. In regards to my Environmental Literature and Writing course and the overall natural environment in which we find ourselves, I am eager to find if my students' writing evidences a sense of the student writers viewing themselves as agents that recognize their responsibility and vital role in their natural surroundings and places that they are inevitably and naturally part of. To some degree, I equate or align the individual's agency with a sense of responsibility as I view both of these

factors as active and aware. Reynolds (2004) describes that “for writers, location is an act of inhabiting one’s words; location is a struggle as well as a place, an act of coming into being and taking responsibility” (p. 11). She emphasizes individual accountability and an individual’s ability to recognize that their independent-seeming actions affect larger, interdependent structures, locations, and places. Identity is heavily place-bound and therefore perceptions of individual agency and responsibility should be byproducts of recognizing one’s active role within an environment, habitat, or place.

Student Writing

Following the publication of our final student publication (<http://www.joomag.com/magazine/a-web-of-places/0580328001449681082?short>), which contained 16 place-based, student written texts, I carefully evaluated the student submissions using the rubric (Appendix D) I had created. To my delight, several students’ writing could be categorized as having “authenticity”, which suggested that “students successfully combine the knowledge and awareness of the larger environment”, which they are part of and “make personal connections to their role” (Balgopal & Wallace, 2009, p. 21). While the subjective category presents work in which students write clearly about their places but not in a manner that suggests their understanding of their role within the larger environment, the objective category denotes student essays in which the student can effectively formulate concepts and issues pertaining to their larger environment and places but cannot articulate the individual significance of this place, therefore not writing themselves into the environment. The authentic classification of student writing, which I hoped to gather from their final essays, implies that my student writers had effectively combined research and information about their places and/or the larger environment with the narratives and experiences that make these places uniquely their own and thereby, worth saving.

In regards to “Authority/Power”, which I defined as the students’ clear demonstration of identifying with her or his place and that it is clear that the student has researched or reflected on her or his place sufficiently to write confidently about it, I found most student papers to exemplify such powers of expression and confidence. Also, I was interested in viewing my students’ writing in regards to exemplifying agency and responsibility towards our environment and their roles within such webs.

Interviewees’ privacy. It is important to note that although the five interviewees’ final writings all exemplified papers that I was able to categorize as “authentic”, I did not include the interviewee’s finals in the current analysis in order to protect their identities. However, their work was addressed and assessed alongside the interview data that was analyzed throughout the second research question below. The analysis of the five interviewee’s final papers can be found in the section titled “Research Question 2”.

In addition, my five interviewees also exemplified elements of authority/power and agency/responsibility in their papers but were excluded from the current analysis to ensure the protection of their identities. Similarly to the prior category, their work is discussed below in the section titled “Research Question 2”, which is dedicated to answering research question 2.

Groups

It is difficult to pinpoint specifically who was affected or not affected by the class and its components since some data was acquired anonymously. However, as I retrieved the students’ final essays that were published through JooMag online, and since I interviewed five individuals, I was able to get a clearer picture of what students’ writing reflected the desired student and course outcomes outlined in the course syllabus. Relying primarily on my final paper rubric that

I had designed (see Appendix D), I grouped my writing students into the “no effect”, “some effect”, or “noticeable effect” groups in order to organize and arrange my student data.

No effect. Referring back to the final essay rubric, the students’ writing that I did not categorize as “authentic”, and that did therefore not reflect the desired class outcome and effect were an eclectic group of individuals. Those who I rated as “subjective” included four female students and three male students. All of my female students that I entered into the “no effect” group were sophomores. Of these female student writers, one was a Criminal Justice major, one a Business Administration major, an Elementary Education major, and one of the female students majored in Agricultural Education. Below is a specific discussion of the students’ final essays along with the reasoning for my decision to classify their writing as I did.

Cassidy Babcock. In her final paper, “You Are Home”, Cassidy exclaims that “Utah has my soul [...] Utah was the only place I got to truly connect with and devote my time to” (p. 8-9). She recognizes that “I had no purpose to these mountains, yet they held so much purpose in my life” (p. 9), and presents an intimate collection of her thoughts in regards to the scenery of her Utah. Inserting elements of research, Cassidy explains the etymology of Utah as meaning “people of the mountains”, and she exclaims that “I was one of those people” (p. 9). She also adds that Utah has some of the highest mountain peaks in the area and that she “believed they were made high enough to block out the evils of the world.” Although Cassidy genuinely and deeply connects with her place, her writing does not reflect the awareness of the larger and greater environment to which her place is inevitably tied. The brief insights into externally researched and added material does not provide the audience with a sense of interconnectivity and fails to grant insight into how her place is affected by or affects things beyond Cassidy’s experiences. Her piece was therefore categorized as “subjective”.

Authority/Power. In regards to the “Authority/Power” category as listed on the rubric, Cassidy’s work most certainly exemplifies her genuine connection with her place and the implied confidence and power that she expresses through her writings. As her final essay is filled with profound narratives, images, and poems that remind her of her place, Cassidy’s writing presents a powerful, impactful, and creative paper that indicates her identification with her selected place, Utah. Another interesting element about Cassidy’s paper is the fact that she included the aforementioned genres, such as poetry and narratives, in order to emphasize the variety of associations, emotions, and feelings she perceives in regards to her Utah.

Agency/Responsibility. Unfortunately, Cassidy’s work did not suggest her awareness of her active role within her environment. compared to some peers, Cassidy’s work did not suggest that she perceived herself as having agency in regards to changing our current global circumstances, nor did the final paper present thoughts on the writer’s sense of responsibility towards her place or larger environment.

Karsen Vance. Karsen selected her family’s red barn as her most important and valuable place that has been influential and conducive to her sense of self. She describes: “The barn is an old barn with chipping red paint, a few small cracks between the wood exterior boards, a huge hay mow, five horse stalls, and endless possibilities.[...] I would sit in the barn for hours daydreaming about my future animals” (p. 22). Emphasizing the importance her place has had on her as a person, Karsen adds that

My red barn has been a major factor in my life. no matter the chipping paint, creaking floors, and dust in the corners it has helped me become who I am today. Teaching me the value of hard work, how to be responsible, and that life is not always going to go my way or be easy. My barn has been my childhood and will greatly affect my future. It has

guided me to my chosen field of study and is the reason why I want to educate students on agriculture (p. 25).

Karsen uses her personal experiences and connection to her place to gain a better understanding of herself and outlines the interdependence between her location and self. She narrates experiences and emphasizes specific incidents that taught her things about herself, while allowing her to make sense of certain inevitable occurrences, such as changes in life and the need to “adjust to it” (p. 25). However, Karsen does not address the larger environment and its relationship with her place, leading me to categorize her final essay as “subjective”.

Authority/Power. Similar to the other writers in her class, Karsen’s writing is infused with confidence as she writes about details, encounters, experiences, and other aspects of her place that present her deep connection and understanding of her chosen location. She does not only address the physical barn as being crucial to her understanding of herself but also the animals that depend on and inhabit her place. The thorough and detailed understanding and feeling for her place present the framework for her powerful and confident writing and the authority, which dictates her final paper.

Agency/Responsibility. Despite Karsen not addressing the larger environmental situation and the existing interdependence between it and her place, Karsen exemplifies a clear sense of understanding her own role within her overall environment. She writes that “as a human, I co-exist with all the creatures on the Earth, not me controlling or taking from them but living with and respecting them” (p. 24). Quoting her FFA (Future Farmers of America) motto, “Do what you can, with what you have, where you are”, Karsen explains that “I do not necessarily have a choice in everything that happens in life but I do have the ability to continue to do something with what I am given and where I am in life. In my mind this is God’s way of molding me into

who I am and who I will become. This is why He blessed me with agriculture in my life” (p. 25). Adding her very intimate religious insights, Karsen clearly perceives her role to be within the agricultural sphere, which largely depends on nature. Karsen explains the importance of religion as she states that “I believe in God and his importance in my life. I believe that God has a large amount of control in my life and life in general” (p. 24), which suggests that if her belief in God also includes the environment, the environment is of extreme significance.

As she expresses throughout her writing that there is nothing more valuable to her than her animals and the continuation of her family’s farm, she has effectively placed herself within that environment, however small, and recognizes that she has the responsibility to protect her animals and ensure the land is healthy. Karsen also mentions that

there have been many morning or late nights that I have gone out to the barn to feed my animals and I have found an opossum or raccoon eating out of the grain bins. As much as I hate them they have a place in the ecosystem. They are not any better than I am when they are eating out of my grain bins trying to better themselves when I am using nature to better myself as well (p. 24)

This further supports the idea that Karsen views the environment as intrinsically valuable and that she lives alongside other creatures who are similar in their dependence on nature as she is. Additionally, she clearly comprehends the concept of interconnectivity and how it is exemplified in her own place and life.

Abbie Kaiser. Abbie describes a campground around Pardeeville, Wisconsin as her unique place as she has endless memories that are associated with this location. She describes: “summer after summer my family and I have travelled up North to the same camping spot; it was unique, it was precious, it was my place” (p. 54). Although she has not been to this site in a very

long time, Abbie explains how its natural beauty has been incredibly influential to her life and is still a spot she likes to reflect on when thinking of her environment. Even after all these years, she can recall certain routines and sensual impressions. She writes

I remember like it was yesterday: I woke up just as the sun was beginning to rise above the curvature of Earth's surface on the midsummer's day, and I walked down to the small fishing lake that resided on the campground. The air remained somewhat frigid as I wandered down the path, when I moved a tree branch from my path, the morning dew slipped from the horizon, but remained over the calm of the lake [...] There was no sound; simply nothing. The world was at a standstill as nothing seemed to exist, but me. The sound of emptiness is a difficult sound to explain, as it is the rarest to be heard (p. 55).

Abbie continues her reflections to a time before her own and describes the possible flora and fauna that marked the described location during the Ice Age. She concludes that "this is a world that is unknown to all human beings today, and that unknown is a beautiful thing [...] The only thing separating us from then and now is time. Time separates us from generations past and future" (p. 56), which leads to her analysis of how her place has also changed from being rather isolated and untouched to being filled with new "housing developments" (p. 56) and perhaps soon, "skyscrapers" (p. 56). She concludes by stating that "someday this place will look different. Someday this lake will be gone" (p. 57).

Abbie's writing is filled with a clear understanding of her place, the significance it has on her life, and the potential changes it has undergone. Abbie's piece does not, however, present a successful combination of the knowledge of the larger environment and awareness and knowledge of her place. She does not make a personal connection to the larger environment but

remains in the narratives of her experiences with her own place. I therefore categorized her paper as “subjective”.

Authority/Power. Regarding Abbie’s work reflecting power and authority as part of her identification with her selected place, Abbie certainly shows confidence in her abilities to write about her place. She is aware of various elements of the appearance of the described place, her experiences with it, and the meaning her place has in her current life. Abbie writes in an extremely descriptive manner that suggests that she is very familiar with her place. While reminiscing about her time at the campsite’s lake, she states

I looked through the clear blue water and saw small fish hiding amongst the weeds and algae, circling one another and darting back and forth as if they were playing a game of tag. Once in a while one would come to the surface as if they were greeting me, welcoming me to their world; one not readily seen by my human eyes. I reached down and touched the surface of the water, causing the fish to disappear faster than the blink of an eye (p. 55).

This description supports the idea of Abbie’s conscious experience with her surroundings, which then make her writing appear very powerful and filled with the confidence of possessing knowledge and awareness of a place.

Agency/Responsibility. Although Abbie does not directly address her active role within the larger or local environment, she briefly describes her impression of not only her role within nature, but our current, Western human race’s impact on the environment. She explains “it is sad that the future is so bleak for the world that we only see the remnants of destruction and not flourishing. We know what we have done, yet we don’t look to fix the problems that we have created on the planet. The future is bleak, because we make it bleak” (p. 57). These concluding

remarks suggest that the writer is aware of our current state that “we” as a collective human society and local culture have caused. Abbie does not use the pronoun “I” to indicate her own role and possible responsibility and agency to create change. She appears to view herself as part of the larger race that has created the natural status quo without reflecting on the possibility of her own actions having the ability to make a difference.

Alyssa Miller. Alyssa’s final essay sheds light on her deep and strong connection with her place that she identified as Rock Cut State Park in Illinois, which she describes as “magical within its borders where there are trees for acres that contain many woodland creatures and opportunities for play” (p. 80). Similar to other writers, Alyssa also addresses the seasonal changes of the State Park, which suggests that she has not only experienced the place during various parts of the year and therefore engaged with it extensively, but also that she has reflected on the sensations of her place and how they alter throughout the year. Alyssa writes that “there are different ways to appreciate this place throughout the change of the seasons” (p. 80), and offers an extensive description of the perceived changes and their effects on visitors, such as “cherry red” (p. 80) noses in winter, or the experience of “crunching leaves” (p. 80) in autumn. Alyssa briefly addresses the health benefits that nature and therefore, her place, have to offer for humans, which hints towards her attempt to broaden her approach from her chosen place to overall nature. Combining research with her experience, she describes that

Nature is not only a place for one to love, but it provides many health benefits, too.

Nature can reduce stress, which in turn impacts our bodies. I know for me that being at Rock Cut State Park has offered me on many occasions a place to let off some steam.

Whether it was hiking rigorous trails, or kayaking down the river, it gave me a place to let go of the everyday struggles of life. Nature can heal. Being in nature and even viewing

scenes of nature, can reduce fear anger, and stress, and increase your overall mood, and pleasant feelings. Exposure to nature not only makes you feel better emotionally, but it contributes to your physical wellbeing. It can help reduce blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, and the production of stress hormones (p. 81).

Alyssa also addresses what author and naturalist, Richard Louv (2005) has identified and coined as nature deficit disorder. Alyssa describes that today's children are not spending enough time outdoors and may therefore be less creative and cognitively stimulated. Her research on the topic also suggests her attempt to address a larger societal issue and how her own place makes her recognize the role of nature in her childhood. She writes that "nature requires children to think and use their brains which was something often incorporated into play while I was at Rock Cut State Park" (p .82). However, her writing does not address larger environmental issues and problems and how these affect her selected location. The connection between larger and individual place might have shed more light on her own role within the larger environment, which is further discussed below.

Alyssa evidently understands the benefits of nature but does not address contemporary issues that affect the larger environment and her location; I therefore rated her work as being "subjective".

Authority/Power. As stated, Alyssa's work is filled with insights and reflections on her place. Her writing suggests that she has sincerely identified with her selected location and has immersed herself in experiences and thoughts sufficiently to write about it with authority and confidence. She writes about her place in a manner that suggests that she has examined every aspect of it and engaged in it beyond a superficial or topical encounter. Alyssa writes "The first time I set foot in this place I was a little girl with a wandering mind. It was my safe zone and the

place that I called home during the changing of the seasons. It will forever be the place that I find myself wanting to venture away and lose myself in, time and time again” (p. 80). Further, she explains that “There is an overall calming sensation I feel when I visit here often. As the bristle of the tress blends together with one another and I hear the birds chirping in the distance, I can feel the warming sun on my face. The ripple of the waves roll over one another and I can hear them pitter-patter as they lap onto the shore” (p. 80). Her writing demonstrates a clear sense that Alyssa knows Rock Cut State Park almost as well as she knows herself. She knows what to expect, what emotions her place evokes, and how it has been a companion in her development over the years. Strengthening the sense of her confidence in identifying and writing about her location, Alyssa adds that “When I’m having a bad day or just need a little escape I can find myself in the realms of Rock Cut exploring its borders. It makes me feel complete and gives me a sense of wellbeing” (p. 82), which furthers the notion that she has sufficiently reflected on her place and its overall meaning in her life.

Agency/Responsibility. Throughout her text, Alyssa clearly reflects on her understanding of nature, her place, and the effect her place has had on her. As stated, Alyssa explored the health benefits of nature and how nature can aid as an “alternative for depression, anxiety, and stress” (p. 81). She writes that “Nature is very easy to connect with. Nature is raw, uninhibited and open. Spending time with nature allows us to unlock the purity found within ourselves. It helps us free the mind and spirit from negativity” (p. 82). She undoubtedly understands nature’s active role for humans and human well-being, but does not address what her or the overall human role should be or is in regards to our environment. Alyssa does not shed light on how she perceives herself as having responsibility toward her State Park and its well-being or the sustainability and preservation of nature in general. Her writing therefore does not suggest that she has created a

role for herself within the environment that relies on mutuality. Further, Alyssa's words do not exemplify a sense of individual responsibility or agency.

The three male students whose final paper I also categorized as "subjective" were comprised of two sophomore students and one junior. The two sophomores were majoring in Accounting and General Engineering, while the junior was majoring in Mechanical Engineering.

Nicholas Felske. Nicholas selected his deer stand on his family's land as his individual place that has been most influential and meaningful to his sense of self. He describes his tranquil place as follows: "My place on this land is a small spot where 3 valleys meet. I sit on the southern most peak looking northeast up one of the valleys. North of me is a crick that runs east and west. I chose this spot because of those two features, and now it is the most beautiful place in the woods to me" (p. 18). He continues exploring his hunting background and family ties that led him to purchase his first hunting license and eventually build the hunting stand. Nicholas explains that "while my stand is supposed to be used for hunting, but [sic] I have never actually taken a shot at a deer from my stand. In the four years I have sat in my stand, I have not taken a single deer" (p. 18). He explains that he has not yet come across the perfect "mature" (p. 19) deer that would be worth shooting and how the failure to shoot a deer has certainly not concerned him as he greatly enjoys simply sitting in his stand. He reflects:

Is there anything more beautiful than listening to all the animals in the woods sing at once in what sound [sic] like a symphony of the forest? I personally do not think so, and when I'm sitting in my stand I get to hear it all the time. Birds chirping, squirrels barking at one another, a turkey gobbling in the tree next to me, a lone cow mooing in the distance, a hawk screaming overheard [sic] and the sound of distant gun shots all help to make up

the forest symphony during hunting season in Wisconsin. Sometimes it is so relaxing just to be able to take in nature in its natural state (p. 19)

Nicholas writes very strongly about the impressions and emotions that he associates with his deer stand. His writing is filled with reflection and insights but lacks a connection to the larger environment that his individual location is inevitably part of. Therefore, I rated his final essay as “subjective”.

Authority/Power. As quoted earlier, Nicholas’ strong connection and awareness of his place’s features and benefits, clearly suggests that he has established a connection that has laid the foundation for genuine reflection and understanding of his place. He writes in a clear and detailed manner that reflects his identification with his selected location and allows him to write about it with authority and confidence. The knowledge and awareness that infuse his writing suggest his apparent understanding of the various elements that make up his place and how he has also become a part of this place. Nicholas writes that “For me, my stand is the most peaceful place in the world. Even though it is nothing special in appearance my stand is a very important place to me” (p. 19); these feelings and sentiments contribute to the sense of confidence with which Nicholas composes.

Agency/Responsibility. Although Nicholas definitely appreciates his natural place and the environment that surrounds it, his writing does not reflect a sense of personal responsibility or agency in regards to his role within the larger or individual environment. Compared to his peer, Nick Costello, who also addresses hunting in his piece, Nicholas does not explore the possibility of his hunting having an effect on population control and therefore service to the existing ecosystem. His writing does not address his role as one that contains responsibility towards his

environmental surroundings and it does not suggest that he perceives to have agency in regards to environmental maintenance and protection.

Brandon Steward. For his final paper, Brandon selected an important feature on his grandma's property. He explains that "My favorite place in nature is the Stone Bridge walking path behind my grandmother's house" (p. 32). Establishing a deeper understanding of the bridge's place in Brandon's upbringing and life, he describes his experiences with it and the emotional sensation he has associated with it throughout his life.

For as long as I can remember, that path has been my personal get away from the stresses of life. the [sic] path is much higher than my grandmother's backyard and it is obscured by trees and brush as far as the eye can see. In the very back corner of the yard I cleared out a small trail up to the walking path. Every time I emerge from the brush and step onto the path it's as if everything going on in the world hurls to a stop. The smell of pine needles engulfs me. I look around and see nothing but trees. The whole path is almost like a leafy tunnel with no end in sight. I feel like I am in complete isolation and nothing can interrupt my tranquility (p. 32)

Brandon's text demonstrates his obvious connection with his place and he is able to write clearly about his personal impressions and experiences with his chosen location. He is fully aware of various angles of the place and briefly addresses its historic context as having been built in an old rail bed (p. 33). Brandon can effectively describe his place in a way that allows his readers to visualize what he has become familiar with. He writes

When I begin walking on the path I am greeted with fresh air and the sounds of nature around me. There is an absence of human noise pollution. All I hear is the chirping of birds and the occasional scurrying of a small animal. I walk down the path until I reach a

wooden bridge with steps that lead down to a shallow creek. The top of the bridge is wood and the rest of it is made of stone (p. 32-33).

However, Brandon does not address the larger environment which his place is embedded in and part of. He does not demonstrate an understanding of the interconnectedness of the larger environment and his place and I therefore rated his work as “subjective”.

Authority/Power. The text about “Nature’s Stress Reliever” (p. 32), presents Brandon’s deep connection and identification with his place. He has reflected sufficiently to write about it with power and authority and the details that he is able to describe give his writing confidence.

Agency/Responsibility. Brandon ends his essay by stating that “Nature is something unique and should remain untouched” (p. 33). He does not provide any evidence of having identified his personal role within the environment and does not provide insights into his role as incorporating responsibility or agency in regards to the environment.

Joseph Garetson. In his final essay, Joseph refers to Nelson Lake in northern Wisconsin as his place. Joseph explains that “while the origins of the lake are not natural, the area surrounding the lake is mostly natural. The wildlife in and around the lake faces little to no invasive species, which makes it one of my favorite places to go for a vacation” (p. 50). He describes Nelson Lake and its peaceful surroundings to demonstrate his understanding and familiarity with his place. He writes

The area surrounding the lake had many trees and plants of different varieties compared to the suburban area where I lived. I enjoyed seeing this each time I came to the lake, although each time we came to the lake a new resort would have opened or a few new lodges had been built since we were last there. The lake looks beautiful in the morning, which makes it a great place to go on vacation at. To add to this, the fishing on the lake is

excellent as well and there is a variety of wildlife ranging from black crappies to loons”
(p. 50)

Adding a more specific memory from his encounter with the lake, Joseph reminisces “one of my favorite vacation activities is to go for walks around the lake, but resorts or private lodges covered the areas that I had walked through on previous vacations. The first time I went for a walk around the lake was with my grandparents, and I remember learning about the different types of birds and plants that surrounded the lake” (p. 50). Providing support that Joseph has thought about various elements of his place, he explains that the two massive rocks that line the area around his fishing spot “have been where they are currently since before humans began to inhabit the area” (p. 51).

Attempting to connect to a slightly larger environment, Joseph assesses the invasive species issue that has been a problem in the Midwest for several decades now. He states that the “Rusty Crayfish” (p. 52) present one of these dangerous species that threaten local flora and fauna. However, Joseph does not address the larger environment that affects people, species, and locations beyond the Midwest but provides strong personal insights into experiences with his place. I therefore categorized his work as “subjective”.

Authority/Power. The depth with which Joseph describes his place in his writing exemplifies confidence. He has evidently researched and reflected on his place sufficiently to write about it with authority and power and allows the readers to gain a better and more thorough understanding of the place as well as Joseph’s connection to this location.

Agency/Responsibility. Joseph does not mention his role within nature and his writing does not demonstrate that he is aware of his personal responsibility towards the continuation and health of his place or his larger environment. His writing also does not suggest that he views

himself as having agency in regards to his natural environments or himself being a possible agent of change.

The one student whose final essay I categorized as “objective” and who therefore also did not reach the objective of having composed an “authentic” final piece, was also female and a sophomore. She was also majoring in Elementary Education.

Robyn Maxey. Robyn’s final essay is infused with passionate statements about the environment, how we must treat nature, and what our society needs to become more aware and educated in regards to our environmental concerns. Robyn does not, however, address her place in a manner that would suggest her identification of or with a place. When discussing the importance of education and environmental awareness, she writes that “I see it all the time in my town, where people litter, and there are so many cars going up and down the streets that it is impossible to cross the street” (p. 74). Robyn also states that she does not like to identify one place as her own because “I call a few different places home” (p. 75) and that each place has “molded me into the person I am today. Each place makes a difference in me, though it may be subtle and I make it feel like a home (p. 75). Lastly, Robyn mentions her “town” that she alludes to throughout her paper but only addresses by name this once. She writes “in the towns surrounding Freeport we have many power plants including the Byron Nuclear Generation Station. The Annual Radiological Effluent Release Report for 2014 shows results of the mass effect on human skin and our body in general” (p. 76). As Robyn does not include personal insights or experiences with her place that would suggest that she has fully engaged with and reflected on her place, but expresses an understanding of the larger environment and related issues, I classified her essay as “objective”.

Authority/Power. As stated, Robyn does not address a specific place and when referring to her town, she only once mentions “Freeport” (p.76) as the name of this place. It is therefore difficult to assess her identification with a chosen place and whether she can write confidently about it. Clearly, she writes with confidence about her knowledge, connections with nature, thoughts about education and the need for further environmental integration, our human failure in regards to approaches and perspectives on nature, her ideas about the texts we read, and how the human perceptions of nature have changed over time. It appears as if Robyn views herself as a place-less world dweller, and if this is the case, then her writing certainly exemplifies authority and power.

Agency/Responsibility. In her piece, Robyn explains that “I believe that there should be environmental classes required in school. In my town there are no classes that tell you about the environment” (p. 72). Being an education major, Robyn might be in a situation at some point in life where she may have the power to influence state curricular decisions. Her statement suggests that she believes environmental education to be important, yet she does not explicitly state that this is something she would like to devote her time to, negating the concept that she has recognized her individual responsibility and sense of agency. She also suggests that she has perceived herself as having a role of responsibility in regards to our environment by reflecting on a high school experience. She writes that “I wrote a paper about global warming only because no one else had any clue what was happening with the atmosphere and the damage that is happening every second of every day!” (p. 72).

Robyn refers to Aldo Leopold who died during a brush fire around his Wisconsin cabin, doing what he felt compelled to do: protect the environment. Robyn writes that “someone who is willing to stand up for the land is, in my eyes, a hero. I think that everyone should get on this

boat where people understand more about nature and what it has to offer, also how nature helps us. People do not realize how important nature is” (p. 73). Here, she again hints at the idea that it is our human responsibility to recognize the significance of nature and therefore change our perspective on it. However, she does not explicitly address her own role, responsibility, and agency, which may contribute to the alteration of other’s approaches.

Similarly, she writes that “We have to save what we have. Protect it, and cherish nature as though it was our own child” (p. 74-75), which provides a message of urgency to her audience but lacks the specific insights into her perception of her own role.

Overall, none of the writers whose work I had labeled as “subjective” or “objective” was majoring in an environmentally-oriented field but several were listed as having a STEM oriented area of study.

Some effect. Although not all students’ final papers were categorized as “authentic”, all, except for one, exemplified authority and power in their writing. This suggests that the course had had some effect on their ability to write confidently about their places, while providing enough research and reflections that enabled their audience to gain a better understanding of their unique places. During the interviews, three interviewees, Nicole, Eve, and Sarah, mentioned that the course had had some influence on their overall perception of themselves within nature. They also mentioned that they had entered the classroom with a strong sense of knowing who they were and wanted to be in their larger environmental contexts and that nature had always had a profound impact on their lives. The course simply contributed to an existing love and affinity for their environmental surroundings.

Nicole stated that the discussions and texts increased her awareness of who she aspired to be in nature and that she wanted to view herself as someone who protected and cared for nature

while preserving and “fixing” it. Sarah was also majoring in an environmentally-based field of study and was engaged in various other off-campus activities that reflected her interest in our natural world. Eve maintained that she had always been interested in environmental sustainability and preservation but that the course had motivated her to maintain and advance her attitudes and environmental engagements because she was able to gain a better understanding of how other humans have also made an impact on their natural environment by protecting it. She specifically cited Sanders and Thoreau.

The interviewees’ accounts and insights into their impressions of the course, their writing, and their place within their natural surroundings as well as my classification of the class having “some effect” on their perceptions of their roles within their places and nature, are discussed in greater detail in the following section titled “Research Questions 2”.

Noticeable effect. Lastly, the eight students whose final essays I categorized as “authentic” were comprised of three male and five female students. Of the five female students, four were sophomores and one a junior. They were currently majoring in the following: Business Administration, Soil & Crop Sciences, Forensic Investigation, Reclamation and Environmental Conservation, and Geography. The three male students were also sophomores who were majoring in Geography, and General Engineering, while one male student was still listed as “undecided”. The five female students whose final pieces I had rated as being “authentic” were also the individuals who had volunteered for the interviewees with me following the completion of the semester. Aside of the two female students who were majoring in Soil & Crop Sciences and Reclamation and Environmental Conservation, other students in the “authentic” category did not seem to have selected an environmentally-oriented major.

Chad Jones. Chad's place was clearly established early on in the semester as he immediately chose Genoa City, WI, his home town. He explains that "this place has shaped me into the person I am today. In this place, I have learned how nature is a provider for humankind, where I got my strong religious values, and saw climate change first hand" (p. 41). Chad describes his place as having a "very unique history, which was a factory intensify [sic] town, having railroads there, and once being called Genoa Junction" (p. 43), and continues identifying place-relevant and valuable historic landmarks while providing some insight in regards to the city's present appearance. He also mentions a brief narrative to demonstrate the city's personable character, which is marked by the gentle and kind people who he claims live there. Chad narrates that following a blizzard, the town's people came together to ensure everyone was accessible and able to get out of their snowed-in houses. He writes

Genoa City and surrounding areas got 2 feet of snow in one night. I had to make a path to let my family's dog out and get to our backyard chickens. They whole family had to go out and shovel away two feet of snow from about the time I woke up to about 2 in the afternoon. One neighbor I have has a physical disability and there was no way he would have gotten out of his house for a few days. That is when my family started to shovel and about 5 other neighbors cleared his driveway. To show appreciation, the guy opened up his garage door and said, "God bless" (p. 46).

Besides this clearly significant event, Chad also explains that he has witnessed climate change through his experience of living through the blizzard that hit Genoa City in January of 2011. He explains that "humans are causing great amounts of pollution, and huge rises in temperature and the greenhouse effect. These three things are directly or indirectly causing a high rise in climate change and the rapid decrease in sea ice. I have seen climate change

happened first hand, as in the blizzard of 2011” (p 42). Further, Chad explores what nature has given us as humans and what it has also given his place. Some of these things include “fresh water, pollination, pest control, soil health, medicine, overall health, climate regulation, and wildlife abundance” (p. 40-41). He further describes his family’s and place’s connection with nature by emphasizing how his family has come to depend on the land. He writes “regarding wildlife abundance, my family is a big fishing and hunting family. Our thinking is that nature provides that deer and venison for us to eat and nature provides that northern pike for us to cook and eat. This means that we need nature for survival and the survival of every other living thing” (p. 41).

Although his narratives and explanation of experiences with his chosen location could have been written in a bit more detailed way, Chad’s work clearly suggests that he successfully combines the knowledge and awareness of the larger environment with his experiences and knowledge of his local place and how they are interdependently affected by one another. I categorized his work as “authentic”.

Authority/Power. Chad’s paper is laden with information regarding his place. He surveys the history, the current environmental threats and occurrences, the social character that make his city so significant to him, and explains why his place has become such an important element of his sense of self. As stated, his piece could gain from adding more detail but overall the information that he presents lets him write with confidence and power and allows the reader to recognize the writer’s deep reflection behind the piece.

Agency/Responsibility. By referring to the Judeo-Christian approach to nature, Chad cites Genesis in which God describes his intended roles for people “They [humans] will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small

animals that scurry along the ground” (p. 41). Chad emphasizes that this does not mean “we should not take care of nature and wait until nature fixes itself. We should preserve nature” (p. 42). He adds that “God has called us to take care of nature and let us provide for us, but not to take advantage of it at a maximum rate” (p. 42). In order to shed light on his own role in nature, Chad explains how he intends to help reduce emissions and become the caretaker that God wants us to be. Referring to his family business where “shell holders for airsoft guns, pins for Harley Davidsons, and shotgun pins” (p. 45) are manufactured, Chad wants to use his education to advance environmental awareness. He explains “Being a history and business major with an emphasis in internal supply chain, I want to reduce the amount of scrap we produce with pleasing the customer to reduce the greenhouse effect from my family’s small business. I also want to reduce the greenhouse effect and pollution of other businesses by going into this field of study as well as this job market” (p. 45). This clearly suggests that Chad feels that he has the agency to make a change and that it is his God-given responsibility to preserve the environment wherever possible. He explains starting with his family’s business but plans on expanding his strategy in order to help others reduce their destructive effects as well.

Michael Killian. In his final paper, Michael describes his hometown of Mount Horeb, Wisconsin as “a place of rich Norwegian culture and genuine people” (p. 62). In order to be more specific regarding the location of his place, Michael states that what comes to mind when thinking of place and nature is his grandparent’s land where he knows “every inch of that woods with a story to every inch” (p. 62). The emotional connection to this land near Mount Horeb is why Michael describes it as “one of my favorite places in this world” (p. 62). Providing further insights into the importance of his place and to his identification with the described location,

Michael states that “to imagine a time in my life where the woods would be cleared or cut down would take away a part of my life away [sic] permanently” (p. 62).

Michael uses the haunting image of destroying his woods to transition into larger global issues that affect the planet and could therefore also affect his place. He describes that “deforestation is a huge reason why the Earth is losing its forests. The loss of forests is resulting in the loss of natural habitats for many species” (p. 62), which he asserts will have devastating effects on various functioning ecosystems since “animals rely on forests for food and a home where they’re able to survive” (p. 62). Establishing a connection to humans, Michael writes that “humans would also suffer as well being responsible for the loss of habitats that produce the air all mammals breathe and take away other resources humans rely on so much” (p. 63).

Intensifying his connection to the larger global environment, Michael states that because “forest hold a huge role within how the Earth works” (p. 63), forests are also entangled in our current climate change situation as they keep the soil moist, reduce CO₂, and produce oxygen.

Creating an even more explicit connection between the two spheres of the larger environment and his grandfather’s land, Michael asserts that “my grandfather’s woods resembles the smaller picture in a much bigger problem. The woods shows how a small area can have such an impact on one person. That represents the bigger picture of how the environment and all the forests mean so much to the worlds’ population” (p. 64).

Michael clearly and effectively combines his knowledge of the larger environment with his awareness, experiences, and knowledge of his own, local place. He connects to his place and understands how all places are interdependent and have effects on one another. I therefore rated and categorized Michael’s paper as “authentic”.

Authority/Power. The depth and clarity with which Michael writes about his place and the research that he uses to supplement his knowledge and connect to the larger environment, allow Michael to write about the topic with power and authority. He confidently asserts that his place has a special meaning to him and that the way nature is being treated is destructive to all habitats.

Agency/Responsibility. Although Michael does not provide much detail in regards to his own role within the environment, it is clear that he possesses awareness of global environmental issues and how the environment presents an interdependent system. His last sentence reads “Save the woods, save the world” (p. 64), which appears to be a recommendation for his audience. However, the writing does not explicitly mention Michael’s awareness of his active role within nature, that he holds responsibility in regards to his environment, or that he might have agency in regards to nature.

Nick Costello. I rated Nick’s piece as “authentic” because he successfully combined knowledge and awareness of his larger environment with his deep connection to two distinct locations, Calamus, Iowa, and Chicago, Illinois. Throughout the semester, Nick had frequently mentioned that he viewed both places as significant and important in regards to his personal sense of identity and belonging and therefore, decided to write about both. In contrast to some writers who also explained that they faced tensions when attempting to decide between two or more places, Nick’s reasoning was not based on emotional connections to both places but rather the idea that Chicago gave him a basis for comparison and eventually allowed him to appreciate Calamus even more. He explains that “Even though I personally know I do not want to live in a big city for the rest of my life, I saw differences and similarities to my person[al] place and how each place controls its own contributions to the environment” (p. 69). In order to give a better

idea of Chicago, Costello presents research on Chicago's waste management, water supply systems, and the long-term health and environmental threats Chicago faced as a direct result of having "minimal regulations" (p. 69) in regards to sustainable infrastructure. Further, Nick describes carbon emissions in Chicago that are based on increased amounts of vehicles as well as the need to import foods into the city as not much can grow in this location. He concludes that "Our cities, our infrastructure, and its people cause problems to the environment that we cannot for see [sic]. But no matter if the city is small or large some of the same issues arise" (p. 69). The amount of research and narrative made it clear that Costello had successfully combined knowledge and awareness of his larger environmental context with the personal connection that he had made with Chicago and Calamus.

Authority/Power. Regarding Nick's writing and his expressions of power and authority, it becomes clear that he has sufficiently reflected on his links to his chosen locations to write about them with confidence and certainty. Tying together Calamus and Chicago, Nick explains that

Everyone has to eat and food is another issue that is similar between the communities of Chicago and Calamus. In Chicago there are signs all over, shop local. The crazy people shut down streets to sell vegetables and fruits, and [a] person could walk 3 city blocks and not see the entire market. The people come down from 24 stories or more just to look around, but they don't have access to the soil (p. 69-70)

Recognizing and exploring this place-based disconnect even further, Nick describes "In my place our family has access to the rich black Iowan soil, and we produce so many vegetables we cannot consume them all [...]. Although the vegetables are grown somewhere for the Chicago markets I can guarantee there [sic] not grown to [sic] close, and the people have no clue what it's taken to grow that food." It becomes increasingly clear that the writer has not only taken into account his

physical locations but the interconnectivity of places and people as well as the larger environment that provides food for all.

Nick also explores the environmental issues that arose as part of a growing city like Chicago, which further strengthens the sense of his powerful and confident writing as well as his clear authority or control over the given subject. Nick writes

As Chicago began to grow outwards a lot of things happened: deforestation, environmental issues, and lack of green space began to rise [...]. As the city grew the city planners began to realize they needed to preserve the forests. I lived on the outskirts of Chicago and the amount of forest preserves was plentiful, but the city still did not have the opportunity to sit in the woods by yourself. I think the forest is a great place to reflect on life and being alone is sometimes needed (p. 71)

Nick's continued effort to juxtapose his places aids his effective social and environmental dissections of his two distinct locations. Further, Nick argues that his previous interactions with nature and perceptions of who he is within his places, is based on his experiences with his 180 acre area that belongs to his family. Suggesting that it is imperative to hunt in order to increase population control on such vast lands and to further connect to his previous description of the lack of green space and lack of understanding about food production in Chicago, Nick mentions that "Hunting allows a person to see the whole process it takes to get food to the table, and also how the ecosystem interacts" (p. 71). This also suggests that Nick has reflected on the interconnecting aspects of his places as well as the larger environment that provides him the opportunity to live out and experience his established role in his place.

Agency/Responsibility. Finally, Nick's writing clearly reflects the writer's awareness of his active role within the environment and his understanding that he is responsible for the well-

being, sustainability, and balance of his ecosystem and place. As previously mentioned, Nick explains that hunting in his family is not merely a sport but rather “to keep populations of negative affecting animals down” (p. 71), which clearly suggest his perception of himself as having one active role as a steward or preservationist who must assist in deer or turkey population control to ensure his place’s health.

Nick also asserts that “As a society we must not continue to remove ourselves from nature. We should live in and around nature to observe its benefits and learn from them as we age. Help nature when it begins to struggle as nature provides for us every single day. Also let nature calm our daily struggles and live life to pursue our dreams” (p. 72). Having grown up on a farm, Nick’s writing demonstrates his recognition of the importance of living closely connected to the environment as nature is a provider for our survival. Nick therefore recognizes his role within the larger system and urges the audience to not become more removed from nature as it is essential in regards to emotional, spiritual, and physiological well-being. He mentions that it is our role and responsibility to “help nature” when our aid is necessary as nature provides for us as well. Nick urges his audience to recognize the need for a more mutualistic relationship with our natural environment as he finds this type of interaction to be his responsibility towards his place.

Nick’s overall sentiments can be found on p. 71, where he writes that “Being around nature naturally makes a person happier, because it is where humans belong, in nature” (p. 71), which suggests the writer’s deep connection and awareness of his perception of his environment, natural surroundings, and place.

Some of the interviewees who were also asked about the course and its effect on them as individual inhabitants of our shared environment, described specific components of the class that helped them reflect and reevaluate their sense of self within their environments and place.

Michelle mentioned that the course enabled her to understand that her role did not end with her life but that her actions might affect those individuals that will make up the future generations. She recognized that her role was crucial to the future well-being of our environment and those who might inhabit our places in the next decades. By taking the class, these three interviewees were able to gain exposure to important facts, realities, truths, perceptions, fallacies, and questions of our time. Similarly, Clara described that the course had an obvious impact on her as the course had provided her with the opportunity to reflect on how other individuals view nature and what impact we as individuals and entire race really have on our natural environments. Also, she described that Environmental Literature and Writing exposed her to the idea that places, the environmental, and we as individuals are all inextricably bound together and interdependent. This realization, according to Clara's interview, made her more thankful and conscious about nature.

Questionnaires

On September 1, 2015, I gave my, at that point 18, Environmental Literature and Writing students their first anonymous questionnaire (Appendix H) and asked them to reflect on the course in relation to their thoughts about environmental issues, perceptions, and ideologies. I wanted to know if the course had, within the few weeks we had met, enabled them to stretch their thinking beyond what they had been used to thinking prior to enrolling in the course. Only two students answered in a rather neutral manner. One stated that "Not really yet. I think I will have to [stretch my thinking] in the future though", and another exclaimed, "Yes and no because I already had these thoughts I just didn't express them normally."

Others described that the course had already influenced their ways of thinking about nature, reality, and their roles within the larger environmental context. One student explained

that “this class has forced me to think about where my place is and be more aware of my environment I have started thinking about my morals and others [sic] morals. I have also been more able to look at the topics discussed in class from more perspectives than just my own which I think has made me a better reader/writer.” Another student wrote that “Yes. I now know how the Native Americans felt about it [nature] which makes me feel like them about nature. I feel like I should give nature a soul so I feel very personal with it and understand it better”, which suggests that they re-examined previous beliefs and how to reframe nature in order for it to make more sense to them. Reflecting on previous and current thoughts on nature, a student answered: “I love philosophy + this deep meaningful thinking that we do in class + I’ve never had those types of conversations about the environment. These conversations have expanded + enforced my own ideologies and perceptions of nature.” Similarly, a student wrote: “Yes, I’ve been thinking of things more critically, even outside the class. Perspective is big to me right now.” Lastly, one student responded by stating “Yes, it makes me look past just simple and convenient answers and makes me really question and think about current perceptions and issues and their reasoning behind them.”

When asked about the possibility of the course stretching the students’ thinking in regards to environmental issues, perceptions and ideologies in the last anonymous student questionnaire (Appendix H), which I gave in mid-November, all sixteen students answered with “Yes”. Some mentioned that “it [the course] is a good reminder of our need to take care of nature”, and that “it’s an informative class with good learning lessons.” Other students mentioned that “Yes, I’ve never had a class that’s mainly based in a philosophic way, yet the students bring the science aspect into discussion. It’s an interesting mix of ideologies”, and “Yes, because it made me think about us being care-takers of the environment and when we hurt the

environment, we hurt ourselves.” Further, a student mentioned that “I didn’t [pay] a whole lot of attention to the environment prior to this class but now I do.” One student expressed a newly found sense of interconnectedness: “Yes, I am always looking at things now and perceiving how they will affect everything.” Expressing a sense of personal responsibility in regards to our natural environment, one student remarked: “Yes, I understand more about nature, who is involved and how to help. I feel like I can make a change now knowing more about our environment”, which suggests that the student recognized a sense of empowerment in their acquired knowledge.

Regarding personal place, one individual articulated that “[...] this course has made me think about how my OWN [original upper case] place is being affected”, which suggests that the convergence of different spheres, the academic and non-academic, was successful for at least some students. At last, one student exclaimed how the course also allowed them to reevaluate preconceived notions they held in regards to individuals who care about the environment: “Yes, I originally thought environmentalists were crazy and now I realize that few of them are crazy.”

When asking myself if the course successfully reached the objective of making students think about nature, their position within nature, and their possible role of responsibility towards nature, I am confident that I reached this goal. Students mentioned that “I’ve learned many things about the environment”, or “I understand more about nature, who is involved and has to help. I feel like I can make a change now, knowing more about our environment”, which suggests that a repositioning and open-minded reevaluation of previously held concepts and beliefs occurred throughout the course.

Concluding remarks and reflections - Research question 1. *Does the students' writing exemplify authority and powers of expression after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course? Further, does students' writing demonstrate that they have become agents of their work who seem to take responsibility for their places?*

As mentioned, while the final publication contains 16 student writings, my current data is based on 11 of these students since I did not include my five interviewees' finals in my current discussion and analysis but address their writings in the section below, which is fully dedicated to research question number 2. As the interviewees disclosed very personal and identity-revealing details about their lives and locations in their interviews, I decided that because of privacy and ethical considerations of my students' identities, their final essays should not be included in this current section where the students' actual names would be used. The five interviewees' final essays are, however, analyzed and addressed in great detail in the section dedicated to research question two.

Looking at my data, I felt quite fulfilled and elated at having created a class that granted such deep reflections, genuine reevaluations, and thoughtful interactions and conclusions in regards to my students' perceptions of their individual responsibility towards our shared environmental surroundings. It was quite apparent that students had taken a genuine interest in exploring and examining their personal places by reflecting on the meaning these places had in their lives but also how the places existed within the larger environment. Most students included personal images of their locations, used selfies to place themselves in their writings, or wrote with such detail that a connection between place and writer was incredibly clear.

As stated, I created a rubric (Appendix D) and categorized my students' finals in order to gain a better understanding about their writing and perceptions of themselves following the

completion of Environmental Literature and Writing. The categories were titled “superficial/subjective”, “objective”, or “authentic”, and described the student writers’ expressions of and levels of associations and connections with their places.

Out of eleven students’ writings, seven pieces were categorized as “subjective” as the students clearly wrote about their experiences with a given location but did not express an understanding of their personal or their place’s role within the larger environment. Of the given student writer group, only one student’s writing was described as “objective”, as the student successfully addressed larger environmental issues but did not incorporate any personal connection to the material or place. Three of the eleven students composed pieces that I categorized as “authentic” as their work exemplified the students’ successful combination of knowledge and awareness of the larger environment and their personal place and how these and all places are interconnected.

For my first research question, I also wanted to know if my students’ writing would exemplify power and authority after having taken my class. In addition, I was interested in finding out if my students writings’ would address their own roles within the larger environment and if these roles suggested that the student viewed her or himself as having responsibility or agency in regards to their general environment and place.

Out of eleven student papers, ten pieces demonstrated that the students wrote with power and authority when discussing their places. Similar to Owens (2001b) and Hothem’s (2009) assertions that writing about one’s place enables the student to write themselves into their locations and situations while placing themselves rhetorically into their contexts, my students’ writings suggested that they had researched or reflected on their places enough to write about them with confidence. Further, the power and authority suggested that students clearly identified

with the described places and therefore felt a close connection to their self-chosen places within the environment. One of the eleven students did not sufficiently and directly address a place but discussed descriptions and references that I could identify as alluding to her hometown and self-chosen place, as I had spent the semester discussing her place with her. Due to the lack of explicitness and detail and potential inability of her audiences' recognition of her place, her final paper was therefore listed as "N/A".

Regarding agency and responsibility, four of the eleven student finals essays exemplified that the student had reflected on his/her place within the larger environment and was aware of their active role within this system. Further, only the mentioned four students described a sense of having responsibility for their places and their natural world while being potential agents of change for their places and the larger natural surroundings. The remaining seven students did not address their roles in a manner that suggested their perceived sense of responsibility or agency in regards to the larger environment.

These numbers and insights I gained from the analysis of my data (Appendix I) were very interesting as I pictured class discussions, individual talks with students, and other interactions we had experienced throughout the semester and tried to place my students' writings alongside the student writer and what I had learned from and about them. The mentioned student who had such a difficult time determining which place to call her own and was eventually categorized as "objective" in her final essay, lamented the situation of her "placelessness" throughout the semester. At one point, however, she realized that this feeling allowed her a certain sense of freedom and while applying for a study abroad program in Australia and the UK, the student writer began to realize that her original failure to identify with a place enabled her to identify with various places now and in the future. These individual pieces of knowledge helped shape

not only my data but the collective experience we shared and that framed our overall course narrative. Heise (2008) points out that a common and shared narrative that addresses and includes our new environmental circumstances that are infused with climate change and the associated social and economic challenges, is of extreme importance for our time. Several of my student writers addressed climate change, analyzed its effects on the planet, and at times assessed how these changes have affected their individual locations. The course generated the dialogue and conversation that is necessary for the re-creation of a collective human narrative that entails what we are experiencing and living out now during a time when our own planet is threatened and suffering due to anthropogenic behaviors and inability to find a way to live and coexist with the natural surroundings in a non-destructive, symbiotic, and more sustainable manner. Heise (2008) states that “Understanding climate change ecologically and conveying a sense of the quite divergent impacts it might have on communities around the globe is a task of such magnitude that relatively few writers [and filmmakers] have attempted it so far” (p. 206). My student writers attempted it and successfully composed insightful, creative, and significant texts that suggest their understanding of the planet and their unique places within varying environmental contexts. My students collectively incorporated the realities of our environmental surroundings into our understanding and narrative of place, role within a place, and the extended natural contexts to produce epistemologically valuable accounts of a time and place that is marked by unprecedented threats and risks to the existence of all living and nonliving beings on planet Earth. Heise (2008) points out that “narrative genres [...] provide important cultural tools for organizing information about risks into intelligible and meaningful stories” (p. 138); this type of storytelling and recomposing of what our collective story should entail at this point in time, was clearly reflected in my student writers’ work. Further, “narrators have to make choices about

which individuals or institutions are cast as protagonists or antagonists in technological controversies, about where and how to conclude their stories, and about how to characterize their own relationship to their story material” (p. 139-140). Although not all of my students exemplified such clear delineation of good vs. bad, or positive vs. negative, through the identification of antagonists or protagonists in the form of individuals or organizations, most students recognized that large corporations and our Western urge to increase wealth were primarily negative factors in regards to environmental preservation and protection. Further, most of my student writers seemed to believe that our historic Western approaches to nature had been wrong and the idea of taking without returning or giving back defeated the needed symbiotic and reciprocal relationship that could save or help the Earth now. Most of my students alluded to Native American texts we discussed throughout the semester to juxtapose two distinct philosophies and beliefs – European vs. Native American – and thereby offered an alternative approach to viewing and living with nature and our human role within our environmental context. Frequently, these references to other cultures were laden with idealized and sentimentalized impressions of people and societies that had lived alongside each other and nature without intending harm, without causing destruction and failure, and without producing the imminent threats we now face as part of our current Western society. Of course, our contemporary capitalist cultures have certainly caused more harm to our natural and therefore social and economic environments than most others, but we cannot forget that preservation and sustainability were also not always on the forefront of other culture’s agendas (Diamond, 2005; Anderson, 2005). I am not stating such critique to alleviate some of the guilt and burden our society has created as part of our environmentally detrimental behavior; I am stating it to further the notion that we are more closely aligned with some indigenous cultures in regards to learning

from failed endeavors, striving towards more environmentally inclusive measures, facing incredible environmental challenges, and exhibiting the ability to rethink and reevaluate previous methods to sustain our global beings, than we might expect (Diamond, 2005; Anderson, 2005; Raffles, 2002). Noting that “the dreams of ending globalism and returning to a national self-sufficiency have long ago become futile. Most nations do not, and cannot, support their current populations from their own resources” (Anderson, 2005, p. 13).

Anderson also points out that we do have the opportunity to learn from ancient or indigenous cultures as they have not only cultivated certain areas of land for generations but are now also facing the same environmental problems we all are on planet Earth. He mentions that “We must get much more value out of each log, each gallon of water, each square meter of soil, and each diverse local ecosystem. This requires attending to the traditional systems that have made efficient use of local resources. Such systems have also saved biodiversity, and are being put to work, worldwide, for saving it today” (p. 14). We may use comparative approaches to not only better understand the environmental aspect of climate change but also the human one that has enabled other societies to endure previously unprecedented threats such as extreme erosion, effects of deforestation, land over- and misuse (Diamond, 2005) or colonialism and its social, cultural, and environmental implications (Anderson, 2005; Raffles, 2002), and that may allow us to regain a sense of who we are and must be in order to play a more conducive, integrative, empathetic, and conscientious role for our natural places. This topic of incorporating additional variations of human approaches to nature is further addressed in the discussion of my third research question that deals with course choices and my evolution as teacher, course designer, and researcher.

Writing throughout the course also offered the students the opportunity to examine and evaluate “their own relationship” (Heise, 2008, p. 140) with their individual places and the larger environmental context, which is also important and conducive to the establishment of a new narrative about our current existence with ourselves, the places we inhabit, and the Earth as extremely complex and intertwined system.

Research Question 2

How do students place themselves in their natural environments after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing course? What do they think their role is within their environments following the completion of the class?

I received my students’ final essays on December 10, 2015, and submitted my final grades to the registrar’s office on December 13, 2015. According to my IUP IRB, which had been approved a few days before on December 11, 2015, I was now ready to send out recruitment emails and collect data for my second research question. All of a sudden, I felt paralyzed, terrified, and completely unsure about sending the email that I had crafted in July, revised several times, and submitted to my institution’s IRB and IUP’s IRB, both of which had approved my study and writings. But this was different. This seemed very real and scary and legalistic. If I messed up one step, the whole study would be off. I would be leaving my institution within the next week, making it more difficult to connect with my former students for interviews or any questions they might come across. I was, once again, changing places and dealing with the uncertainties, excitement, and disorientation that comes along with an endeavor that requires one to reconstruct, reorient, and re-navigate the spaces of one’s existence. I had been asking my students to do the same thing throughout the semester, though: rethink their roles

in their places and environments, which oftentimes included navigation through space and time and various relocations between mental, spiritual, and physical locations.

Interviews

Out of the sixteen students, five agreed to meet for interviews following the completion of the Environmental Literature and Writing course. I meet these students within 10 weeks after completing the course and used my previously created interview questions (Appendix G) to gather more information that would help me answer my research questions. All students selected their own gender-reflective pseudonym. Each interview session lasted approximately 60 minutes that included a discussion of the questions, clarifications of how some questions might sound similar but were aimed at yielding different answers, information regarding pseudonym selection, and general talks about the interviewee's Christmas break, current semester, or other personal items that should relax the situation a bit and allow the student participant to feel as comfortable as possible in a new situation.

Arrangement. Regarding the overall arrangement of my interviews, I decided to let time and the interviewees' ability to meet for the interviews dictate the layout of my interview data. The interviewee who was available first is mentioned first, while the one who could not meet until all others had already completed their sessions, is listed as the last one. I decided to do this as it reflects the reality of the narrative that underlines my study, thereby emphasizing the temporal aspect of one of the "dimensions" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) that are important to narrative inquiry (see "Methodological Overview" and Chapter 3).

I also decided to arrange my interviews in a way that emphasized the interviewees' written and spoken words because, albeit inevitable similarities, written and spoken words have always appeared different to me, not only in form but also implications and meanings. Perhaps

this is due to English being my second language and the differences in meaning making I associate with the production of spoken or written language (Rioux, 2016c). The research on written versus spoken words is rather inconclusive as some studies suggest that written words yield more accurate insights into a person's perceptions of something while others argue that spoken words are superior or more reliable (Sauerland, Krix, van Kan, Glunz, Sak, 2014). For my own research purposes and the reality of my own perception of the two language and insight producing channels, I've decided to present my data separately in the following section to emphasize and not neglect what I have come to believe about language as a result of my own experiences. I've arranged the interviewees' written words taken from my students' final essays, followed by their spoken words that they provided during our interviews. I've decided to present the data in such a way because the students wrote as part of a class; they were embedded in a course that emphasized a love for our environmental surroundings and supported such positive outlooks towards nature. The students' writing was therefore contextualized in a setting and place that asked students to genuinely reflect on their roles to see if they could not also become great agents of environmental conservation and preservation. Now, I am certainly not arguing that this affinity that the writing students expressed in their writing isn't sincere and honest, however, I have to ask myself, as part of my critical practice and thinking, what aspects of the course endured time and space outside of the course, the semester, and the classroom. Would my students still feel what they perceived while they were engaged in our Environmental Literature and Writing class? The course had been like a river they had stepped into; a river whose current was reflection on the environment, a recognition for our connections to it, our recognition of our interdependence with living and non-living organisms around us, and our responsibility towards all of them. Would my students still feel and therefore verbalize the things they had written about

several weeks after the course had ended? After they had stepped out of the collective river? Would the words in the spoken accounts reflect those found in the students' final essays? Had the students' affinity for nature, expressed interest in our natural surroundings, and their experiences with nature and their discovered roles within their places outlasted our shared Environmental Literature and Writing class?

"I'm really sorry, Yasmin, but I just can't really put a lot of time into your final essay".

"Why is that?", I ask.

"I'm just exhausted and have to study for my other finals", says one student, a STEM major with a strong desire and very realistic chance of advancing to a top rated graduate program in her field upon graduation.

Another student, approaches me with a similar "dilemma".

"I just have to study for my important classes. I can't find the time to write this essay..."

While I encountered this situations a few times during finals week, I am not sure I can use this information as evidence for my class' failure to create a real, durable, and genuine chance in my students' perception of themselves within the environment following the Environmental Literature and Writing course. Based on our discussions, after class talks, email correspondences, questionnaires, writings, notes, interviews, etc., I am confident that my students truly felt that the course challenged their way of thinking about the environment, their place in it, and their places that they frequent and identify with. As with any school, graduate programs evaluate students based on their major's cumulative GPA; a "B" in an English course will most likely not determine whether a STEM student will get accepted to a graduate program. This does, however, raise questions about my students' perceptions of the varying "realities" that

they encountered, traversed, and negotiated during their college lives. In the reality outside of the campus, and beyond our fall semester, our shared Environmental Literature and Writing course might not compete with a Physics project or a job a student holds in order to pay tuition. What is important when and where? How much can the perceptual changes our course created in a student's endure in regards to the demands the student's altering realities pose?

At times, some students would come up before class to say that they couldn't get through all of the readings because another instructor from a major-related course had given "too much" homework and they had to complete it as it would be on their exam.

My hopes for these students as well as the others is that they recognize and will keep recognizing that there is no place for any of these alternate realities without a healthy Earth that can sustain life.

On the other hand, I also encountered so many instances of students that went above and beyond to ensure their academic success but also to fully engage in the content of the class. Some students sent emails informing me of course-related or environmentally-based materials they had encountered outside of class, or shared things they had overheard in other classes, or questions that had risen from family conversations about their family farms and properties. These students were clearly captivated by the class and all that comprised it even when we weren't together. They recognized the relevance of what we discussed and how it continued even when we weren't bound to the yellow room. Some of them stayed after class, walking with me to my office to continue discussions we had engaged in during our time in the "cave". They would come to class with links to videos about the environment, readings about nature, or humorous memes about the Transcendentalists that they knew I enjoyed so much.

The groups that mentioned not having time to finish my final paper and the ones that clearly took the class' content with them wherever they went, both carried with them some elements of the semester's course. While it seemed that the latter might have been more actively involved and absorbed during that fall semester, I do not have the long term data or outlined methodology in this dissertation that would allow me to claim that one group retained more of what we came together for and what we learned from our shared time in regards to our place, our place in our natural surroundings, and our responsibility towards the environment in general.

Nicole. Nicole was the first responder to my recruitment email and met with me only a few days after the course had ended, during finals week. Having been an exceptional, interesting, and intelligent student in a previous Composition 2 course I taught, Nicole mentioned that she had selected my class because she was interested in the topic and in taking another course with me as the instructor. Although she was a Criminal Justice major with an interest in forensic investigations, she described finding peace and balance in nature. Nicole was also one of the three individuals who added an English minor following the completion of our course as her interest in writing and literature had been ignited.

Nicole and I met in my office, which I was preparing to pack up and clean due to a new job offer. We sat amongst boxes, stacks of books, and piles of student papers that were scattered around the floor. Nicole, in her usual humorous and diligent manner, was not bothered or distracted by our place selection and was eager and curious to get started.

Nicole's words. The first question was designed to gain a better understanding of the students' overall perception of the environment throughout their lives. After asking Nicole about how she had viewed herself as part of the environment throughout her life, she made it very clear

that nature had always been an integral part of her upbringing and development. She explained that while camping, hiking, or playing outside had always been part of her life, the reflective component of why this was so or how this might affect her was not. Nicole stated that “I was younger and obviously didn’t know all that much about the significance of it all but I mean I was always a part of nature I thought.” She also described the idea of nature being a constant in her life and that she “always felt like everything needed to stay how it is because I enjoyed it so I wanted to keep that forever I guess as a child.”

Similar to many of my students, Nicole had grown up in the Midwest, approximately 2 hours from our campus. In regards to our shared place, it is quite common for people to spend their summers outdoors, hiking, fishing, boating, or camping, as if trying to overcompensate for the harsh winter months that reign over the lands between November and March. A basic interaction with nature is quite common, yet, the idea of thinking and reflecting on one’s role in nature, the impact our actions might have on our environment, or what we can do to be responsible elements within a balanced system, is not as customary.

The second interview question addresses the student’s perception of their role within nature following the completion of Environmental Literature and Writing. Nicole mentioned that “my perceptions it didn’t change much since I already had that kind of preservation mindset as a child but the question “why do people belong in nature” really made me think.” Here, Nicole referred to a modified version of one of the course’s central questions “What is our role in nature?”, that was brought up earlier in the semester. Nicole explains that it “really made me think because at that moment I was like “wow we really don’t belong in nature”...we don’t contribute anything naturally, we’re kind of wrecking it.” She also explains how this rather bleak realization was integral to her realization that we as a human race and she as an individual must

act: “we need to do more to preserve it and restore some aspects because as of now we don’t really have any positive role in nature if we’re not trying to restore it.” Nicole addresses having been raised with a sustainability-oriented philosophy and outlook on life and nature in general and that her “perceptions didn’t change much.” However, she quickly adds that the course gave her a certain depth and increased understanding of our role in nature and our human neglect to conductively contribute to nature in a constructive and symbiotic manner rather than a removed and destructive one. Due to these additions and the continued references to an increased understanding and awareness of nature, the course’s objectives of enabling students to reflect on their perceptions of our human roles in nature, was met.

In the following question, Nicole reemphasized her individual role by stating that after having completed Environmental Literature and Writing “I want to know like how I can help like little things like recycling not [...] polluting with stuff.” This again suggests that the course played a vital role in Nicole’s reevaluation of her role within the environment and eventually led her to believe that she must respond as an individual in order to promote positive changes and impacts on her natural environments.

When asked specifically how she established this new role for herself, she replied that the readings were significant as they enabled her to think more deeply about past to present perceptions of humans considering nature. She explained that it was important to think about how “people have viewed themselves in nature” in order to better understand the roots of our current Western attitudes towards nature. Nicole also mentioned that although she feels like this role had already been established as part of her upbringing, the Environmental Literature and Writing course “developed it more” within herself. When asked about what specific elements of the course Nicole found to be most conducive to the new meaning she had established for herself

within nature, she replied by describing Scott Russell Sander's text, *For the Children* (Caplow & Cohen, 2010, p. 268) and how his descriptions of intergenerational responsibilities towards our planet made her think more deeply about her own responsibility in regards to the future. Nicole said that "that one really got to me because it's like oh think about our children or our children's children. Right now everything may be ok but what happens in like ten years if [we] don't do something to preserve or restore parts of nature." Thinking about the austere consequences we may face if we fail to respond to our environmental changes, Nicole stated that "we could essentially die out. Or we could kill everything else on the planet which could ultimately lead to our destruction too, since everything's kind of symbiotic relationship at least I think for the most part." Again, Nicole describes the recognition of our human role within nature that is wholly intertwined and interdependent on all other ecosystems that are demarked by individual places. She mentioned that the discussions and reflections that were associated with the reading of the Sander's text led her to realize and recognize that our roles in nature transcend our time here on Earth and that our current actions will create the foundations of our children's lives.

Regarding her sense of being a writer within an environment after having taken Environmental Literature and Writing, Nicole asked if she could explain her answer by exploring how her place has shaped her as an individual, which then influenced her identity as a writer. She explicated that her experiences on the track made her more "gutsy", which she explained meant "I'm not afraid to take something of my own even if people don't see it as being the correct or like acceptable thing [...] my track [...] brought me up in a way to be individual as well as like a team so [...] if I like think something is right then I'm not going to let people influence me." Nicole's writing and approach to class exemplified her confidence. While she was continuously open to discussions, alternate interpretations, and individual opinions, Nicole's concept of self

allowed her to reevaluate herself independently of others, which also led to the abovementioned establishment of her new, more individually responsible role within her natural environments.

When asked to reflect on her writing's ability to help her understand and create her current understanding of her role within her environment, Nicole mentioned that "analyzing all the texts and stuff helped me see the bigger picture of everything" and that writing "helped me think more on the broad spectrum than just like how I've known [nature] without any scientific or textual knowledge." The exposure to existing texts and the act of analyzing and writing about her own place allowed Nicole to write herself into her environment and become more aware of the larger picture that transcends our physical boundaries.

Nicole's writings. Nicole's writing had also continuously exemplified a deep and genuine reflection-based understanding of her surroundings. While the first two essays asked the students to use literary examples to reflect on human interactions with nature from a historic to contemporary standpoint, all essays also asked students to think of their own places and how the texts, historic knowledge, or other course elements have influenced their locations or how their new knowledge affects their perceptions and understandings of their places. Nicole, who identified her high school track in a small Midwestern town as her place, consistently applied her new knowledge to better understand and identify with her place. In her first essay she mentioned that the excerpts from Thoreau's journals that were assigned as part of the course, allowed her to realize that "This [Thoreau's text] is closely tied to how I have viewed myself within my place and within nature itself." Through the reading, discussions, and writing about Thoreau's texts, Nicole was able to recognize that "life is full of lessons that need to be learned, one way or another", and that the best way to understand one's surrounding and learn is "through experiences in nature rather than solely in a classroom learning curriculum that may not be very

useful in the future.” She indicates that “There should be some kind of compromise between hands on learning and lecturing” because “Nature is always evolving right before our eyes.”

In her second essay that asked students to examine one or more conflicts that exist or have previously existed between nature and humans, Nicole researched deforestation as it was mentioned as a contemporary threat in one of the class readings (Caplow & Cohen, 2010). Nicole mentions “I am not aware if deforestation had occurred in order for the city to build the place of my high school track and field”, but that “it is very probable that many trees were bulldozed down” in order for the track to be constructed. In her further reflections on nature, place, and her sense of self, Nicole describes that “The track, to me, is still a very essential part of my being: just as forests are a part of nature, I am a part of the track. [...] If my place was altered, I would be altered as well; I would not be the same person because I would not have had the same experiences that have shaped me to be who I am today.” Clearly, Nicole recognizes the connection between her concept of self and the relation of the self to her place. By using the forest as analogical tool to determine her own place in nature, Nicole successfully acknowledges that her identity and place are interconnected.

In her final essay, Nicole further describes her track and the influence this place has had on her development and sense of self over the past years. She describes her role at her place as that of a runner as running outdoors is what makes her feel connected to her natural world. Nicole explains that “my high school track is more than just a track; it is carefully tied to other ecosystems and ideas that influence the entire earth.” This mindful assertion continues by the writer’s brief analysis of the interconnectivity of her defined place: “The woods surrounding the track is an example of an ecosystem that the track is nestled inside of. This area supports many species of animals and plants; it isn’t strange to see a deer or two emerging from the trees.”

Writing beyond the idea of physical interconnectivity, Nicole also explains that “The goals that are accomplished by my track transcend to the entire earth. The track does not harm the earth, but gives back to it in many ways.” Revealing her extensive research on polyurethanes – the polymer that largely comprises running tracks – Nicole explores how the track provides a harmless sphere within the existing ecosystem, although she does acknowledge (in paper 2) that the area must have been deforested prior to the track’s establishment. She explains other areas where polyurethanes are used in construction to determine that her individual role in nature is to cause as little harm as the track she calls her place. As this research-based analysis comprises a large part of her final paper, Nicole seems extremely concerned about her ability to ensure that her place aligns with her sense of self and role within her environment as non-threatening participant. Nicole’s successful combination of environmental knowledge and awareness with her ability to connect these features to her own location make me categorize her final paper as “authentic” on the final paper’s rubric (Appendix D).

Authority/Power. As described above, Nicole clearly demonstrates that she identifies with her selected place. Her writing is filled with genuine reflections about her location and what it means to her in regards to her role within the environment but also her sense of being and sense. It becomes very clear that for Nicole, the track is an invaluable aspect of how she views herself and how she can make sense of herself within her immediate and greater environment. Regarding writing confidently and with authority and power about her location, Nicole’s words in her final essay reflect confidence through clear reflections.

Agency/Responsibility. Through Nicole’s clear analysis of the environmental impact of her track, its chemical properties, and the overall comparison between indoor and outdoor running, she demonstrates her awareness of her individual responsibility towards her natural

environment. It is apparent that Nicole values environmental protection and that she views herself as a responsible agent who keeps in mind the future of her actions. She mentions, for example, that “If we could find more ways to use materials, such as polyurethanes, for more items we construct in the world, maybe it could lead to more conservation and restoration of our earth”, and connects her analysis back to her place and sense of responsibility by adding that “there is much more than meets the eye when it comes to my high school track after all.”

Sarah. Similar to Nicole, Sarah also responded to the call for student participants within 24 hours of my email. She agreed to meet me in my office a day after I had interviewed Nicole. Sarah also stood out as an exceptionally insightful, interested, and intelligent woman who was majoring in Reclamation, Environment, and Conservation and came to Environmental Literature and Writing with a plethora of scientific information and knowledge that she effectively used to explain concepts to our group, provide supplemental information for readings, and contribute to class discussions. Sarah had been a popular student among her peers when the time came to move into small group discussions, create a presentation, or do peer-reviews.

Sarah's words. It became clear early on that Sarah was already heavily invested in nature and the protection of our places and environment. When asked about her overall perception of herself as part of the environment, she explained that “growing up I was always interested in the outdoors, and outside and nature and especially when I grew up in Illinois, I moved around a lot and we, I would always play in my backyard. We had a lake, there was a swing set there that was like my place. And then throughout when we moved and everything I ended up moving to Michigan and in Michigan there is a nature center there, called the Chippewa Nature Center in Midland, MI, and it's just like the coolest little pocket of nature ever and so I worked there for their summer camp programs and would just go like hiking through their trails and everything so

I think I've always kind of been infatuated with nature." Despite her evident changes in locations, Sarah perceived that she was a part of nature despite geographical affiliations. While her early place was a swing set in the backyard, she later came to identify with the Chippewa Nature Center where, according to class discussions and our conversations, she continues to work.

When I asked her about how taking Environmental Literature and Writing affected her perception of her role within the environment, Sarah remarked "I've never looked at nature through a philosophical or historical philosophical lens so reading some of the readings that we did from Native Americans and the eighteenth hundreds [...] and just understanding how the perceptions of nature have kind of shifted throughout like our culture and our society as like a human race...I've never had a class that's done that before so that was really interesting to kind of see through a different lens." Coming from a hard science background, Sarah explained that her semesters are usually filled with chemistry or botany classes and that the given course, taught from a Humanities background, allowed her to ask crucial questions, engage in reflections, and as a result, become more aware of how and why our human perceptions of nature have changed over time to become what they are now.

To clarify her perception of self, compared to the larger, human picture, Sarah described that "I've always kind of been aware of like where I am in nature and I think like what my place is but I do think it [Environmental Literature and Writing] intensified that like a little bit more or made me gain like a greater appreciation [...]." Connecting to our current campus location, Sarah added that having taken the course made her recognize nature all around, even on strolls through the campus. She stated that "I think it made me appreciate the smaller...the smaller aspects of nature than actually having to be engulfed in it."

When asked about her current role in the environment, Sarah stated that she was not sure whether our class alone was responsible for her recent changes. She said: “I don’t know if it’s this class in general or the classes I’ve taken this semester or just how my life’s kind of going but this semester has kind of been like a [...] narrowing-to-a-point in my life [...] I’ve kind of figured out the path that I kind of see myself going in.” She further explored that “I think just the combination of classes and experiences that I’ve his semester kind of led me in that direction [...] I definitely know that in my future career I want nature to be like an integral part in what I do every day and how I kind of live my life and how kind of I find my joy.” Although Sarah did not provide enough explicit information to create clear connections between contents of other courses or her personal experiences that she alluded to, her previous answer in regards to the “philosophical” and reflective questions our course raised, can suggest that Environmental Literature and Writing played a crucial role in her recent developments and current understanding of her role in our environment.

Sarah’s statements supports the claim that Environmental Literature and Writing was influential to her development, although it was the combination of courses and experiences of the semester that allowed her to fully make meaning and sense of how she currently views her role. Sarah explained that

I took a lot of like plant- identification classes this year and I’ve never taken a class where its sole purpose was just to find a plant and be able to identify it and that’s something that’s always been kind of a weird goal of mine to walk into any place in nature and be able to like know everything that’s like around you. I’ve always wanted to be like oh well that’s that and this is this. And so that taking those classes kind of helped me get closer to that goal and it kind of sparked this passion in me of wanting to be out

and touching nature and figuring out what is this called and how is this related to the things around it [...] I think then adding this class [Environmental Lit and Writing] into that mix just kind of made it all heightened [...] because not only was I expanding my passions and my goals but then this class really made me take a very interesting look at everything that I was doing so that when I was going out and trying to figure out my life through those classes and those things that deal with my major I could kind of have this shift towards a deeper thought process

Sarah's responses seem to conceptualize the interdisciplinary focus that ecocomposition allows and calls for. While her botany class enabled her to reach a lifelong goal of becoming proficient at plant identification, the addition of the Humanities-based Environmental Literature and Writing course gave her an opportunity to raise relevant and important questions that helped her create her new role and make sense of who she was within the environment. Our Literature and Writing course enabled Sarah to have a platform for critical thinking or "deeper thought process[es]" that provided a key element to her personal development in regards to her place, identity, and meaning within her larger context.

Emphasizing the importance of collective meaning making and the co-construction of knowledge that took place in the Environmental Literature and Writing classroom, Sarah explained that the discussion component of the class was probably the most beneficial element for the establishment of her sense of self within the environment. She explained that

I really liked the discussion aspect of this class [...] and with the readings that you chose, [...] some of them were very specific but some of them were vaguer to where you could have multiple different opinions about what the author was talking about in each writing and so through those discussions of those readings it was just I don't know it was my

favorite part of the class and I think it really helped to expand our knowledge of what we were really talking about.

Throughout our course, some readings were well-liked and received while others were viewed as confusing and vague. However, as Sarah pointed out, the class was able to evaluate individual opinions and interpretations in order to make sense of a given topic or text. By utilizing individual experiences and applying such to given readings, students were able to combine academic and non-academic spheres, allowing them to give value to their individual places. Sarah's response that was echoed by others whom I talked to, made it very clear that the combination of external texts and existing knowledge and meaning worked well for the given course.

When asked about her writings and her concept of herself as a writer, Sarah explained that she was intrigued by the idea of being able to reach audiences beyond the classroom, therefore transcending boundaries. As our final essay asked students to compose a place-based piece and then publish it as a collective e-book, the students were able to send the link to family and friends, post it on their social media sites, or share it however they saw fit. Sarah explored her writer identities before and after the course by stating

I never really saw myself as [...] a professional writer [...]. I mean I wrote for classes and I wrote for reports and things that needed to be written but I never just wrote to have things published or to have really other people read them other than a teacher. And honestly, I think the coolest part about this class was publishing the book at the end because I was able to share that with my friends and family and I've had so many people comment, make comments to me or send it to other people and have just random people comment or email me about things and it was really interesting to be able to share kind of

a collective piece of like kind of what this class was all about and kind of how our minds kind of formed these ideas with other people and they were very receptive so it was really cool.

Again, Sarah explains how the collective experience of taking the course allowed her to not only make sense of readings and texts but also to compile a collective course final essay that aided as something that could be shared with others outside of the class but also those in other, non-local places. The idea of combining places and transcending boundaries is integral to ecocomposition and was clearly realized as a significant, helpful, and effective element of the course by Sarah and other students and those who enjoyed reading our book “A Web of Places”.

At last, I wanted to know if Sarah found that writing helped her create her current understanding of her role within the environment. She described figures of speech, such as metaphors and personifications that allowed her to creatively engage with her writings. Further, she mentioned that “I really enjoyed expanding and getting really detailed making all of these connections to how cotton from the cottonwood trees looks like snow in the summer and like things that and so I think that ...it kind of strengthened my writing?”. Sarah especially enjoyed a freewrite we did, which was “a love note to a tree”, and the place-based essay for her final paper. She also mentioned that “I like making connections like that and being very detailed so that if somebody is reading what I’m writing they can play a movie in their head and be able to actually visualize it in full so that’s what I enjoyed most”, which again supports her strong awareness of audience that she also mentioned for the previous question. The students in Environmental Literature and Writing were free to explore their places through as many creative or fact-based genres and writing styles as they wanted as long as they incorporated some elements of research and clearly wrote about their places. Her description of using creative ways to allow her audience

to visualize her place shows how place-based writing allows students to utilize their voices and write themselves into their environment and context, academic or non-academic.

Sarah's writings. Reflecting on human's perceptions of nature throughout the past 200 years, Sarah was fascinated by Thoreau's inspirational writings as well as the Native American texts (Blanche, 1990) that we discussed in class. Similar to Nicole, Sarah also mentioned agreeing with Thoreau's views on nature and education that suggest that experience-based learning emphasizes the interconnectedness we have with nature. Sarah states that "we are interconnected to nature, and to ignore that is to not fully experience life." Analyzing her own relationships with nature, Sarah exclaims that "ever since I was young, nature has been deeply intertwined with my life. I used to spend hours outside on my swing set immersed in the nature of my backyard; the lake nearby, the ditch behind me, the deciduous trees that changed color in the fall. It became my escape, the place where I could become anything and everything. [...] Nature was my playground." While the beginning passages of her exploration of her early encounters with nature sound quite quaint, Sarah also explains how - similar to how humans' perception of nature altered throughout history, which was the topic of essay 1 - her understanding of nature was also affected by her development. She explains that "Years passed and nature left me. I still would walk outside, but only as far as the school bus stop. I would still climb trees, until our landscaper cut off all the low braches. I would still wing, but only until homework called my name inside." The resolution to her temporary disassociation with nature came in the form of a letter from the Chippewa Nature Center that offered nature programs for children and young adults. Sarah describes the center, which became her place of choice throughout the semester, as "a magical place, it's my place." This location then allowed her to reengage with nature and allowed her to make sense of herself within her environment: "the

nature center became an integral part of my coming-of-age so to say, with nature [...] I found my place within the natural world.”

Creating a connection to the Native American texts (Blanche, 1990) we read as a class, Sarah explains that “Similar to the Native American ideology of wisdom stories, where important life lessons were told in creative verbal stories [...] I taught children daily, by speaking about nature and what it is and why it’s important.” Here, Sarah transcends the idea of physical location and explores how her place also influenced her overall sense of identity as an “educator, a storyteller of sorts” and how she came to make this new meaning of her place and herself through the reading of a course text and the associated reflections and discussions thereof.

In her second essay, which asked students to explore a conflict that existed or exists between humans and nature, Sarah explored resource depletion in various locations, specifically the Amazon rainforests. She raises the question “Are we allowing a cycle of poor conditions to continue just so we can drink specialty coffee? Yes, because that is the economic need in which we perceive the rainforest to give us.” Using this assertion as transition point to her own place, Sarah explains that “my place is the opposite of these ideals. I do not enjoy its land only to use the resources that are there. It is a place in which I feel connected with nature. The Chippewa Nature Center is my home away from home, my sanctuary.” Sarah makes it very clear that her place holds spiritual and mental value for her instead of being a physical location that is existent solely for the depletion of resources and its use for our consumption.

Addressing the issue of intergenerational responsibilities, as discussed through the abovementioned Sanders text, Sarah describes that “I teach the next generation to not have these ideals towards nature and do my best to live a life that doesn’t enable the cycle to continue.” It becomes clear that Sarah views herself as an agent of responsibility for her environment and as a

person who feels the urge to act on behalf of nature in order to ensure our overall survival. By teaching the next generation, Sarah feels like she presents an integral and influential part in the efforts to support and save the planet's places.

In her final paper, Sarah's connection to her place seems to reach its climax. She explains every season and intricate change that occurs at the Nature Center and allows the reader to experience all sensual perceptions she has become so familiar with. Sarah explains that "The more time I have spent here, the more I understand the seasons that the center goes through – where each high point is and what leads up to it. In order for someone to understand what I mean, each season needs to be explained in vast detail." Similar to Nicole, Sarah also explains her place in relation to the larger environment, emphasizing how global changes have impacted her place as well. She remarks that "Winter becomes longer each year, the Polar Vortex becoming stronger each year as climate change takes its toll across the world." In the spring, Sarah has become witness to the increased precipitation that affects the Nature Center and describes that "The amount of rain has been increasing. As climate changes across the globe, temperatures increase and precipitation comes in record numbers, this little pocket of nature is effected just the same." She lists specific numbers that allow the reader to understand the drastic amount of rain that has allowed people to "kayak the walking trails straight into the river."

In her conclusion, Sarah remarks that "Nature has this way about itself: it never disappears, only changes. It fluxuates [sic] with seasons and weather, but it always returns to itself." Reminding her audience of the spiritual benefits her place and overall nature can have, Sarah concludes that "You may forget nature is there momentarily or bypass it while you're busy with life, but when you need to find yourself, when you need to recenter [sic] your soul, you will stop, reconnect with the beauty of nature, and be reminded of how precious, how delicate, how

perfect the world around you truly is.” The intricate details and extensive amount of research that allows the reader to gain an understanding of Sarah’s place as well as her knowledge of the larger environment that her place is inevitably a part of, made me categorize her final piece as “authentic” on the final essay rubric.

Authority/Power. As stated, Sarah’s writing exemplifies extensive research and reflection that eventually allowed her to write with confidence about her place. Her final essay is infused with very detailed descriptions of her chosen place, which suggests reflection. Also, her reflections are supplemented by extensive and rich research that allows the reader to gain a better understanding of her place within its larger environment and perceive the complexities of her affinity towards nature that she refers to as “my love affair with the outside world.”

Agency/Responsibility. Regarding Sarah’s writing suggesting that she is aware of her role within the environment and that she has responsibility to what occurs to her place as well as the larger environment, Sarah’s work exemplifies these sentiments as she clearly views nature as a spiritual entity that she is “forever indebted to” as it has given her not only pleasure and solitude but also a basis for a career in environmental reclamation and sustainability. In her final paper Sarah describes the importance of working at the Chippewa Nature Center as she views it to be her responsibility to protect nature by sharing its fascinating beauty with future generations through her role of being a camp counselor. She explains that it is her calling and “my job to inspire other children to love nature just as I do. The more time I have spent here, the more I understand the seasons that the center goes through – where each high point is and what leads up to it. In order for someone to understand what I mean, each season needs to be explained in vast detail.”

Michelle. Michelle and I met during winter break at a small local coffee shop as I had already turned in my office keys to begin my new position elsewhere. Michelle was a Crop and Soil Management major with a minor in Horticulture. She had enrolled in the course because she had been interested in the topic and needed another English credit.

The day of our scheduled interview was an ice cold morning and after having waited for 15 minutes, I decided that Michelle, who had been an extremely diligent and reliable student, must have had car issues – a very frequent occurrence on Midwestern winter days - and that I'd finish my Green Tea and head back home. However, before I tasted the rich accumulation of honey that I had poured generously into my cup, I could see Michelle walking briskly toward the café, hands in pockets, and the pain of the temperatures written across her face. I thanked her several times for meeting despite the harsh temperatures and offered her a warm drink before we began our interview.

Michelle's words. Similar to the other interviewees, Michelle also explained having viewed herself as part of nature from childhood on. She describes:

I didn't grow up on a farm, I just grew up out in the country kind of in the middle of nowhere; it's just kind of farm fields with a lot of pets and I always understood the importance of the environment. And I guess my mom sort of taught me more of how aesthetically pleasing nature can be; like planting outside all the time, and we gardened a lot and my dad owns a couple of farm fields so we got to see the changes there and people out in our field trying to take care of the crops take care of the land itself so it can keep being used so that was something I saw from like little on.

Early on during the semester, Michelle mentioned the importance of the aesthetic factor nature has played in her upbringing and how her mother's gardening presented a constant in her

life. Her father's farming habits and the observations of other's also benefiting from the health of their lands were foundational in her current life as she is not only majoring in Crop and Soil Management but also minoring in Horticulture. Also, the intergenerational aspect of her family, herself, and the land the family owns seems fundamental to Michelle's current understanding of herself within the environment. for question number 2, she pointed out that "it [Environmental Literature and Writing] made me start to see more of how humans affected how something you do today can have an affect 50 years from now and how some of our problems today came from our grandparents, great grandparents and that wasn't something I really thought about. I kinda just thought that the problems now are our fault but I realized after this class that this takes time to...it takes time to create the problems and it's going to take time to fix the problem."

Further, Michelle mentioned that after having taken Environmental Literature and Writing, she came to the "realization of what I do now is going to affect my kids, grandkids, I want to [...] make sure I don't do anything to create more problems or make our problems worse. I want to do the opposite, make it better for them; like hope that we don't see things get any worse. Just do little things when possible." Michelle's focus on family and familial experiences is clearly reflected in her deep connection she feels towards her place that is also infused with familial connections. These family values exemplify the interdependent correlations and relationships between places, people, and self that appear important and central to Michelle's reality.

When asked about how Michelle established this role for herself, she described that "I became more aware of my actions and what I throw away, what I do, kind of looking at the ground I'm walking on...how can I keep it the way it is or make it better...kind of leave things the way, the way they were found." Similar to other interviewees, Michelle expresses a newly

discovered and established sense of responsibility towards the environment that is also infused with recognition, appreciation, and awareness of a place. Her interest in maintaining a place or contributing to its betterment is evident in her assertions and she explains that certain components of the course allowed her to reflect on herself in order to develop this new role within nature. Michelle describes that the readings from the *Wildbranch* (Caplow & Cohen, 2010) text were beneficial and conducive for her development of a role within the environment. She mentioned that these readings “were easier to relate to” than some of the other texts we’ve covered. Michelle also described that the authors wrote about “problems of what was done then is affecting us now and it’s going to keep going like that if we don’t do something about it, and they seemed to have like a connection to the environment and ourselves so it wasn’t just about nature.”

As her answers indicate, Michelle felt that the course also affected her sense of herself as a writer within an environment. She commented that

writing about the environment was definitely something new for me and I actually enjoyed writing and being that, you know, I had some understanding of the environment before the class it was kind of cool to get to write about something that I had cared about and cared about like more throughout the class and it was actually...it seemed hard but once you started writing it was actually very easy and actually surprisingly writing makes it easier to relate to the environment and like go through that thought process I guess.

Michelle’s answer suggests that the act of writing made it easier for her to understand environmental concerns but also to establish connections between existing places as well as herself. She also mentioned that

from this course I kind of understood how writing out your thoughts is kind of a good way to share those thoughts with other people if you want to see others start to change their views of the environment like seeing and reading your writing can kind of have that effect just like our thoughts changed by reading all those pieces, all the stories.

Here, her comments suggest that she also was able to use her writing as a way to transcend academic and non-academic boundaries, just like Sarah had suggested. Michelle's insights into her writing process also strengthen the idea that the act of writing helped her draw connections between concepts and experiences while making new meaning and sense of complex readings and thoughts (Balgopal & Wallace, 2009).

Michelle's writings. Compared to most of her peers, Michelle mentioned that "I honestly cannot pin point where my place is yet because my heart is in more than one place.", she therefore started writing her first essay without a definite place that she would continuously use throughout the 16-week class. In her writing she explains that "I really love the yard around my home back in Sheboygan Wisconsin because it is where I have spent practically my entire life and that is where I was raised." Similar to Sarah, Michelle feels a strong connection to her childhood neighborhood and natural setting but also takes into account her own development and the expansion of her knowledge of places. She continues exploring these places by stating that "I have grown to truly love [Southwestern University] and this has become home to me. I grew this connection for two reasons. My first reasons being that I love the landscape. I love the hills and openness of fields around the outside of town. My second reason being that this is where I was better able to connect with myself and who I am." It appears that Michelle is perceiving a slight tension between her place-based associations in regards to her identity and although she

continues exploring one specific spot close to campus in essay 1, her second essay and final paper describe her home in Sheboygan as her place.

Throughout her first essay, Michelle continuously uses the readings to make sense of herself in regards to the conflicting places, almost as if trying to argue for one over the other within herself. Citing Thoreau's brief quote "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity" (McKibben, 2008, p. 20), Michelle explains that Thoreau's exploration of the fast-paced human lifestyle makes her appreciate her second place of choice, a hill close to campus that hosts the university's team letter "X". She describes that "to appreciate nature, we must stop and just slow down for a bit and see what it has to offer us and just how beautiful it can be. That is why I love being on top of "the X" so very much. Up there I am able to stop and appreciate the farm land all around and realize how important that land is and how it affects me."

Following a brief analysis of William Bradford's text, Michelle asserts that humans can often forget that they are part of nature and that they view themselves "in a separate category". Here, she refers to her home as her place as she tries to draw connections to Sheboygan, WI. "At my home we don't have a garbage truck that comes and picks up recycling so we don't recycle much at all. My family and I have never found it important enough to separate and take recycling somewhere. We do not have a good reason either, we do not just because that would mean going out of our way and doing something extra." She further concludes that "this is the attitude everyone kind of takes because it is human nature to want everything to come easy for us so we do not have to work hard and go out of our way." Michelle also connects this attitude that her family also exhibits, to the larger environment and our status quo. She states: "This attitude causes environmental problems. When those problems happen we sit around wondering why they happened or we simply think nature is doing causing [sic] problems for itself. We cannot

think like Bradford and realize we have the power to take care of nature just as much as we have the power to destroy it.” In her sincere analysis of places, Michelle clearly tries to make sense of herself, her family, her role, humanity’s role, our attitudes, our problems, and her belonging within this convoluted setting.

Interestingly, this conflict seems to have been resolved for the second essay as she does not mention the area around Southwestern University or the “X” on the hill in this piece anymore. While the description of her home is fairly brief, she continuously draws on personal experiences to make connections between the given texts, underlying ideologies, and herself. When addressing changes in regards to personal locations as described in an Olmsted (Caplow & Cohen, 2010) piece, Michelle analyzes that “I have had to do this [observe physical changes in place] on my own street as changes have occurred around me. A huge golf course was put up and increased the traffic a new house took over a local field and a fire destroyed my neighbor’s yard. All these things happening around me changed my place and not in a positive way. I saw what my street was like when it was natural so I know how my street looked at its best.” Analyzing and reflecting on her perception of our contemporary human attitude towards nature, Michelle remarks that “today we are taking way more from nature than we are giving back and this would be a much better relationship however humans have become almost parasitic.” Michelle concludes that “If more people had specific place[s] that they paid attention to they would be able to see the problems humans are causing within nature and might start seeing the responsibility we have towards nature.” Again, Michelle clearly uses the texts and reflections on her own location to establish a role for herself within her natural surroundings. By suggesting that we, as a human race, must pay attention to our surroundings and accept our responsibility to

do so, Michelle also expands her own role to create or suggest an overall human ethic in regards to our environment.

In her final paper, Michelle's connection to her place has become certain, assured, and clear. Without alluding to the campus' location, she begins by stating "[...] the place that means the most to me is my home." It appears that the tension she perceived in September, has completely vanished as she explains "I live out in the country [...] I have grown up in the same house all my life. I have never lived any other ways and after coming to college I can't say I want to live any other way but out in the country", and that "this is my home and I would pin point this as where my story began", which draws a clear connection to her realization of the importance of her place regarding her sense of self and the role she plays within her environment.

Alluding to her mom's influence on her aesthetic appreciation of her natural surroundings, Michelle describes that "I feel like because of all the work I have done with plants from such a young age has really made me find my place in this world and my place in nature [...] I feel like my place in nature will be to care for plants." Drawing connections to her larger environment and her place's role within, Michelle explains that "nature works for us and in return we should work to take care of it." She continues to list several ways in which readers could further their interests in working for nature and choosing an environmentally driven career, just as she has. Michelle offers a rationale that should motivate her peers and general audience to consider the described occupation type: "If we had more people caring for the environment and working to fix some environmental problems our relationship with nature as the whole human race will be a lot better." Michelle successfully combines physical roles and places with social

ones as she explores her current and future place in nature as well as her role within our society and culture.

In her conclusion, Michelle reminded the reader that “When it comes down to it the most important interaction humans should have with nature is to fall in love with their own place. Once you enjoy one place you will base others off that place and enjoy similar places beyond yours. This expands a person’s appreciation of nature. That appreciation of nature is ultimately what human’s [sic] most important job is. We just need to care. Take care of you place, make sure it is clean and used wisely.” Michelle seeks to provide her audience with closing remarks that shed light on her view of herself in nature and her experience with it while providing the reader with inspirational thoughts about their potential re-evaluation of their present perceptions of our environmental surroundings. Similar to her peer interviewees, I also rated Michelle’s final paper as being “authentic” in her final rubric, as she successfully combines research, knowledge, and environmental awareness with her individual place and sense of being within such location.

Authority/Power. As mentioned, her writing exemplifies both research and reflection, yet, the connection between researched information and knowledge and her own place-based reality is a bit lacking. She describes the significance of selecting an environmentally oriented career and lists numbers provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which provides an insight into her motivation behind her own career interests. By doing so, Michelle provides an idea of how her place has influenced her career choice and interests, however, such connection is not explicitly described. In regards to having composed a piece that reflects her clear identification with a place, Michelle’s paper suggests that her early childhood memories are not only influential to her current perceptions of nature but also infused with connections to her family life at her home, especially her garden. By reflecting on her interactions with nature, Michelle describes that “I

feel like because of all the work I have done with plants for much a young age has really made me find my place in this world and my place with nature. I am really good with plants and caring for them and I feel like my place in nature will be to care for plants.” Overall, Michelle’s work exemplifies thoughtful reflections that allow her to write confidently about her place.

Agency/Responsibility. Although Michelle’s role is clearly established, her overall identification with nature and acceptance of her role within the environment is based more on a collective sense of our human responsibility rather than her individual sense of such agency. She writes that

When it comes down to it the most important interaction humans should have with nature is to fall in love with their own place. Once you enjoy one place you will base others off that place and enjoy similar places beyond yours. This expands a person’s appreciation of nature. That appreciation of nature is ultimately what human’s most important job is. We just need to care. Take care of your place, make sure it is clean and used wisely

Although her writing is filled with such advice, it is unclear whether she actually keeps her place “clean” and if her natural resources in her location are “used wisely”. Further, Michelle advises that “if we had more people caring for the environment and working to fix some environmental problems our relationship with nature as the whole human race will be a lot better.” Again, she clearly understands that it is important to reflect on our natural habitats and that it would be wise for us as a society to re-examine our current environmental philosophy. However, it is not clear whether Michelle also engages in such thoughts and behaviors in order to take responsibility and be an agent that acts for the environment.

Eve. Eve was a Business major who had not decided on a specialization but had expressed an interest in international business when entering the class in early September. She

also mentioned that she had needed an extra English class and that she was not necessarily interested in the environment but immediately identified as a “city girl”. Eve had moved to the United States from Russia when she was 10 and her mom had married a man from Colorado. She finished her elementary years in various ESL classrooms but moved on to Middle and High school without ever identifying as a non-native English speaker again. I was always able to identify with Eve as she expressed the same place-based confusion that I so often feel when trying to articulate a place-based identity. She loved Russia, but also endeared the mountains that surrounded her home in Colorado. She missed her grandma in Russia but loved living in Colorado with her mom, new dad, and friends who had shown “the city girl” how to fish, camp, and hike. Lastly, she chose Colorado for her final paper and wrote about it expressively and confidently. Similar to her peer, Nicole, Eve also added an English minor following the completion of the course as she expressed a love for writing about things she cared about.

I met Eve on the Friday of the first week of the spring semester in the lounge of the campus library. Eve came up to meet me and greeted me with a genuine hug. She immediately explained how exhausted she was but that it had been very important to her to keep our interview date. I thanked her several times and after we had finally located a suitable room – some conference rooms were under construction and the other library areas were too loud – Eve and I nestled into a fairly small, wooden-walled room that was used as a staff meeting room.

Eve’s words. Eve was the only one of my five interviewees who made it clear that she would forever consider herself a “city person”. Having moved to Colorado and Wisconsin from Russia, she had experienced several different countryside appearances and landscapes and explained

well I was always growing up in the city so the environment in the city is very like not what you would see in the countryside, it's very like dirty and there's it's smoky and dirty and coming to X and to Wisconsin seeing how the nature is so much cleaner here so I guess the environment and the nature between the two are very different but I always view myself as a city person no matter what

As was also obvious in her writing and our conversations, Eve felt a bit unsure about what place really was her place. Similar to my personal experiences with moving to this country from another and then between states within the United States, Eve was encountering an opportunity to reflect on what these individual places meant to her, how they had influenced her, and how they were intertwined with her sense of self. At the beginning of the semester, when I explained the idea of place-based writing, Eve and I had several conversations about the sense of belonging and homelessness that we felt was associated with moving such vast distances. Oftentimes, Eve waited until the other students had left and the two of us would walk to my office, talking about our experiences and perceptions. During our interview, I asked her if her perceptions of herself in regards to the environment changed from place to place or if she felt that her attitudes had remained similar or the same despite geography. Eve explained that

well in Russia it's all city, it's a little bit countryside somewhere but I pretty much grew up in the downtown of my town, Volgograd (Stalingrad), my little city in Russia, and it is all like just a city; I don't know how else to describe it. Then moving to Colorado is...it's less than the city...well actually...it's like I guess more buildings I guess but yet there is beautiful nature and mountains that you can see all along the sides and the hill that my parents live on, they live on a hill, and you go... you go to that house, on your way there you can see mountains in the background and when you go back down the hill you can

see the downtown skyline which is really pretty. So I definitely think that Colorado is my kind of like the medium that I have and then coming to Wisconsin it's completely like country and [...] I'm not a fan of it because there's no mountains and I feel like there's not a lot to do, so I'm a city person and yet Colorado is totally my medium cause I fell in love with nature even more when I was there because I was ...I would hike a lot and just yes...be a part of nature, hike, camp, whatever

Similar to Michelle, Eve also exhibits a sense of being torn between places or trying to make meaning of what place most resonates with her being. As she explicitly stated various times throughout the semester, Eve spent some time trying to make compromises, articulate pros and cons of each area, and to eventually situate herself into one sphere for each given essay.

When asked about how taking Environmental Literature and Writing had affected her perception of her role within the environment, Eve described her initial role as being one of a caregiver and caretaker and one who attempts to preserve the environment. The course acted as a type of motivator to enhance that perception as Eve recognized that other people were also interested in taking on the same responsibilities that she had felt for some time. She explained:

my role I think was always like I think take care and preserve [...] like preserve the environment like don't throw trash out on the street, always put it in the bin and recycle and stuff. Reading the texts and short stories from the books or whatever the handouts were...it was nice to see how the author, other authors lived and how they took care of nature; it made me like 'huh that's interesting maybe I should do it', but I can't go off the grid yet like Thoreau did I think. But it was interesting and I don't know if it affected me much because I'm still the same I think. I just realized that a lot of other people live and

perceive it [nature] differently and I've always perceived it like you gotta save it, you gotta recycle and just do whatever you can

Eve maintained that her basic attitude existed prior to enrolling in Environmental Literature and Writing and that she still views herself as someone who is responsible for the maintenance and preservation of our environment. However, the course allowed her to become exposed to likeminded writers who supported her thinking and therefore strengthened her beliefs. This message was also clearly stated when asked about her view on her new role within the environment at this point, after she had completed the class. Eve repeated that "I don't know if I see it any differently. I still feel the same I just have the knowledge from the literature that we read about other people [...] I don't know if I've changed too much, I think I still keep everything as the same." She further explains that the class has provided her with motivation to act more on her existing beliefs: "I just really want to like volunteer more I think that's what I want to do to just you know ...like at shelters, or just at the like a national park if I can or just clean up trash at a park I think that would be super fun which I never thought I would do before because I kind of don't want to but now after reading all the texts that the other people did like Thoreau." Again, it appears that Eve was inspired by reading other individual's thoughts and their actions in regards to preserving our natural world. By engaging with the texts and the class, Eve connected with her general writing environment that consisted of other writers, other places, and eventually, led back to herself.

When asked about the establishment of the new role for herself, Eve additionally strengthened her previous claim considering the influence other writers had on her own role. She commented that "by seeing what other people have done and what the length I could go to like if they did it I think I can do it too if I have time, especially in the summer perhaps I could do more

work for the environment, like volunteering and stuff like that.” She added that aside of the writings, she also felt inspired by some of the YouTube clips other students recommended, by the opinions and insights her peers shared, and by the interactions in the “big huge group discussions.” She mentioned that “it was just really nice to just hear other people’s opinions and see where they stand and see where I stand.” Similar to other students I interviewed, Eve suggested that the interactions were invaluable as they allowed her to explore where she placed herself within the larger context and environment. These discussions allowed her to consistently reflect on, construct, and co-construct her ongoing development of her role within the natural world and the implied issues as well as the, at times conflicting, ideologies.

Regarding Eve’s writing and Environmental Literature and Writing, Eve mentioned that “as a writer I think I’ve grown a bit because I feel like I’ve been pretty good as a writer before I’ve never had really any problems but I liked to write about this class because I got to talk more about nature and what I like instead of like other past classes where I had to talk about a book report or something that I don’t really care about.” She further discussed how the course’s generally flexible writing approaches helped her to increase her ability to connect with the overall subject. She stated that

In this class I could relate to and I could talk about myself a lot which I liked because that didn’t include...involve a lot of like research it was all from me and from the heart and I could express myself however I wanted to and I think with all the feedback that I ...I received from other students and the...from you, the instructor really gave me more ideas of how I can improve and I did save all these essays to look back on and see what I can improve on in my future essays and how to write my future essays better

Eve remarked that the class' writings not only provided her with feedback that might be useful for the course-relevant writings, but insights that she could use beyond the classroom walls and beyond the given semester. She also expressed that the class offered her the opportunity to write "from the heart", which implies that she was able to connect with the subjects, allowing her to envision and write herself into the environment.

Further, Eve noted that writing helped her create her current understanding of her role within the environment. Eve exclaimed that the class allowed her to attain more knowledge and greater awareness that helped her to go beyond her usual perspective. She described that "I'm just not kinda like in this inside the box not outside the box and it expanded my mind a bit about it and I think that it was amazing."

Eve's writings. Eve's writing exemplified the type of place-based uncertainty that comprised several of our conversations throughout the semester. It also showed interesting changes in her perception of place as she clearly negotiated her place throughout her writings.

In her first essay, Eve explored Native American texts from the Tigerman (2006) anthology. While examining relationships between European settlers and their impacts on the Native community in various locations, Eve wrote that "Connecting to my place and experiences with nature, I love my land and where I am from. I would not want intruders coming into my country and invade it with no remorse. I would want everything to be exactly like it is now." Although she alludes to "my place", she never explicitly states what this place is; Russia? Colorado? Wisconsin? We are never told which location she is referring to although it is clear that she connects to the given area. She defensively asserts that, "If someone tried to take over a piece of land, it would stir a lot of trouble and possibly a war", suggesting a sense of affiliation and loyalty to the given place. She later advises, "Enjoy nature, learn from it. Do not pick a

flower because it looks nice, take a picture of it so one can remember it for a whole lifetime. There is no need in harming the planet for [our] own selfish reasons when there are so many alternatives on how one can preserve nature without harming it.” Here, it is apparent that Eve feels responsible and connected to the larger natural environment but still not to one specific location.

Further, Eve used Peter Blue Cloud’s (Tigerman, 2006) *Burden Basket*, to juxtapose the contents with her own burden-free life. She describes that “I do not carry any burdens with me. Whenever I am at a park or hiking the mountains and hear nothing but the sound of birds and leaves on the trees rustling, I know I am alone and at peace here. Nature is the best source of therapy and more people need to take advantage of the beauty it offers.” Similar to her previous remarks, Eve’s allusions to her place are very vague and do not entail enough details to allow the reader to speculate about what place she might be describing. The park or mountains could exist in various places, although the latter most likely excludes Wisconsin. It appears that Eve avoids the commitment to a place and finds herself in a place-less sphere in which she can establish opinions and thoughts about nature and our human responsibility within it, but that does not require her to pick one over the other.

In her second essay, Eve explicitly addresses her sense of “placelessness” and the difficulty she is perceiving when trying to determine which of the three spaces is what she identifies with most. Eve describes: “When thinking of “My Place” I picture bits of Russia, but also Colorado where I have spent the second half of my childhood. Russia is where I was born and grew up, Colorado was where I found my identity, lifelong friends, learned so much about myself and grew up as a person.” Concerning Russia and Colorado, Eve reveals that the latter is where she established her sense of self, however, Russia and her associated childhood with this

location, is also quite impactful, which she explains in the following quote. Regarding Wisconsin, the place where she has spent the least amount of time, Eve exclaims that,

I have not been able to relate to Wisconsin yet or find anything interesting about it. I need familiarity and friends for me to fully commit to a place and like it. I relate to mountains and a busy city. Wisconsin does not offer me those experiences so ultimately, no matter how hard I try I cannot call this state my home. My two places are worth saving because that is where I come from and who I am today. If I lived in different places and met different people, there is no doubt that I would be different. My outlook on life and who I am in general, would be very altered from who I am today”

It is obvious that Eve has reflected on her places and feels a deep connection to Russia and Colorado.

In her final paper, Eve seems to have come to the conclusion, if temporary, that Colorado is most likely her place of choice, even over Russia. She goes so far to say that “When thinking of ‘My Place’ the only place that comes to mind is Colorado”, shedding all previous uncertainties while seeming to commit to one location that she associates with most closely and genuinely. She explains that “It [Colorado] is where I grew up, I found my identity, lifelong friends, learned so much about myself, and grew up as a person” and that this place “is worth saving because that is where I come from and who I am today.” Interestingly, Eve also mentions that “If I lived in different places and met different people, there is no doubt that I would be different”, which suggests her clear understanding of the importance of place in relation to identity but is a bit perplexing as well since she has lived in different places and seems to undermine that here.

Tying it in with the larger environment, Eve mentions air pollution in Colorado, which according to her individual research, “has never been bad. Our air has never been foggy due to pollution which makes Colorado a better and safer place to live.” Using her deep infatuation with Colorado, Eve examines her own role within the environment, which she has come to establish as part of having taken Environmental Literature and Writing. Similar to Michelle, Eve directly addresses her audience in her final paper and gives specific directions as to how one could live a more environmentally aware life, despite location. Eve writes:

For that beautiful state to keep thriving and blossoming we need to reduce our waste and recycle. People all over the globe not only in Colorado need to be more aware and conscious of how each individual is harming the planet and change their actions. For this to work every one needs to work together on sustaining and repairing our beautiful Earth. Perhaps in Colorado we could start by not littering, recycle more, grow your own garden for fresh fruits and vegetables, create a compost, or make as little waste as possible from products we use every day. Dump the aerosol cans and recycle that piece of plastic or paper, find the nearest garbage can to throw away your trash. It really does not take a whole lot to make a small difference. Every little difference counts towards a greater cause and that is saving our beautiful planet. Nature is depicted all around us and we need to take better care of it.

Regarding Eve’s newly established role of herself within nature, she explains that “I position myself within nature by helping it any way I can and encouraging others to do the same. Our human perception of nature changed throughout the centuries is by using our planet for our own selfish needs and never giving back.” At last, she leaves the audience with a warning-like

reminder to recognize the urgency to reformulate our current roles and states: “our role as human beings that inhabit this Earth is to help and start restoring what we have before it is too late.”

Regarding my rating of her final paper on the final rubric, I decided to categorize Eve’s final paper as “authentic” as it exemplified a combination of knowledge of the environment with her personal connection to a place and such knowledge.

Authority/Power. Through her research on air pollution in the US and one of Eve’s favorite places, Colorado, her information regarding the value of national parks and forests, Eve’s inclusion of material on deforestation in the world and US, as well as her reflective sections on her affection for Colorado, her final suggested that she can write confidently and with power about her place. As a writer, Eve gives the reader a clear sense that she has a thorough understanding of her place and its importance to its surroundings environments. She does so by relating to personal experiences that make her writing accessible and personal to potential audience members.

Agency/Responsibility. Eve’s paper clearly suggests that she has accepted her responsible role within nature, from her place to the larger environmental context. She writes that “People all over the globe not only Colorado need to be more aware and conscious of how each individual is harming the planet and change their actions. For this to work every one needs to work together ton sustaining and repairing our beautiful earth.” She further remarks that “I position myself within nature by helping it any way I can and encouraging others to do the same.” Clearly, Eve has reflected on her individual responsibilities and views it to be important to not only contribute to the lessening of destructive behaviors but also to educate and motivate fellow humans to join the cause.

Clara. Clara had been an outstanding and very interesting student who had selected Environmental Literature and Writing based on her interest in our environment. Prior to completing Environmental Literature and Writing, Clara was majoring in Geography but had not yet decided on a minor. Now, when I met her in late January for our interviews, she informed me that she had added Sustainability and Renewable Energy as well as English as a minor to her still existing Geography major. We met at the same café that Michelle had selected and although Clara was overcoming pneumonia that made her cough profusely throughout our conversation, she was eager to partake in the interviews. Our conversation was a bit shorter than the previous interviews as I was genuinely concerned about her well-being and her frequent coughing that prevented her from being able to finish sentences at times, made me stay on track and move along quite swiftly.

Clara's words. Clara had been born and raised approximately two car hours from our campus. She had spent her whole life there and had clearly been impacted by the natural surroundings of the breathtaking bluffs and scenic landscapes of the Mississippi. When I asked her about herself considering the environment throughout her lifetime, Clara responded: “growing up I lived in a very scenic area and so being out in nature is something that a lot of people did because it was so pretty you wanted to be out there.” She added that the course allowed her to see the beauty she had been surrounded by all these years and overcome the usual acceptance or blindness regarding such beauty that comes over time. Clara suggested that, “I suppose I didn't think much of it really until honestly taking this class and having to like reflect deeper on what I think about what my part in the environment is.”

I then asked her exactly how the class affected her perception of her role within the environment, and Clara answered that, “I guess this class made me more aware of my influence

as an individual human and then like as the human race in general, and how what we do impacts it so just from the writings and from the discussions... listening to other people kind of gives you those “aha” moments that you wouldn’t have thought of on your own.” Similar to the other student participants, Clara greatly benefited from having the exposure to a group of students who were also constantly trying to make meaning of the given course topics and texts and was greatly influenced by the discussions that allowed for a dialogic analysis of self-reflections and insights.

When asked about her new role within nature, Clara explained that, “I feel more of a like a duty to like care about the environment I guess. [...] I guess after having this class I realized how not how important but like how influential the environment can be on your life and your perception of things and so having taken that I’m kind of more like conscious of my surroundings and more appreciative kind of.” Just as Eve and Michelle had discussed, Clara was also inspired by Environmental Literature and Writing, to become more active in efforts of environmental conservation. She described her newly discovered feeling of “duty” towards nature as she recognized how interdependent all living systems are.

I then asked her about how she created this new role for herself and Clara described her personal development throughout the class and how it started as a rather “normal” course experience but moved her into another direction. She stated: “when the class started it was kind of I did the readings and you know it was just homework I wasn’t really thinking much about it; I was doing it to get it done, and then there were a couple pieces...I mean even like the Native American stuff like realizing it wasn’t that long ago but their life and their outlook on it was so incredibly different...kind of started me thinking more deeply about it.” The Native American writings were part of the first four class weeks, which suggests that her transformation occurred fairly early in the semester and continued for the next 11 weeks.

To gain a better understanding of the components of such a transformation, Clara described that one of her most influential experiences in the class was our tree-writing in which students were asked to go outside and find a tree and write to it, about it, or whatever came to mind when surrounded by it. Clara, as many others who later came to love the activity, thought of this as a “Hippie exercise” but overcame her reluctance and skepticism to encounter the writing open-mindedly. Clara explained her thinking and writing process as follows:

kind of silly but the writing exercise we did when we went outside and we wrote about the tree. At first I was like ‘ok kind of weird, but I understand it’ and then I was sitting out there doing it and it was probably the coolest writing thing I’ve had to do because I wrote about that tree that’s the oldest one in Wisconsin and I was just sitting there looking at this giant tree and I’m just [...] how much that giant tree has seen and how much has changed and like the people that have been around it...like there were Native Americans here when that tree started growing. Like that’s crazy

Southwestern University houses the oldest (recorded) tree in the entire state. Clara had recognized it from a tour she had taken of the campus as a senior in high school and although the identifying plaque was no longer placed in front of it, Clara recognized the tree that she found herself writing to and for. As she was so intrigued by her arbor-treasure, Clara supplemented her narrative with research and explored other facts about the tree that she later shared with her peers.

I asked Clara about herself as a writer within an environment following Environmental Literature and Writing and she explained that the course had allowed her to become more confident and creative, which she would carry to other essays and classes outside of our course. She described that

the writing assignments for this class actually gave me more confidence in my writing ability and I think the biggest thing that I like was able to learn from and grow from was we were doing non-fiction writing but [...] there are so many different ways to convey what we're saying...like we talked about romanticizing it [nature] a lot and you can do a more scientific approach and things like that and so that's something that I keep in mind now when I have to write: there's how you present it and how you phrase things influence how people read it and who reads it

Clara, like some of the other interviewees, seemed enthused by the idea of transcending what she had previously known about writing and enjoyed thinking of her audience's perceptions of her influences as writer. Being able to convey meaning through various approaches also moved Clara and she sounded quite joyful to have encountered different forms of composition to use for upcoming writings.

Lastly, I wanted to know whether Clara believed that writing helped her understand herself within the environment. She responded with a confident "definitely", and explained that "I think it helps me like always, having to sit down and write, but specifically for this [course] just really having to focus and reflect on like these deeper questions like almost philosophically [...] and to try and convey it to get someone else to understand; it means that I have to understand it myself and so there was a lot of thought behind it." Clara had been using a writing-to-learn approach for several years and recognized that she could retain more information through writing. In our course, it also enabled her to reflect and go beyond her previous notions and comprehensions in regards to our natural environments. By writing about given topics, narrating, and reflecting on who she was within her places and experiences, allowed Clara to gain a better understanding of the course but also herself in a web of environments.

Clara's writings. Clara's essays reflect her immediate association with a place. As mentioned, Clara had been born and raised in the same location and had not moved until going to college. Interestingly, she never mentions the area around Southwestern University and consistently emphasizes her connection with her hometown.

When critiquing the financial gains some associate with the environments and how resources have, at times, come to be more important than preservation, Clara brings up her own place and its meaning to her life. She writes:

My place in the environment, where I feel a connection to nature is in my hometown. It's in the Mississippi River valley, surrounded by tree covered bluffs. Every time I come home, excited to see the beauty that surrounds me, I'm upset by the destruction of my favorite place. The natural gas boom has caused a demand for frac [sic] sand, for the hydraulic fracturing (fracking) process. As it turns out, the bluffs that surround my home are made of the perfect stone for frac [sic] sand. Every time I enter town, I can see the ever-growing hole expanding in the side of the bluff

Aside from the aesthetic value her place offers and has offered throughout her life, Clara is clearly distraught by recent changes that illustrate the destructions that are oftentimes imposed onto our current nature. She continues by questioning the environmental integrity of the company that owns the described land: "Since the company owns a plot of land, does that justify exploiting its natural resources? Just because one person feels an emotional connection to a location, should that be taken into consideration in a business meeting? If anything can be said, it is that the landscape of the earth is constantly changing." It is clear that Clara, as most individuals, is unable to make sense of the damaging behaviors that some current businesspeople

or individuals approach nature with. She raises questions that she is unable to answer and can only assert that change is inevitable and so is what we call our place.

In her second essay, Clara also draws upon her place to make connections between and sense of our current, Western environmental approaches and attitudes. Combining what we had discussed in class and the readings, Clara uses information from her major to describe the area surrounding her hometown. She writes: “In Southwest Wisconsin, the land remained untouched by glaciers thousands of years ago, and the result is evident in the rolling bluffs and valleys. The natural beauty of the tree covered bluffs lining either side of the Mississippi River, make Prairie du Chien a tourist destination in all seasons, but especially the fall as the bluffs come alive with vibrant colors.” Clara is also aware of the price the aesthetic value of her location has and remarks that “Many locals rely on the natural beauty to draw in tourists to eat at their restaurants, shop at their stores, and visit their attractions. Take away the aesthetics of the bluffs and river valley and all that is left is a small town surrounded by farm fields, isolated from any urban luxuries. The results would be devastating on the local economy and ecosystems”. Although she does not elaborate to explain how the missing tourists would directly affect existing ecosystems, Clara’s insight clearly demonstrate her understanding of the interconnectedness of the systems that comprise her place.

In her final paper, Clara’s strong understanding of the geographic and geological history of her place compose the overall core of her paper. Starting out with “The Earth is a complex interconnected system in which every action has a reaction. Changes, big and small, prompt responses and alterations to the cycles and systems that take place at all levels of life”, Clara sets the stage for an elaborate description of her selected place’s meaning within its larger environment as well as her understanding of her role within an effectively existing, but

threatened ecosystems. Clara situates the human race within its current context of global destruction and states that “trying to comprehend even a fraction of the interaction is inconceivable, yet we know humans have managed to spread their influence to nearly all corners of the earth from ocean to atmosphere and everything in between. Rising sea levels, changing atmospheric composition, global mass extinction, human influence seems to know now limits.” This sobering analysis of her perception of where humans currently stand in relation to our environmental web, Clara concludes by inferring that humans have lost their “niche” that other species fulfill, and that “through the advancement of weapons and intellect there came a point when humans essentially succeeded in removing themselves from the food chain. No longer prey to anything, but rather the ultimate predator.” She recognizes our human ability to have such drastic impacts on ecosystems as “strictly a human quality” as “no other species possess a destructive talent quite like that of human beings.”

Refocusing on her place, Clara explains that some changes within the Earth’s long history have not been caused by humans. She explains the importance of glaciation in the Midwest and recognizes how it also affected the shaping of her place. Like Sarah, Clara focuses on the seasons and their influential changes within the place’s elements to present a descriptive illustration of what place she identifies with. She writes “It’s humbling to sit and observe the passing of seasons. Despite the hardships we force upon the environment, nature responds gracefully by carrying on, just [as] it has since the first days of it’s [sic] existence.”

Fully aware of our current destructive path and her perception of humans being almost completely reckless, Clara departs by addressing John Lovelock’s Gaia Theory that we had discussed late in the semester. Clara writes “As the Gaia theory explains, the earth is a self-regulating system, which strives to achieve a habitable equilibrium, but if we push the

boundaries too far there may come a point when the earth loses the ability to regulate and correct our mistakes.” She does not give her readers a detailed description of what to do in order to become an active part of the reestablishment of an environmentally friendly approach to earth; Clara writes in an almost disillusioned manner about the unavoidable consequences of our current behavior and resistance to change. Because of Clara’s clear sense of the environment, her awareness of our natural habitats, and her ability to couple such knowledge with a personal connection to such places and her chosen space, I categorized Clara’s piece as “authentic”.

Authority/Power. Clara’s extensive research and insightful, thoughtful, and personable reflections enable her to write with strength and confidence about her chosen location. Through factual data as well as an intimate sense of knowing and belonging to her place, she invites her readers to examine and enjoy her place that she inevitably identifies with.

Agency/Responsibility. Similar to Michelle’s final paper, Clara’s paper also suggests a clear awareness of our society’s philosophical issues with nature and that our outlook has been destructive for several centuries. Clara remarks that “No doubt, our contemporary fixation with globalization and consumerism fuels the exploitation of natural resources[...] no other species possesses a destructive talent quite like that of human beings.” Further, she explains that despite our awareness that we rely on trees for survival, our destructive behaviors and mass deforestations have not ended. Clara criticizes that “the fact that we knowingly continue this contradiction of logic is unexplainable, but says something about the carelessness of humans.” Although it is quite apparent that Clara is well aware of the negative impact humans are having on the environment, it is not quite clear that she acts differently or views herself as having agency and the responsibility to foster change that would affect our current attitude towards the environment.

Student Questionnaires

I handed out the second anonymous student questionnaire in early October. At this point, almost 50% of the semester had been covered and the students had engaged in numerous interesting discussions, read several texts, and exchanged thoughts on contemporary issues and approaches to our environments.

Most answers to the question “What is our position within nature?”, were met with rather disillusioned and disheartening answers. One student answered that “we don’t necessarily have a position, we are just there. I would say almost working against it.” Another student echoed this sentiment by saying “Our position as a whole is pretty detached. Some of us are close with nature, however, as a whole we don’t interact with it too closely.” Lastly, another student mentioned that “we have placed ourselves on a pedestal above nature. Our place is one we’ve created, not one we’ve been given.”

Some students identified our unequal relationship with nature and the way we’ve positioned ourselves: “we, as humans, have a unique position because directly through our actions we can either help or hurt nature. We can live with the environment and protect it (symbiotic relationship) or we can exploit resources for our own use.” Corresponding to these beliefs, another student stated that “Our position in nature is that we need nature to live, but nature doesn’t need us to live”, which again suggests the students’ awareness of an unequal relationship that we have created over time.

Recognizing a shift that has taken place in regards to our human perception to nature and our position within it, one student mentioned that “Our position has changed over time. At the beginning we talked as if we were in nature. Now we remove ourselves, and talk of nature in the third person.” Similarly, another student mentioned that “Nature has a place in our lives. But,

over time our position has changed due to technological advances in the world”, or that “we destroy nature every day. There are people trying to help now that we realize what damage has been done.”

Lastly, one student answered in an idealized and romanticized manner that directly contradicts the previous, hopeless statements. The student suggested that “Humans are children of Mother Nature and should take care of nature. We are the care takers of nature.”

Unfortunately, the question did not ask students to explain further or explore their own actions that support their statements and underlying beliefs in greater detail.

On the third anonymous student questionnaire (Appendix H) that I handed out in mid-November, one of the questions asked students about their position in nature. Interestingly, the answers to the same questions were less discouraging and gloomy but presented a slightly stronger sense of the students’ ability to impact our natural status quo and make a change. One student wrote that “our position is what we make it. We can either be here to help nature or to harm it. We just need to make that decision and stick with it.”

Similar to the October questionnaire, some students addressed a human shift in perceptions towards nature by stating things such as “Our position within nature is not what it once was. So much of our time is spent indoors, trying to keep nature out”, or “We are removed from nature”, and “We are living alongside nature, using it excessively at times. Lately, we have recognized the need to preserve nature.” This awareness suggests that some students used our course interactions and assignments to evaluate our human interactions with nature in a chronological manner, revisiting what was, what is now, and what needs to be done in order to make changes that will allow us to remedy or counter past mistakes.

Other students were more realistic and mentioned that we are “killing nature of [sic]

slowly”, and that “we are destroying it to survive.” This bleak realization was oftentimes directly countered with idealistic thoughts that students expressed in their anonymous questionnaires.

These students answered that “Our position is to help and restore nature. Preserve it, let it grow and flourish and not destroy it”, “We should respect it and only use what we need”, or “without nature we cannot survive.”

One student used this opportunity to explain how they, as an individual, position themselves in nature. The student wrote that “I like to work with nature mutualistically I try to find the best benefit for both.”

Overall, the third questionnaires presented a greater variety of answers and might suggest the students’ recognition of their ability to become part of a hopeful change rather than accepting the dooming circumstances. The third questionnaire was handed out following the completion of both student essays, the implied research associated with these papers, and before their group presentations were to be presented. The students had read the Herndl (2012) texts that laid the foundations for their group work and were aware that we were about to impart on the journey towards the final paper and publication, which they had been looking forward to. My students had read all of the selected texts except for the theoretical ecocompositin pieces that they would use to frame their final essays and that were to provide them with a greater rhetorical understanding of place-based writing. Perhaps they had found answers, motivation, or hope in all of those discussions and readings and were now able to recognize their own role within the larger, current position of our human race.

Concluding remarks and reflections - Research question 2. *How do students place themselves in their natural environments after having taken an Environmental Literature and Writing class? What do they think their role is within their environment following the completion of the class?*

Following the analysis of my data, it became apparent to me that the Environmental Literature and Writing students seemed to have gained an increased sense of individual responsibility. Throughout the interviews, the student participants expressed an urge to become more involved with environmental efforts and to take on more active roles of environmental protection. They described an increased interest in volunteering at organizations or simply becoming better at recycling or making other environmentally conscious choices. These sentiments were also clear in some of the interviewee's accounts where some students, particularly Michelle and Eve, mentioned recognizing that they had been more motivated to collect trash and recycle. Of course I cannot say whether this behavior lasted, especially as the course ended right before the harsh Midwestern winters months began.

The students explained that the course had allowed them to become aware that they have the ability and power to become a part of a solution or at least to not further our current environmental problems and to look towards the future instead of maintaining present roles that have caused our contemporary demise in regards to environmental protection and inclusion in our daily lives, choices, and decision. Also, my students explained that they have come to realize that they are a part of their places, which are interconnected to other places and that this recognition has led them to see themselves as part of existing ecosystems that will transcend their individual lifetimes.

Reflections. What I found in my overall data, specifically these interviews, was what Cronon (1996) mentions in his description of the subjective meaning of places: “What we find in these places cannot help being profoundly influenced by the ideas we bring to them” (p. 20). While most students explained their individual and subjective perceptions of the roles within their places was oftentimes greatly influenced by class discussions, the collective experience of sharing the class, and the co-construction of knowledge and meaning that took place as part of having taken Environmental Literature and Writing, their fundamental disposition towards the environment cannot be neglected. A large majority of our Environmental Literature and Writing class had grown up surrounded by nature in one way or another, but had not reflected on the environment and their roles within it. The course, with its various constituents, was influential in the students’ realization of their role within the environment and the reflective component of the class was conducive to their collaborative co-construction of themselves within nature. As can be seen from the interviews as well as the writings, my Environmental writing students effectively used the 16 week course to grapple with valuable and necessary questions that, unfortunately, demark our status quo, which allowed them to make more sense of their individual places and roles within the larger web of nature. In addition, the class seemed to satisfy the need for the students to write themselves into their rhetorical situations, explore individual writing styles, forms, and ways of expression, and thereby recognize the transcending component of writing that allowed them to write for an audience beyond the classroom. Anderson (2014) describes our current Western society’s lack of an environmentally inclusive approach to sustaining our large human population. He discusses that “traditional and local” (p. 15) cultures and people who “have successfully conserved fish and forests, farmed without huge losses of soil and fertility, and prevented urban sprawl onto prime farmland” (p. 15). He further writes that people

oftentimes are “bound, to some extent, by cultural precedents and lockins” (p. 49), suggesting that we are a direct product not only of our forefathers and mothers but also their proceedings in regards to our natural surroundings and what they left behind. This is what I see when looking at my students’ writings and hearing their stories and answers in their interviews: an existing outlook that was grounded in familiar places and associated with certain, socially constructed ways of interacting with nature (i.e. farming, hiking, fishing, camping, etc.) and their understanding of re-assessing these embedded values through their own negotiations of time and place.

Anderson (2014) also points out that our human history in regards to environmental interactions and land cultivation “reveals constant adjustments, adaptations, failures, restarts, and negotiations” (p. 49). I see my course as having been influential enough to become an integral part in my students’ reevaluation and reimagining of their places. I hope that the experiences made in the course lay the groundwork for becoming such adaptations, restarts, and adjustments in the lives and places of my students. When looking at their writings and interviews, and seeing their words of a newly discovered sense of responsibility, even “duty” in regards to the environment, I become hopeful and maybe even optimistic that the positive changes my students perceived in themselves as part of having taken Environmental Literature and Writing, will remain throughout their times and that they will continue to ask themselves the crucial questions that led to the establishment of their new roles within the environment.

Research Question 3

How do I, as the teacher, course designer, and researcher evolve while teaching a semester long Environmental Literature and Writing course?

Teacher

Regarding myself as a teacher, I must continue to keep in mind that nature itself is a “profoundly human construction” (Cronon, 1996, p. 25), which means that although we might have some similar understanding that a tree or perhaps a flower are part of nature, I cannot assume that our individual associations with and attitudes towards nature are similar. Those attitudes and associations are subjectively constructed. I entered the course knowing this and being as open as I could be in regards to my students’ perceptions of nature. However, I found myself surprised by the initial interactions I had with my agriculture students who saw their natural environments as existing for nothing more than production of humanly consumable foods or food for livestock that could later be eaten by humans. Their construction of nature did not in any way mirror my own concept of nature being something peaceful, peace-bearing, and valuable as its own entity without the interruptions or interactions of humans. My view was that nature is something that has its own rights and needs, something that is deserving of solitude and “humanlessness”, and something that needs to be protected and respected.

I can, however, say with some confidence, that by providing my Environmental Literature and Writing students with a real context that they can not only become interested but also invested in as they are so greatly part of it, they were able to transcend the artificial classroom boundaries (Cahalan, 2008; Owens, 2002b; Reynolds, 2004; Trimbur, 2000; Mauk, 2003). Most students wrote themselves into their environments, successfully crossing academic and non-academic boundaries and using what they had attained in one academic or non-

academic place to make connections to another similar place.

Course Designer

According to our classroom discussions, the student note-taker's notes and my perception of the course, I will have to spend more time on John Lovelock's Gaia Theory. Our discussion appeared too cramped and it could have been used effectively as a bridge between widely accepted views of nature as being comprised of individual ecosystems, to other cultures or views that depict it as a living being that itself presents an interdependent system.

Also, I was able to gather that students were at times overwhelmed by the amount of reading early on in the semester. Although this didn't hinder their progress and they weren't frustrated, some did at times come into the classroom exclaiming that they had simply not been able to read as thoroughly as they had liked to because other obligations, such as course work or clubs. It was beautiful to see that students commonly expressed that they had wanted to read more due to the information they gathered from the readings but were restricted by time. It is quite common to hear students not wanting to complete a reading as it is too long or boring or they simply didn't get the point of why they had been tasked with the reading. However, the Environmental Literature and Writing students oftentimes explained - verbally and in their anonymous course evaluations - that they loved the class and were eager to contribute to discussions that allowed them to think about the world differently and challenge what they believed. When asked what students would change about the course if they could, "less readings" was a fairly common answer on our anonymous, qualitative questionnaires! However, most students rebutted their own critiques by stating things such as "I don't like reading a whole lot, but the discussions are always good!", "[...] everyone gets into the discussions, therefore it makes it easier for me to understand the difficult texts", "They [the discussions] help me

understand the readings better”, or “I love it [the class]. It’s a lot of reading, but I enjoy and even look forwards to this class because of the discussions we have which wouldn’t be possible without the readings.”

Similarly, the third and last questionnaire, which was distributed in early November, elicited the same responses that suggested the students’ willingness to overcome the “annoyance” of reading various texts just to partake in the discussions. Some wrote that “Other than the length of the readings – which is semi-unavoidable – I think it was really good”, “the discussions/readings promote my in depth thinking skills”, “I don’t like reading a whole lot, but the discussions are always good”, and “I think the workload is manageable [...] I normally don’t like it [discussions], but in this class it’s natural and helps understand text.”

After a few weeks, we had established a wonderful and light class atmosphere that I believed allowed and encouraged students to be honest and open in regards to readings, course discussions, essays, but also the matter around the course. At this point, students would come into class and state “I have to be honest, I didn’t do the reading. I’ll still talk though!”, which suggested their comfort level with me and the present peers. I never criticized the students for not reading as this was such a rare occurrence and it was so apparent that students were eager to participate and learn; criticism or punishment would have only stifled their motivation.

“From a STEM background, I would prefer more scientific articles.” Although this was the only instance of a student mentioning the desire to read more scientific articles, I remember another student mentioning this following the reading of the Herndl (2014) texts. This is an important reminder to increase the scientific readings for the upcoming Environmental Literature and Writing classes in order to better address or take into account the STEM students who view this class as a bridge between the hard sciences and humanities.

When asked what they would change about the class, most students mentioned that they'd like class to be held outside more as the course centered around nature. Some mentioned that they'd like to go on field trips to the surrounding nature reserves, education centers, or state parks in order to give a place to our class. I absolutely agree and will take this into account for the upcoming time I am honored to teach Environmental Literature and Writing. While piloting this course at my alma mater, I ensured that the students and I went to surrounding parks, recreation areas, or trails to ensure that students would have the opportunity to gain a better understanding of their local place as many were from different regions in the US. However, as my current class only met twice a week, my lack of familiarity with the local surroundings there (I commuted to work from a different state), and overall approach that this course presented the foundation of my research, made me think differently about spending time outside. Looking back, I feel a bit like a hypocrite since we spent our hours in a window-less, mildew drenched, and hot basement, discussing our perceptions of nature, instead of creating new and natural platforms for such perceptions to take place outside.

Consistently, the students maintained that this was one of their favorite classes during the given semester or overall. Some students mentioned that "It's one of my favorite classes I've taken! I look forward to it every Tu/Th", "love it, my favorite course of semester and possibly, of my college career", "good course, learning a lot", "the course has a good variety of material, and right amount of writing", or "fantastic!!!".

Researcher

One of the central questions I placed on the course's syllabus (Appendix B) and that I tried to ask my students over and over again was "Are humans part of nature? Or apart from nature?". These questions themselves exemplify my own perceptions of nature or at least those that I have grown

to know, accept, and understand. While they are supposed to challenge an existing idea, ideal, and concept of what humans and nature are in relation to one another, the fact that they are presented as two separate entities suggests that my own Western schooling, upbringing, and socialization has led me to see them as potentially separate entities, which is not common to all cultures found in the world today. By our basic genetic makeup, chemical composition, and astronomical location, we are just as much part of the universe as the stars, flora, and fauna with which we cohabit our planet Earth (Swimme & Tucker, 2011).

Some of the suggestions that follow are very closely linked to my previous, course designer, section. However, I would like to emphasize that the three elements of course instructor, designer, and research, which are described in this research question, are inextricably intertwined. My understanding of my own limitations and the research involved with trying to remedy my shortcomings influences my course design and ability to teach. In order to be a more knowledgeable researcher, I feel the need to examine my own positionality and contribute to my own educational expansions. Similarly, my courses inform my teaching and point out my own gaps in knowledge, as was the case with the Environmental Literature and Writing course.

It became clear to me that, as mentioned above, my course was infused with my own ideologies and Western thinking that relied on binaries between nature and humans. Following some reflection, I realized that I had to engage in research that would allow me to become more aware of other cultures and cultural interests and engagements with nature. What follows is an insight into my own research and learning experiences that will inevitably influence how I will design and teach the class in the future. My understanding of the subject matter affects my role as researcher as it allows me to expand the course material, raise crucial questions, and expose

students to existing environmental attitudes beyond our Western cultures. In this section, I will reflect on my teaching journal and explain some ideas for future environmental writing classes.

Research. Six to seven million years ago, the planet's climate, atmosphere, and overall landscape presented the perfect conditions for a new species of ape to evolve, one that "would [...] bring forth massive brains and learn to dwell in a world saturated with dreams" (Swimme & Tucker, 2011, p. 81). These new beings made the African savannahs their home and lived there until a small group decided to migrate towards the Arabian Peninsula via the Red Sea approximately fifty thousand years ago, thereby populating the entire planet. The birth of the homo sapiens also marks the first encounter between humans and nature and as Cronon (1996) points out, such an occurrence presents the first manipulation of a natural ecosystem by the new human species.

Besides of the homo sapiens' bipedalism and unprecedented brain size, the changes of the brain's neurological makeup led to the loss of primal, innate behavior and to the emergence of consciousness and "behavioral flexibility" (Swimme & Tucker, 2011, p. 84) that allowed humans to rely on more than just instincts and impulses. This apparently unique ability can, however, also be found in other mammals which are able to make more sophisticated and less instinct-based decisions while adjusting their behaviors on situations rather than responding to compulsion. Exploring the similarities between living beings allows us to understand how we collectively evolved alongside each other and were part of similar, basic evolutionary processes that led us to our current state (Swimme & Tucker, 2011).

In an attempt to problematize our Western, binary attitudes toward nature and humans, I would like to point out an even more fundamental link between these two "disjoined" entities of nature and humans. Even before the small group of apes mutated and evolved into bipedal, large-

brained beings, and before the savannah could become a suitable home for such individuals, the planet had to form. As a result of the Big Bang, the constituents of matter were created as atoms formed. Through various nuclear and physical processes, hydrogen atoms fused together and created stars, which marks the beginning of our Cosmos and sets the stage for various stellar explosions which formed all known elements (Sagan, 1980). Some atoms, which were the byproducts of these earliest supernovas are still among us today as they make up all of the Earth's atoms. This means that in a very basic and rudimentary way, we are made of stars and matter of the universe that also makes up everything, living and non-living, around us (Sagan, 1980). The knowledge of our own composition should suffice to signify to us that we are completely inseparable from our natural surroundings and that we are "a part of" rather than "apart from" nature. Unfortunately, it appears that we too often forget about this incredible connection.

Cronon (1996) remarks that "nature is a human idea, with a long and complicated cultural history which has led different human beings to conceive of the natural world in very different ways" (p. 20). In an effort to challenge my students' and my understanding of the course's central questions while exposing us to new concepts of humans and nature, I incorporated countertexts into our fairly Westernized curriculum. As I wanted these readings and writings to adhere to the courses' place-based approach, I added various Native American texts to the course syllabus (Appendix B). I wanted to give my students the opportunity to explore experiences and ideas through alternate cultural lenses and by doing so, provide them with a way of thinking differently about the environment, humans in nature, and the role of writing. In a time that is marked by a global environmental crisis, the implied open-mindedness in regards to alternate ways of engaging with nature and awareness of other ideologies appears more than beneficial

(Donahue, 2014; Horner, NeCamp, Donahue, 2011). Furthermore, by discussing and uncovering non-Western ideologies, students can imagine and envision other ways of thinking and consequently engender different views and considerations as the acquisition of new ways of understanding the world is in some ways “an act of imagination and of telling the stories of that imagining, stories about how the world works” (Powell, 2002, p. 399).

In addition to offering counter ideological insights that do not necessarily coincide with Western traditions, the inclusion of Native American texts also offers valuable ideas and approaches to writing. Some Native American cultures and writings are infused with and informed by another set of socially- and historically-based ideologies, which can inform students of a distinct rhetoric, approach to writing, and consequently, a different way of thinking (Cole, 2011; Owens; 2002; Powell, 2002; Cushman, 2014). As Cole (2011) points out, that “a more complete engagement with Native and indigenous rhetorics not only holds out opportunities to make students better writers, but it also carries the potential to make us better teachers and scholars in our field” (p. 142). By exposing my students to different approaches to writing that have their own purposes, contexts, and audiences, I wanted to give them an opportunity to explore texts and therefore ideologies that can be different from the widely-accepted, Euroamerican (Powell, 2002) tradition but that are perhaps fundamental for a more sustainable living.

The incorporation of Native American rhetoric and cultures can also encourage reflections on domination, colonial mentalities and intellectual acceptance of Western traditions not only from a cultural and historical perspective but also an ideological one that has manifested itself in all our ways of living, including our writing, and has persisted to the present day. Specifically, the experience of engaging with Native American rhetoric should generate a “new”

way of thinking about sustainability within a localized framework. What have other, local cultures done to coexist with nature in mutual and undisruptive relationships? What ways of thinking informed their actions to preserve the land without destroying it?

Still, the scope of varying environmental approaches seems inadequate and minimal. The world that is now facing terrible, destructive, and unprecedented decline due to anthropogenic behaviors, is also home to thousands of unique cultures that have lived with and experienced nature from various perspectives and roles, yet it is impossible to explore and address – or understand – each fully and entirely in the scope of this dissertation or this lifetime.

In an effort to grapple with and explore some underlying environmental assumptions as perceived by Western and non-Western thinkers, the fourteenth Dalai Lama describes how the basic attitudes that underlie Western ways of experiencing nature are fundamentally different from Buddhist approaches (2005). While it is common for Western teachings to place humans above all other living things, Buddhists distinguish between sentient and non-sentient beings, suggesting that all living things, especially animals, are of equal importance. The Dalai Lama states that

[...] if one examines the history of Buddhist philosophical thinking, there is an understanding that animals are closer to humans (in that both are sentient beings) than they are to plants. This understanding is based on the notion that, insofar as their sentience is concerned, there is no difference between humans and animals (2005, p. 106)

As neither humans nor animals have souls but are conscious beings, there is no definite distinction between animals and humans and both are concerned with the escape from suffering and the attainment of happiness. The incorporation of other natural beings also signifies the importance of their protection and the implied protection of their habitat. Aware of the diverging

environmental understandings between Western and Eastern thinkers, the Dalai Lama also calls for a new methodological approach to understanding the universe and its inhabitants, one that takes into account “the subjective experience of consciousness itself” (p. 142). Based on the demographic information I have gathered from my Environmental Literature and Writing students, it is safe to assume that none of them represent a Buddhist point of view but I must ask myself as a researcher, the course designer, and a human being: How would we perceive our roles in nature if we felt that we were as important or unimportant as a cat? A mountain gorilla? Or perhaps a starfish? What if their roles were as significant to our lives as those of our human relatives?

Similar to Buddhist thoughts on nature, Islam scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains that “Islam is not only for human beings” (A Religious Nature, 2015, p. 14), but rather “a cosmic reality; all creatures participate in Islam” (p. 14). Believers or followers are viewed as khalifas, which can be translated into representatives or agents who are on Earth for God to act for him and in his name. In regards to the environment, this suggests that “humans are guardians of God’s creation” (p. 15) and thereby responsible for the well-being of the planet and its human or non-human inhabitants. The idea of khalifas also adds an important element to my previous discussion on agency, which I addressed for my first research question. If we, as humans, were to systematically perceive ourselves as agents or protectors of the environment that we are part of and if this perception was so inevitable and internalized that our every action and choice was based on our understanding of our roles as environmental guardians, would our world face a different fate now? It is hard to imagine something that is not, as such thoughts are oftentimes romanticized and overlook pragmatic realities of human beings. Yet, I find it important to mention and if I have grown as a teacher of an Environmental Literature and Writing course,

then the need to incorporate more alternate, non-Western environmental ideologies and philosophies into the course, is one such element of my evolution. I must become a more holistic researcher who approaches research with a broader philosophical base to either take into account other ways of sense-making or provide my students with a wider ideological scope considering the environment.

Teaching journal. Looking through my teaching journal, I remember a class fairly early on in the semester (September, 15, 2015) that generated an unexpected and interesting discussion. In response to having read Bradford one of my female students mentioned that we, as members of our contemporary Western society, tend to view ourselves as having power and dominance over our natural world. Some students added by raising questions about the origins of our dispositions and attempted tying it in with the Puritans who clearly perceived nature to be terrifying and something in need of taming rather than preservation and protection. We briefly addressed the Bible's Genesis in which the idea of dominance is alluded to. Here, some students discussed that they interpreted this section as God's will for us to be stewards of his land, while others mentioned that it read more like a permission slip to destruction. The discussion continued to incorporate issues of translation and what words or syntactical choices the original Aramaic text might have used to avoid the concept of dominance and authority over all other Earth dwellers. I could only add by reflecting on my knowledge of the German text and my lack of recollections considering what diction which version of the biblical text relies on. Here, a similarity between the Muslim khalifas and Christian stewards would have been incredibly beneficial to immediately emphasize the existence of alternate approaches to nature and the human role within it.

At last, I would like to add more precise examples of how and where climate change has

affected the world already. While most students were able to successfully reflect on their places and analyze how climate change had affected precipitation, harvests, and winds, I would like to give students the opportunity to gain exposure to factual accounts and human responses to such changes earlier in the semester. Using specific texts (Norgaard, 2011; Anderson, 2005; Kolbert, 2006) that shed light on global communities that are and have been experiencing changes first-hand could be impactful and aid in the students' understanding of interconnectness between the global sphere and their personal places.

Concluding remarks and reflections – Research question 3

How do I, as the teacher, course designer, and researcher evolve while teaching a semester long Environmental Literature and Writing course?

Following the teaching of Environmental Literature and Writing in the fall semester of 2015, I experienced a sensation similar to a void within my daily schedule. I genuinely loved teaching the course and enjoyed the conversations, discussions, and interactions that had created our collective experience. Reflecting on our place, where the course had taken place, I am reminded of the importance that people bring to locations despite the place and that the two are genuinely interdependent. Our dingy little place that we had criticized so often for being too hot and stuffy, too humid and damp, too smelly and generally fairly gross, brought out humor and sarcasm, laid the foundation for inside jokes and puns, and had been the yellow hole in the basement that had allowed our group of people to come together to discuss some of the most pressing questions of our time.

The roles of researcher, teacher, and course designer are just as intertwined as places and people, our environment, and our individual locations that we hold dear. Certainly there are things that I would have liked to improve, to delete some of the errors I had come across on the

syllabus or re-assigned some of the readings that were listed without “pg” or in a manner that was not clear enough for my student writers. Even these incidents, however, brought with them grounds for laughter and contributed to the overall light, open, and sincere atmosphere that we had created for our course. Having been their teacher, who designed the course, for 16 weeks caused me to build relationships with the students that were based on a shared experience. I oftentimes thought of Motha’s (2009) “Afternoon Tea” article, in which she describes how she modified a study based on the significance the routine of having afternoon tea with her participants and how this tradition changed the dynamic of the researcher/participant relationship. I did not alter the methodological approaches of my study but was, nonetheless, impressed by how much I enjoyed being surrounded by my students, our discussions, their questions, and the sounds of their friendly debates. They were aware of my dissertation status and oftentimes showed genuine interest in my progress, updates, and psychological well-being!

Overall, this was one of my most influential and profound teaching and researching experiences that would have not been what it was had anything been different, even or especially our smelly, yellow, basement cave.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

While writing this dissertation, the USA alongside 194 nations came together in Paris on December 12, 2015, to sign a revolutionary document that would help decrease CO2 emissions and greenhouse gases, leading to a more sustainable future for planet Earth. In spite of the environmental victory the signing of this document holds, the late signing thereof seems almost sad as it has taken over 30 years to reach global consensus on the existence of climate change and our human responsibility or connection with the issue. The United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-Moon, stated that the signing itself signifies a “historic moment”, since “for the first time, we have a truly universal agreement on climate change, one of the most crucial problems on earth” (Davenport, 2015). Three years ago, when my interest in Ecomposition was ignited by Owens’ (2002) *Composition and Sustainability – Teaching for a Threatened Generation*, the bitter aftertaste of the US’ failure to sign the Kyoto agreement was still strong in our minds, leaving little room for the possibility of what the new agreement may hold. Another impressive occurrence that I witnessed as result of the signing of the mentioned document was, President Obama’s clear inclusion of future generations, which has been quite uncommon for our Western thinking in regards to the environment.

Around the same time, my mom visited us in the Midwest from Germany, to spend the holidays with my children and family in the United States. Talking about the weather has widely and cross-culturally been regarded as a way to eliminate uncomfortable silences between people who have nothing more to speak about, a common topic for small-talk, or a place holder to generate better topics (Norgaard, 2011). However, this year, in 2015, the weather was a serious and widely talked about topic even among individuals who had something more substantial to say to one another. On Christmas Eve, which is the *real* Christmas in Germany, while the 25th is

simply an opportunity to eat more delicious foods, my mom set up her laptop at the dining room table to make her annual Skype calls to friends all over the world. The weather was always a topic. Her Canadian friend, Ivan, who was in his late 80's and spent half of the year in Prague and the remainder near Toronto, was sitting in front of his PC in a T-Shirt. He remarked that this year was an unusually warm winter and that snow had yet to fall near his cabin in Canada. He mentioned walking to a friend's house for dinner, which was strange to him as the previous decades had called for snowmobiling or driving in a 4x4 vehicle in order to get anywhere. This year, Ivan would leave the house and walk to his friend's place as if it were May. He mentioned not wearing his down parka and the quiet evenings that were not marked by loud storms and snowplows.

Next on the list were my neighbors in Augsburg, Germany. We triangulated a call to incorporate their son, Alex, who was currently staying with his girlfriend in Sweden. Similar to Ivan's story, Alex, who was spending his first winter in Northern Europe, exclaimed how mild the winter was in Sweden and that he would set out later that week to find snow and thereby solidify his long-standing belief that Sweden was one of the harshest places to be throughout the winter months. My mom and Alex's parents in Germany, who also had no snow and were enjoying the 15 C weather, were noticeably shocked to hear Alex's story. Sweden, Norway, and Denmark have always been notorious for their extreme winter conditions throughout Europe, and the fact that there was no snow there this winter seemed to change something within my mom and her same-aged neighbors. Their gasps and silence seemed to frame the realization that something was seriously wrong. Their stares into the cameras signaled disillusionment but also fear and something like disappointment, perhaps in the weather or perhaps in us, as a human society and our failure to have acted in the 1960s when the first talks of climate change began

(Lovelock, 1979). The conversation between my mom, our neighbors, and their son ended soon as the mood was clearly affected by the mentioning of a snow-less Sweden.

It was insightful to see the intergenerational conversation and reflection on the weather in Canada, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Sweden. While Alex, who is 32, explained the lack of snow and how it was contrary to what he had been told about Sweden growing up in Germany, the group of 60-some year olds who had experienced various European countries in the winter over the past decades, was clearly shocked. Ivan, in his late 80s, exuded some surprise but not the fearful emotions that were attached to my mom's responses when hearing about this year's winter weather in different countries. Ivan mentioned that at his age, he welcomed a less complicated and dangerous winter.

Here, in the Midwest, we were also faced with a relatively warm winter and green Christmas. It had snowed once in November but by the time my mom arrived around December 10th, the snow had melted and it looked like Easter outside. Previous winters had held us in their grip from early November until mid to late April, making the drive to pick up my mom at the Chicago airport or Rockford bus stop a quite dangerous endeavor. In 2015, I didn't even have to put my Jeep into four-wheel drive and got to my destination without slipping, sliding or getting stuck behind a snowplow. This was also the first winter since moving to the US in 2008, that I had been able to run outside past Thanksgiving; this holiday usually marked the last outdoor run before returning to the indoor track until April. This year, however, I ran outside without ever getting painfully cold, until after Christmas.

The narratives of weather patterns and experiences made me think of my own children's stories: how will they describe winters, snow, sledding, snowshoeing, or T-shirts in February, as what is occurring now, in the snow-less Iowa, is already normal to them. At times my 7-year old

son, Noah, echoes our sentiments of having a white Christmas, yet, he has only seen three of them. What will our stories be in 50 years when we get together to enjoy family traditions? What will we tell our children? What will they reflect on or look forward to when thinking of winter? My dad, a hydrologist-turned-science teacher, joked around,

“This global warming thing ain’t bad!” and later turned to me to discuss his conscience that was bothering him for having made that statement in front of Noah,

“I hope he doesn’t think I’m serious. We can’t make him believe this is normal or ok.” We’ve witnessed climate change over the past decades and have experiences that allow us to see the differences and shifts in the weather. Our children don’t.

My Pedagogy: An Effective Approach?

Did my Environmental Literature and Writing students gain from my class what I had hoped they would leave with? Did the course provide them with an opportunity to reflect, research, reexamine, and reevaluate their roles within nature? Did their writings really exemplify power and authority or a sense of agency and responsibility towards nature? Did the course enable my students to successfully place themselves within their immediate and larger environments?

Below I offer a synthesized discussion of my findings that I already addressed in the previous chapter. I will go over the final paper rubric again to offer a more concise insight into my findings, address the semester questionnaires and what they revealed in regards to my overall objectives, and lastly present and describe three distinct groups of students. The grouping will categorize students as follows: those who were unaffected by taking our Environmental Literature and Writing class, those who might have been affected somewhat, and those who mentioned a noticeable change that came as part of having taken the course.

Final Paper Rubric

Regarding my class' final paper, the rubric I designed was intended to shed light on students' ability to combine the awareness and knowledge of the broader environment with a connection to a personal place. Also, I wanted to see if they could place their selected locations within the broader environment and by doing so "make a personal connection to their role" (Balgopal & Wallace, 2009, p. 21) and to the vast environmental context within which they are situated. The rubric was also designed to shed light on the students' ability to research and reflect effectively on their individual locations and as a result, to write confidently about their places. Lastly, I wanted to see whether my Environmental Literature and Writing students' writing suggested that the students were aware of their active role within their environment, that they had a sense of responsibility within and towards their environmental context, that they and recognized such agency as part of their environmentally-contextualized, human role.

After analyzing all sixteen student final papers, I concluded that I had rated eight students as having written about their environments and places in an "authentic" manner, which suggests that they had successfully combined factual and researched materials with knowledge and insights into their own locations. These students had combined their awareness of the larger environment with a connection to their chosen locations.

I had only rated one student's final essay as being "objective". She clearly understood larger issues and concepts that pertain to our extended environment but did not show a connection to her personal place. The objective writer failed to incorporate personal material that would suggest a clear understanding of the interconnectedness of her place and her broader natural environment.

Regarding the “subjective” category, I rated seven of the sixteen students’ final paper as falling under this definition as these individuals wrote clearly about their personal connections, ties, and experiences with their selected places, but did not express an understanding of their or their location’s role within the larger environment. These students often presented extensive and well-written narratives about their places and the impact such places has had on their sense of self, however, the writing lacked insights into the larger environment which they and their locations are inevitably part of.

Half of my Environmental Literature and Writing students, eight of sixteen, achieved the objective of writing in an “authentic” manner about their locations. The remaining 50 % of the class did not. Interestingly, the five students that had volunteered for the interviews all exemplified “authentic” writing in their final essays. Were they simply a different type of student? More motivated or interested in the subject matter? Were the other students swamped with other final exams and papers at this point in the semester that they had lost a sense of engagement? Perhaps all students who had been doing well in the course also knew that a certain percentage on their final piece would suffice to secure them an “A” in the overall course and did the amount of work that was required to reach their personal objective of receiving that “A”. Perhaps I hadn’t focused enough on them as individuals within the environments but had dedicated too much time to analyzing existing pieces of literature and place-based texts by other writers in Wisconsin.

Regarding the “authority/power” category which I incorporated in my final essay rubric to determine whether my students could write with confidence, power, and authority about their places (Hothem, 2009; Owens, 2001b), fifteen out of sixteen exemplified the objective in their final writing. The one individual who did not meet the objectives for the mentioned category,

failed to provide sufficient reflection and research on her vague location description; further details are described above in the section titled “Concluding Remarks and Reflections – Research Question 1”. Of course, I am pleased with these findings as my pedagogy enabled students to write themselves into their locations, place themselves rhetorically into their environmental context, and present sufficient information for their audiences to comprehend the unique and individualized meaning of their places.

The last category that I had created for my final paper rubric sought to gain a better understanding of the students’ awareness of their role within the environment and that they had a sense of personal responsibility towards their immediate and broader environmental context. I wanted to see if their writing demonstrated that they were aware that they were agents of action and change that could contribute to the establishment of a new and more sustainable attitude towards nature. Out of all sixteen student papers, I classified seven as clearly showing a sense of agency and responsibility towards their immediate and extended environments, seven as not exemplifying this objective in their writing, and two as demonstrating a sense of communal and collectivistic responsibility towards our environment, but not explicitly addressing their individual role and awareness of agency in regards to our environmental context.

Here, I feel that my pedagogy was not as effective as I had hoped it would be. Having the students view themselves as integral and responsible part of nature was an important objective I was aiming for, so seeing that some of my Environmental Literature and Writing students did not present these elements in their final paper is unfortunate. The two individuals who expressed their awareness of a human responsibility towards nature and who did not explicitly discuss their own role within this human collective, might feel what I had hoped my students would feel at the end of the course – a sense of responsibility and agency towards our natural contexts - but didn’t

address this sense directly or sufficiently. Similar to my previously discussed notions that students might have disengaged at this later point in the semester, I cannot exclude this possibility from the last final paper category. Perhaps my Environmental Literature and Writing students had already completed the semesters in their minds and not fully engaged in the writing of their final pieces. Perhaps an earlier paper would have been better for my analysis?

Questionnaires

When looking at the questionnaires that I distributed throughout the semester, it appears that students were well on their way to reaching the course objectives and had reflected on their roles within the environment sufficiently. As mentioned, I distributed the first questionnaire in the first week of September. The third question asks students to think about the following: *Has the course made you stretch your thinking on environmental issues, perceptions, and ideologies? How?* As described as part of research questions 1 and 2, only two of the sixteen students answered in a rather neutral manner, while the remaining 14 unanimously agreed that the course was and would continue to stretch their thinking as the discussions and readings were conducive to their reflections and reexaminations of their existing outlooks in regards to nature and their role within it.

Similarly, the second questionnaire that I handed out in October, listed a question that specifically addressed an important objective of the course: *What are our responsibilities towards nature?* Students answered in a very clear manner that reflected a sense of environmental awareness. All students mentioned that it is our human responsibility to care for nature and help in efforts to give back what we take. Also, students referred to the importance of protection, conservation, and respect when interacting with nature, and the need to increase

efforts to refine resources by making them more environmentally friendly and thereby being more responsible for our future generations.

The third and last questionnaire also raised a question about “our responsibilities towards nature”. Again the students answered in a very definite manner that exemplified awareness of environmental knowledge and a sense of responsibility in regards to other Earth inhabitants. All students mentioned helping and healing nature in order to protect and preserve it and its resources for future generations. Some mentioned aesthetic values by alluding to our need to admire and adore nature, while a few others mentioned that we need to return to treating nature as an autonomous entity as some past generations and other cultures had. Here, students referred to the Native American philosophies that we had encountered through our course texts.

Overall, the questionnaires revealed that the course had allowed students to reflect on their perceptions of nature and their roles within it. Also, that the class provided the students with a place to recognize the importance of our collective roles within nature and how, over time, these roles have undergone changes and are malleable and not fixed. It appeared important to the students to refer to future generations and recognize their imminent and current roles that might affect those who may live on our Earth several decades from now.

Groups and anonymous questionnaires. As mentioned, the anonymous questionnaires, which unfortunately do not provide us with demographic data to gain a better understanding of who the students were, suggest that the course was overall successful in its objective of raising awareness while allowing students to engage in interactions, experiences, and activities that would enable them to place themselves rhetorically into their individual places.

Conclusions

Looking back at my students' writing, the questionnaires I handed out, and the interviews I conducted, I am pleased to say that my pedagogy seems to have had some effect on most of my Environmental Literature and Writing students. While some objectives were reached more effectively, others require some improvements in order to ensure that the class offers a sphere and platform for *all* students to genuinely engage in crucial environmental debates, discussions, and questions and to sincerely realize their importance within the larger environment as well as their localized and smaller natural contexts.

Considering the final paper rubric, I could classify 50 % of the students' final essay as "authentic", 15 of 16, or 93.75%, demonstrated authority and power in their writing, and 7 out of 14, or 50%, demonstrated that they had a clear sense of agency within their natural contexts and felt responsible for their environmental surroundings. As mentioned, two students did not exemplify an individual sense of responsibility but mentioned a collectivistic idea of what we all as a human race should do. They did not directly address their individual role.

As stated in my analysis of the anonymous student questionnaires, most students remarked that the course allowed them to grapple with crucial environmental questions, that the course stretched their thinking, helped them to consider environmental attitudes, and eventually enabled them to gain a greater sense of our individual and human roles in our natural contexts.

Further, the five interview sessions, in which I asked my students to comment on their perceptions of the course but also themselves within their immediate and larger environmental contexts before and after the course, revealed that the course had been impactful in the students' ability to establish an environmentally-focused role for themselves.

Was my pedagogy effective in reaching its objectives? As noted, some areas certainly need to be revisited to understand why 50% of my students' final essays still did not exemplify that they were able to combine the knowledge of their larger environment with personal meaning and places. Also, why many did not address their own roles within the environment or accept their responsibilities despite having had a clear concept of such a responsibility throughout the course and in their anonymous student questionnaires. Further, is it important to question why the two mentioned students constantly referred to "our" collective responsibility towards the planet without explicitly writing about their sense of individual responsibility. Is their sense more inclusive and reflective of existing interconnections that we emphasized in the class?

The questionnaires, interviews, and some points of the final paper rubric create some contradicting suggestions regarding the effectiveness of my pedagogy. It is therefore also important to examine the overall limitations of the study as well as the context in which my study was placed.

Limitations

My study is based on a one semester long course, which, one could argue, is not a long time nor do 16 students provide enough data that would make my findings generalizable. Due to the qualitative nature of my dissertation, generalizability was not a goal. I believe this study sheds light on a very important and valuable experience that my students and I had being part of our Environmental Literature and Writing class.

It would, of course, be interesting and insightful to see how another class and another group of students would perceive their roles within the environment following their engagement with Environmental Literature and Writing. Also, a class made up of all STEM students instead of a mixed group of individuals like I had for my dissertation, might present different findings.

Creating comparative situations and collecting more data would most likely yield more insight in regards to the effectiveness of my course.

Other factors, such as gender, the students' hometowns and states, or educational background in regards to high schools, might also present important aspects that could be looked at further. Some of my students mentioned being from areas with wonderful recreational activities or attractions while others spent their childhood and adolescent years in urban or suburban jungles. Also, some students claimed to have had high school classes that dealt with environmental changes, allowing them to explore some of our generation's most pressing environmental questions.

Another recurring thought that I encountered while reflecting on my course was the role I, as the teacher, might have had. I was extremely motivated to teach the class and announced the first day that being there with the students was "my academic moment of glory", which was received with the intended humor but also truth as having been able to develop a course that reflected my passion and that would allow me to gather data for the exact dissertation that I had envisioned for years was certainly glorious. I believe my motivation, excitement, and energy influenced the class and my students were also consistently motivated to contribute to all areas of the class. I was visited in my office, oftentimes students stayed behind after the class had ended just to talk and continue a discussion, and I received great feedback from students in their anonymous questionnaires. Following the class' end in December, I even told my then students that I had made peace with my decision to take a new position that would, unfortunately, not give me the opportunity to keep teaching my Environmental Literature and Writing course, because I couldn't imagine being able to come close to what we shared that semester. The student participants and I simply shared an unforgettable class experience. Had the class' content

been taught by another teacher, would the outcome be the same or similar? What if the instructor had a more thorough understanding of the environment and scientific ecology than me? Or less? Would it had made a difference if the instructor had been male? Older? Had more experience as a writing instructor? Or less? It would be interesting to replicate the exact same course with a different teacher to see what would change.

My student participants who I interviewed mentioned a definite change that took place in their minds and attitudes in response to having taken Environmental Literature and Writing. As mentioned, I met these students between one and ten weeks after the semester had concluded, which means that the course was still rather fresh in their minds. This leads to questions of pervasiveness or continuance of such beliefs over time, once the thoughts about the course have become less prevalent in the students' minds. Will the individuals with whom I shared the class experience still feel the effects of the course and changes that the course caused in their thinking in six months? A year? What about five years, when their college experience has expired? A follow up study would be necessary to determine the potential long term effects of having completed Environmental Literature and Writing and whether the perceived changes in the student participants' minds endured.

Realities of My Place

As mentioned above, the place and time in which my study was embedded created the foundations for an array of challenges and unforeseen obstacles. State-wide budget cuts, the ongoing fear of job losses and position cuts, and my eventual acceptance of an offer at a local technical college, were omnipresent and reflected in my pedagogy and work. Had my position been secure, the constant fear subsided, and an overall sense of security emerged, I might have taken greater risks or at least delved into the context of our class experiences more thoroughly. I

felt, for example, that discussing the 2016 presidential candidates and their individual environmental agendas with my students might be too risky. I knew, of course, that the conversations that could have risen from such contextualized research and debate may have been invaluable and advantageous to my students as they could recognize their own role and agency within a larger political sphere which they are inevitably part of and can contribute to. However, knowing that some writing students had complained to the department chair that lecturers were imparting their liberal biases onto the students, I was not in a position that would allow me to raise and create potential controversy. As most lecturers in my department, I too wanted to keep my head down and not be noticed by administrators for causing too much disagreement or dissatisfaction among student groups as this could have led to the termination of my position. My place – the place of my study and the implementation of an environmental pedagogy that I had created specifically for this place – was itself ripe with issues that transcended the classroom and reflected the overall political sphere of a politically conservative state. Due to the political, social, economic, and educational changes that were, and currently are, affecting Wisconsin - a state where the question of truth behind a global warming “hypothesis” still circulates – the implementation of a potentially controversial pedagogy that challenges conservative realities could be perceived as risky and untimely. Yet, despite my fears and the paranoid distrust that was filling the hallways of the English department, the classrooms, and instructors’ minds, I still believe that a pedagogy that enables students to reevaluate their roles within their natural habitats and locations, while placing them in the larger environment that is reliant on and comprised of interconnecting spheres and systems is crucial. Especially in a time like ours that is marked by the inevitable loss of species and land but also the spiritual and symbolic loss of our collective place-based, environmental identity we cannot expose students to too many crucial question,

texts, and other experiences that will perhaps lead them to a more sustainable way of thinking and acting.

While Wisconsin is being overrun by doubts about climate changes and polluted by unfounded fallacies that deny scientific truths, it is still important to challenge students who make up our next generation, to raise significant questions about systematic attitudes and beliefs towards our environment and reevaluate their role within social and cultural contexts that oftentimes fail to value what gives life to us as humans and allows us to even raise such questions: our natural habitat.

In the End

Even if my pedagogy affected “only” some of the students in the overall desired way, I feel like I have succeeded. In our current times that are demarked by anthropogenic climate change, the destruction of habitats, the elimination of species, and a Western philosophy that is ripe with neglect, ignorance, and a lack of consideration for other living things, any number is a number that cannot be ignored. My data shows that almost all students were impacted by the course in one way or another and that by having been there, they were exposed to questions and realities that they may have never encountered had they not been there for those 16 weeks.

Some students were responsive to all of the given objectives and reached them by the end of the semester. At least half of my students gained something from the course and, according to my study, none were completely unaffected. Now it is my duty as a scholar to continue my research to see how I can revise my pedagogy to ensure that the remaining individuals who were enrolled in my class will also be affected in all of the intended areas and leave the semester with a clear understanding of who they are and what their role and their perception of their role is within their environmental surroundings. The need for a writing course pedagogy that enables

students to become familiarized with alternate environmental attitudes while reviewing their own roles within our interrelated environmental places and writing themselves into their natural surroundings is more pressing than ever. It took the international community over 30 years to agree that climate change is an actual and real concept. We do not have the luxury of three decades to revise and implement an environmentally-oriented pedagogy for the writing courses we teach.

Pedagogy – Contributions

What can I suggest or recommend to others who may feel the desire to teach an Environmental Literature and Writing class at varying institutions? What tools can I provide that will ensure that another instructor at another institution will also impact her or his students in ways that are conducive to our understanding of our current environment(s)?

First, I would like to point out and problematize my own place a bit more prior to discussing practical approaches and tools that I have been able to elicit as part of my research. As described in my “limitations” section, my institution houses a rather homogenous group of students, compared to many schools in the US. Especially the students in my Environmental Literature and Writing class, my research group, consisted of fairly traditional college students. My students were in their late teens or early twenties, none of them were married or with children, none were Veterans or had been divorced. They were all Caucasians, most of them had lived within a 100-mile radius of campus for their entire lives, and most of the students came from middle or upper middle class families. Most students had an agricultural background with family farms as old as this country. Their families had moved to the Midwest as immigrants, settled on an acreage, and never left. The students in my class were very likely to return to their hometowns to settle close to their families, perhaps even back to the family’s farm, and never

leave either.

Although I cannot comment on the struggles the families might have experienced in regards to economic stability, I can say that their appearances, possessions, and hobbies, such as boating, snowmobiling, gardening, or fishing and hunting, suggest a certain elevated socioeconomic status. Their agricultural backgrounds and outdoor hobbies also suggest that my student participants had experienced the environment and nature in one way or another prior to entering my classroom. They had all encountered our natural surroundings throughout their lives and it appeared that all of them were familiar with some aspects of our environment, either through hobbies or as an economic backbone. This exposure to and familiarity with nature raises questions regarding transferability and my research. I must ask myself questions regarding other settings and other places where students have not grown up with some immediate familiarity with or understanding of nature as something positive, attainable, or essential. Where nature is a privileged concept for those who can afford to move beyond the city. Or where nature is something not valued as interactive space but something that should be used for economic advances only and not as a playground to enjoy, examine, or enjoy in some other non-invasive and mutual way. How had the class and my study evolved, how had my students responded, and how had my research been affected had my class been taught in an urban college in South Side Chicago or West side Milwaukee? What if the class had been taught in places that are economically disadvantaged and geographically removed from green areas? What if someone else had taught the course? Perhaps someone not as enthusiastic about the class as I was when I had the honor of teaching it. What if another individual who lacked the rapport and strong ties to students that I had built over the 16 weeks taught the course? What if a person with a stronger environmental science or general science background had taken the course and taught it at a

different place? Or even different time?

Also, I am aware that my students' gender poses an interesting element that influences their identity, perceptions of themselves within their settings, and writing, responses, and participation. I am also aware that my interviewees were all female students, which inevitably contributes to their understanding of the questions, their responses, and their general experiences with their places and our course. However, as stated earlier, it was not my focus to examine and dissect this aspect of their identity but to contextualize my research and "limit" it to focus on my students in relation to their local and extended places. Gender, however, certainly offers a facet of my students and in my research that cannot be ignored and that should be pursued in future research endeavors.

Returning to my pedagogy, I would like to address the aspects of the course that I think would transfer beyond and across economic, geographic, and institutional divides and places. Throughout the semester, I gave my students ample opportunities to share their perceptions of the course. In their anonymous questionnaires, course discussions, papers, and later on, the interviews, my students suggested that they greatly enjoyed the selected readings, specifically the Native American pieces and the more current writings from the *Wildbranch* Anthology (see Appendix C). For the latter, students commented on the beneficial aspects of the writers' discussion of future generations and contemporary problems that we are affected by (i.e. deforestation) and that will inevitably also affect those who will dwell on the Earth after us. Regarding the Native American texts, students mentioned that they had never been exposed to the history that contextualizes such writings and that the use of Native American literature provided an effective countercontext (Donahue, 2014; Horner, NeCamp, Donahue, 2011) to the standard Western cannon that they had discussed in high school.

Several students also commented that the writing assignments, free writes in their journals, and note-taking had been an effective way to conceptualize and recognize their own places within the environment and to create connections with texts, their places, and the surrounding environments.

Reflecting on my experiences, I can recommend the described texts as class readings. Also, in-depth discussions about alternate views on nature that have risen from various cultures outside of our Western way of perceiving and dealing with our environmental reality and circumstances are necessary when trying to encourage reflection and the creation of personal roles and opinions. The texts provided the students with beneficial platforms from which discussions could flourish while giving students the ability to reflect on the past, present, and future of our environment and human interactions with it. Also, students mentioned that by reading relevant materials, they felt connected to an existing and forming body of knowledge, which emphasized their individual importance and ability to act for environmental change. Aligning with writing to learn research (Balgopal & Wallace, 2009), my students greatly benefited from the use of writing practices throughout the daily classes but also outside of the classroom and throughout the semester.

Through my study I found that students were excited by thorough examinations of cultures, including our past and current ones in the USA, and a sense that other writers, scientists, and humans in general are actively researching, writing, and engaging in matters dealing with our environment and the protection thereof. The sense of having the ability to be part of a larger and exiting community of environmentally active individuals appeared important to my students. Overall, I can recommend using texts that encourage reflection and alternate perspectives on our natural surroundings. Also, place-based writings of local communities that

emphasize relations between actions and time to elicit discussions among students that address pressing questions about our effects on future generations and places. My students repeatedly mentioned how affected they were by the notion that their actions would impact and influence the existence of their children, grandchildren, and the future of our entire human race in general. It is therefore paramount and a strong component of my recommendation to include texts, reflections, and discussions that emphasize such intergenerational responsibilities.

The examination of texts that show how others are actively engaged in supporting the environment and how individuals can become active agents of change are also greatly appreciated by students. My writing students explained that they could more easily and thoroughly investigate their relationship towards environmental ethics, concepts, outlooks, and responsibilities through the inclusion of writing as part of the course. Guided writing assignments inside and outside of the classroom are therefore also essential when teaching a class that aims at helping students determine their own roles within the larger environmental places and settings. The bridging between academic and non-academic spheres can also be further emphasized through these writings that frame the course as students recognize the intellectual and academic importance of something they are incredibly familiar with: their places.

At last, it is important to transfer and bring to life a certain passion for the environment so students can feel the life energy of their natural surroundings and eventually recognize or develop the affinity towards nature that E.O. Wilson describes in his *Biophilia* (1984). Through discussions and the emphasis on interrelatedness of non-living and living organisms, students can gain a sense of awe and a greater understanding and appreciation of the complexities of their surrounding ecologies that they are inevitably part of.

Ecocomposition – Contributions

My greatest contributions to an existing body of knowledge was the inclusion of and emphasis on student voices. Compared to other existing research, my research focused largely on what the students had to say, how they viewed themselves within an ecocomposition-based class, and how the courses provided a platform from which an environmental narrative could grow for them. My Environmental Literature and Writing students became more than “just” students in an English class; they became contributors to ecocomposition. My students allowed for the creation of pedagogical approaches to environmental writing that seem effective and useful for others who desire to teach the described course. The students wrote themselves into their and our shared environments and gave feedback on what helped them examine their roles within nature, thereby shedding light on writing, practice, theoretical advancement, and ecocomposition in the college writing classroom. My students also wrote themselves into an existing theory, thereby replicating its essential aspect of interconnectedness and interdependence. They became as much a part of ecocomposition as ecocomposition became a part of their thinking and writing in our context and places. Through their interactions and engagement with me, each other, and the overall class, they gave a voice to an integral part of ecocomposition: the student and student writer. They shed light on what part of the theoretical framework contributed to their understanding of the environment and their role within it. The students shared their perception of how ecocomposition helped them grapple with the overall interdependent relationship we, as humans, share with the Earth and the significance of the emergence of mutually acknowledged and ratified environmental approaches that can sustain living organisms for future generations in a healthy environment.

My research also contributes to ecocomposition by raising invaluable questions about

effectiveness, implementation in the collegiate writing classroom, and overall agency in regards to the environment and humans. As discussed, it was important to me to enable my students to recognize their individual responsibility towards the Earth and its sustainability and to acknowledge that they can have agency and be agents for the betterment of the planet and the generations to come. However, this raises questions of the subjective nature of “good” or “better”. More specifically, who should we empower through the pedagogy of ecocomposition? Everyone? All who sign up for the Environmental Literature and Writing course? Only a select few who seem to “get it”? In our current times that are demarked by environmental threats and demise, the inhabitants of our current place – the USA – have decided elect an individual who lacks environmental interests and whose views on the environment are shallow, ruthless, and ignorant. The citizens of this country were also ok with electing an individual whose top pick for the office of Environmental Secretary, Scott Pruitt, does not believe in the existence of climate change. However, the people have recognized their agency within their governmental and political contexts and have acted upon it (Thomas, 2015). I taught my course in a hopeful manner, praying and hoping for its so desperately needed effectiveness with a generation that we depend on for environmental change and the saving of our places. Yet, Wisconsin’s people – almost all of my students were natives of the state of Wisconsin – voted against the environment in the presidential election of 2016. My heart sunk thinking of the students who may have voted for him, the future of my three young children, the national parks, trees, endangered animals, endangered places, locations suitable for capitalist endeavors like fracking... Who should be empowered and made aware of their agency? Teaching an environmentally-oriented class challenges our perception of what currently exists and what demarks our concept of reality. It also problematizes what should be and who should decide over such matters.

Another important contribution my study creates in regards to ecocomposition and questions or problems is the notion of nature itself. As described in the analysis of my third research question, it is of great significance to not ignore the relationship and connection between culture and humans. As Cronon (1996) remarks that our understanding of nature and the concept of nature itself is fully human therefore varies depending on individual values, morals, perceptions, and philosophies. In other words, nature as we perceive and think of it exists within our human realm of understanding and shaping it throughout time. These notions, largely created and influenced by German naturalist and scientist Alexander von Humboldt (Wolf, 2016), present the concept that nature itself is human-made and therefore anthropocentric. Nature, as we comprehend and have learned to know it, exists because we prescribe its perceived existence, which clearly raises questions of our own significance in relation to other beings. Such an idea problematizes our human importance among other non-living and living beings and organisms, raising the question our own “ontological status” (Boyle, 2016, p. 539). We must ask ourselves, who we, as a human race, are within the natural environment as we should recognize that the world is not as centered around humans as we have come to believe due to our defining and therefore limiting prescriptions of our environmental surroundings. Not only can we acknowledge that our culturally based notions of nature vary depending on our personal history and experience (Cronon, 1996), but also our collective perception of nature might require serious reconsiderations and adjustments.

In an article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, James Lovelock suggests “enjoy life while you can: in 20 years global warming will hit the fan” (Aitkenhead, 2008). At times, especially while writing this dissertation and researching the depressing, disillusioning, and

numbing information associated with my topic, I have reached points that were marked by feelings of senselessness or the desire to give up on my topic; not due to the dissertation process' intensity that undoubtedly exists, but rather a feeling that our human efforts to reconcile and create new and less destructive approaches to living with instead of against nature, might be utterly pointless.

“It's too late anyway. We've gone too far and have no way of halting the destructive paths we've created”, I think at times.

In the abovementioned article, Lovelock calls for investments in survival strategies or infrastructural changes that allow for a country's ability to take in more immigrants that will arise due to habitat loss, instead of focusing on renewable energy resources or trying to counter the inevitable. Then, of course, there are still those who don't even believe climate change is an actual and real thing and accuse global governments of creating such conspiracy. This has, at times, further dampened my hope in humanity and caused me to question the reasons for my work. At those times, I think back to my students, their responses to their anonymous questionnaires, the fabulous discussions we've had, their interviews, essays, and their clear understanding of their ability to become a catalyst for change. I think about my three beautiful children, Noah, Magdalena, and Ezekiel, and those children I might still have. They are all the reason for at least trying.

At a time when threats to the environment have never been greater, it may be tempting to believe that people need to be mounting the barricades rather than asking abstract questions about the human place in nature. Yet without confronting such questions, it will be hard to know which barricades to mount, and harder still to persuade large numbers of

people to mount them with us. To protect nature that is all around us, we must think long and hard about the nature we carry inside our heads (Cronon, 1996, p. 22).

All we have left is hope, thought, and action.

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Appendix A

IRB



Indiana University of Pennsylvania
www.iup.edu

Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Stright Hall, Room 113
210 South Tenth Street
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P 724-357-7730
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irb-research@iup.edu
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December 11, 2015

Yasmin Rioux
2451 Pennsylvania Avenue
Dubuque, IA 52001

Dear Ms. Rioux:

Your proposed research project, "Placing Ourselves in Our Environment: Former Students' Perceptions of Their Writing and Role in Nature Following an Environmental Writing Course," (Log No. 15-299) has been reviewed by the IRB and is approved. In accordance with 45CFR46.101 and IUP Policy, your project is exempt from continuing review. This approval does not supersede or obviate compliance with any other University requirements, including, but not limited to, enrollment, degree completion deadlines, topic approval, and conduct of university-affiliated activities.

You should read all of this letter, as it contains important information about conducting your study.

Now that your project has been approved by the IRB, there are elements of the Federal Regulations to which you must attend. IUP adheres to these regulations strictly:

1. You must conduct your study exactly as it was approved by the IRB.
2. Any additions or changes in procedures must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented.
3. You must notify the IRB promptly of any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects.
4. You must notify the IRB promptly of any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in items 2 or 3.

The IRB may review or audit your project at random *or* for cause. In accordance with IUP Policy and Federal Regulation (45CFR46.113), the Board may suspend or terminate your project if your project has not been conducted as approved or if other difficulties are detected

Although your human subjects review process is complete, the School of Graduate Studies and Research requires submission and approval of a Research Topic Approval Form (RTAF) before you can begin your research. If you have not yet submitted your RTAF, the form can be found at <http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=91683>.

IRB to Yasmin Rioux, December 11, 2015

While not under the purview of the IRB, researchers are responsible for adhering to US copyright law when using existing scales, survey items, or other works in the conduct of research. Information regarding copyright law and compliance at IUP, including links to sample permission request letters, can be found at <http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=165526>.

I wish you success as you pursue this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jen Roberts".

Jennifer Roberts, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Professor of Criminology

JLR:jeb

Cc: Dr. Gian Pagnucci, Dissertation Advisor
Dr. Sharon Deckert, Graduate Coordinator
Ms. Brenda Boal, Secretary

Appendix B

Course Syllabus for Environmental Literature and Writing, Fall 2015

ENGL 2100 Southwestern University Fall 2015

Yasmin Rioux

Phone: 319-450-5979 TEXT ONLY

Email:

Office Hours:

It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.

- H. D. Thoreau

Welcome to Engl 2100! This environmental literature and writing class will expose you to the notion that all places and people are inevitably interconnected and mutually affected by local environmental concerns. In our current time, it is more crucial than ever for you to gain an appreciation for your personal place and your current location. By surveying the history of environmental literature and learning more about nature writers, you will be able to place yourself as well as our time within the larger social, historic, and environmental context.

Course Overview

An environmental literature course in which we will explore the significance of nature writing, personal “place”, as well as related environmental concerns and matters of sustainability. We will examine the history of environmental literature in the US, and see how the relationship between humans and nature has changed, how humans have positioned themselves within nature, and the significance writers have attributed to the environment.

What is the relationship between humans and nature, and how has this view changed from the past to now? What is our position within nature? What is the purpose of nature? By addressing these and other questions, the course emphasizes the relationships between environments and the relationship between self and the environment.

Writing Emphasis:

As this is a writing intensive course, a large portion of your grade in this class will be based on your writing. For all assigned papers, we will engage in a rigorous peer-review process to emphasize the significance of revision and ensure your papers are effective for your audience and the given purposes and requirements. In addition, you will meet with me individually to discuss drafts, understand revision suggestions, and ensure your understanding of rhetorically effective writing strategies. In addition to daily journals, we will be writing three formal essays that will focus on your understanding and interpretation of given literary pieces. The final paper will ask you to compose your own piece of nature writing to demonstrate your ability to place yourself within our natural environments.

Materials:

- Readings: aside of the required texts (listed below), supplemental readings or links to these documents will be provided throughout the semester. Each student is required to read all materials thoroughly and come to class ready and prepared to discuss! Also, if links are provided, it is each student's responsibility to come to class with the text accessible on screen or with a hard copy!!
- As we will be using various online sources (Google Maps; Google Earth, etc.), students are required to bring their laptops on designated days, have necessary information to log into campus laptops/PCs, or use tablets or smartphones for specific research and class purposes

General Policies

- **Cell Phones:** no phones during class unless phones are used as research devices as mentioned above. In addition, if you are a labor coach, parent, or have any other urgent and essential needs to have your phone on you, please make sure to contact me prior to class.
- **Kids:** if you are a guardian/parent or in any other way responsible to a child (incl. pregnancy), various class policies (deadlines, participation, etc.) might vary. Please let me know if this applies to you.
- **Attendance:** each student is required to attend ALL class sessions. However, each student may miss 8 classes without grade penalties. Following the 8 missed classes, the student will receive an "F" and fail the class. Students are held fully responsible for attaining material and information that was discussed on missed days.
- Each student is responsible for awareness/knowledge of their academic standing!
- **Style:** MLA or APA; even though APA and MLA format will be discussed in class, each student is responsible for researching and practicing such formatting in order to increase fluency and efficiency in MLA/APA based writing.
- **Late work:** no late work will be accepted in this class. There will also be no make-up options for missed classes and assignments.
- **Anonymous evaluations:** As I'm always interested in enhancing my courses and ensuring that your needs are met, I will disperse anonymous, open-ended questionnaires throughout the semester. By gaining insight into your perceptions of the class, I will be able to modify some things and make adjustments!
- **Writing Center:** please make sure to check out the campus writing center. This is **NOT** a remedial service, but rather an opportunity to increase the quality of your work despite your academic standing in this course!
- **Student Affairs Office:** the following links provide useful information regarding student accommodations. Please make sure to read the information and ask questions if needed:
 - <http://www.uwplatt.edu/stuaffairs/index.html>
 - http://www.uwplatt.edu/university/documents/student_policies/index.html

Americans with Disability Act (ADA) Statement: Reasonable accommodations are available for students who have a documented disability. Please notify your professors during the first

week of class of any accommodations needed for the course. Confidentiality of all requests will be maintained.

Assignments and Calendar

Central Questions:

- What is the relationship between humans and nature? Historically? Contemporarily?
- What is our position within nature?
- What is the purpose of nature?
- What is the purpose of humans?
- What are conflicts and tensions between humans and nature?
- What are our responsibilities towards nature?

Journal: each class period will begin with students adding to their nature writing journal. The journal can be used to respond to assigned texts, reflect on personal experiences with and perceptions of nature, and keep notes on class interactions and insights. The journal entries will also be used during class discussions or small-group work and can aid the student with the completion of formal writing assignments.

Essay 1: Reflecting on at least 3 literary pieces that we have discussed thus far, analyze the pieces based on the following questions. Make sure you provide sufficient literary examples to support your claims!

Qus: How is nature depicted in the selected texts? How do the authors position themselves within nature? According to the authors/texts, how has our human perception of nature changed throughout the centuries? Connect to your place. Pg. 5

Essay 2: Based on at least 3 literary texts, analyze the conflicts that exist between humans and nature. How do the authors address these? Are these conflicts still current today? How are they represented (in one form or another) in your own natural surroundings? Provide literary support for your claims! Connect to your place. **Pages:** 5

Presentation: In a group, you will compile a comprehensive presentation demonstrating your understanding and reflection on a piece from the Herndl (Sustainability) text. You will be evaluated as follows:

- Summary of document: 20 pts
- Connection to class: 10 pts.
- Connection to our current place; how does the text affect us here and now? 10 pts.
- Connection to students' individual places: 10 pts/per student

Final: Compose your own piece of place-based nature writing. Use what you have learned throughout the semester to reflect on what nature means to you, how you position yourself within nature, and what role you believe humans play within our natural surroundings. Your piece HAS TO reflect your personal place to explore natural experiences and answer the given question. Following the completion of your own piece, we will compile a class document to represent the interconnectivity of all our places, and publish this document online using JooMag.com. If you feel uncomfortable with the idea of having your name published in a public magazine/book, you are free to use a realistic pseudonym (please inform me if you do so).

Individual piece: 5 – 7 pages; can include pictures, drawing, sketches, poems, etc.

Grading

Essay 1: 50 pts.

Essay 2: 50 pts.

Group Presentation: 50 pts.

Essay 3 (Final): 60 pts.

Class Contributions/Attendance: 10

Class Note-taker: 15 pts. X2 (student twice/semester)

Total: 250 pts.

Texts

Herndl, C. G., (2014). *Sustainability – A reader for writers*. New York, NY: Oxford.

Blanche, J. D., (1989). *Native American reader: Stories, speeches, and poems*.

McKibben, B., (2008). *American earth: Environmental writing since Thoreau*.

Caplow, F., & Cohen, S. A., (2010). *Wildbranch: an anthology of nature, environmental, and place-based writing. (Contemporary)*

Rulseh, T., & Petrie, C., (1995). *Harvest moon: A Wisconsin outdoor anthology*.

Wendell, B., (2010). *What are people for?*

Sanders, S. R. (2009). *Mind in the forest*. Retrieved from
<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/5099/>

Sanders, S. R. (2001). *Stillness*. Retrieved from
<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/80/>

Supplemental Reading - for theoretical background

Cooper, M. M. (1986). The ecology of writing. *College English*, 48 (4), 364-375.

Fleckenstein, K. S., Spinuzzi, C., Rickly, R. J., & Papper, C.C. (2008). The importance of harmony: an ecological metaphor for writing research. *College Composition and Communication*, 60 (2), 388-419.

Cahalan, J. M. (2008). Teaching hometown literature: a pedagogy of place. *College English*, 70 (3), 249-274.

Hothem, T. (2009). Suburban studies and college writing – applying ecocomposition. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 9 (1), 35-59.

Dobrin, S. I., & Weisser, C. R. (2002). Breaking ground in ecocomposition: exploring relationships between discourse and environment. *College English*, 64 (5), 566-589.

The syllabus may be subject to change depending on student progress, coverage of curricular objectives, and other potential variables.

Week	Topic	Writing & Reading
1	Introduction to Environmental Literature & Nature Writing; Intro chpts. & theoretical framework of ecocomposition	Journal
2 – 3	Native American Literature; Blanche (1989); selected texts	Journal
4 – 6 Week 6: Essay 1 due	Early Western Settlers in the US; from the Puritans to Transcendentalists (Anne Bradstreet; Melville; Thoreau; Whitman; Emerson; etc.) ; McKibben (2008)	Journal Week 6: Essay 1 due
7	Early Western Settlers in the US; from the Puritans to Transcendentalists (Anne Bradstreet; Melville; Thoreau; Whitman; Emerson; etc.) ; McKibben (2008)	Journal
8 – 10 Week 10: Essay 2 due	Contemporary views on Nature and Nature Writing; Caplow & Cohen (2010)	Journal Week 10: Essay 2 due
11 – 13	Here (Sanders, 1997) & Now (Wendell, 2010); Rulseh & Petrie (1995)	Journal
14 – 16	You: Place, Identity, and Nature; ecocomposition	Journal
16	Final	Final due

Week 1	Topic	Writing & Reading
R – Sep 3	Introduction to Environmental Literature & Nature Writing; Intro chpts. & theoretical framework of ecocomposition	Journal Read Blanche p.
Week 2 Native American Literature		

T – Sep 8	Journal Discussion: Blanche (1989) selected texts	Read Tigerman (2006)
R – Sep 10	Journal Discussion: Blanche & Tigerman	Read Smith; Bradford
Week 3 Early European Settlers		
T – Sep 15	Journal Discussion: John Smith; Bradford	Read Rowlandson
R – Sep 17	Journal Discussion: Rowlandson Discussion Essay 1	Read American Earth: p. 1-36 (Thoreau); 37-45 (Catlin)
Week 4 Thoreau & Friends (1800s)		
T – Sep 22	Journal Discussion Thoreau and Catlin	Read American Earth: p. 62-70 (Whitman; note: tone); p. 71-80 (Marsh)
R- Sep 24	Journal Discussion: Whitman and Marsh Peer Review Essay 1	Read American Earth p. 85-89 (Muir); p. 129 – 133 (Roosevelt)
Week 5 - 1900s		
T – Sep 29 Essay 1 DUE	Essay 1 Due Journal Discussion: Muir and Roosevelt	American Earth: p. 134-139 (Austin); 392 – 394 (Zahniser)
R – Oct 1	Journal Discussion: Austin and Zahniser	Journal American Earth: p 265 – 294 (Leopold)
Week 6 – Contemporary		
T – Oct 6 Leopold	Journal Discussion: Leopold	Wildbranch: p. 34-36 (Cotter)
R – Oct 8 Contemporary	Journal Discussion: time and Cotter Discussion Essay 2	Wildbranch: 88 – 95 (Futrell); 96 – 104 (Shaw); 116 – 123 (Fitzgerald)
Week 7		
T – Oct 13	Journal Discussion: Futrell, Shaw, Fitzgerald	Wildbranch: p. 201 – 202 (Bates); 184 – 185 (Deming)
R – Oct 15	Journal Discussion: Bates and Deming	Wildbranch: p. 245 – 247 (Olmsted); p. 268 –273 (Sanders)

Week 8		
T – Oct 20	Journal Discussion: Olmsted and Sanders Peer Review Essay 2	Sanders: *; print out **
R – Oct 22 ESSAY 2 DUE	Journal Read Sanders **; Discussion: Sanders	
Week 9		
T – Oct 27	Journal Discussion: Sanders continued	Harvest Moon: p. 48-52 (Schoenfeld); 64-71 (Mc Lean);
R – Oct 29	Journal Discussion: Schoenfeld and McLean	Harvest Moon: 120 – 125 (Wendorf) 212-221 (derleth)
Week 10		
T – Nov 3	Journal Discussion: Wendorf and Derleth	What are People For? P. 123 - 128
R – Nov 5	Journal Discussion: Sanders	What are People For? P. 109 – 122
Week 11		
T – Nov 10	Journal Discussion: Sanders	Read ***
R – Nov 12	Journal Discuss Gaia Theory ***** Discuss Presentations	Sustainability Herndl p. 155- top of 158
Week 12 - Here and Now		
T – Nov 17	Journal Student Presentations Cicerone (158 – 182)	
R – Nov 19	Journal Student Presentations NRC (183 – 196)	Brainstorm your individual place-based nature writing...for final (remember: you may include drawings, pics, poems, etc.!!) Read at least two of the above mentioned Theoretical Articles!!!
Week 13 –Final Publication Place-based writing		
T – Nov 24	Discussion: Theoretical Framework for final aka “Why are we doing this!?”; individual and publication	Work on your individual final

R – Nov 26	In-class writing day: Individual place-based nature writing	Bring in your current draft!
Week 14		
T – Dec 1	Peer-review of individual nature writing piece	Finalize your individual piece; keep in mind that it will be published and accessible online! Broad audience; transcend current place (College campus community) Go to JooMag.com before next class and familiarize yourself with navigation, options, designs, etc.
R – Dec 3	Individual place-based nature writing DUE Discussion: arrangement, layout, chapters, collective map of final publication; cover page; table of contents; consecutive page numbers Work with JooMag.com	NOTE: your individual piece must be saved as PDF in order to be uploaded!
Week 15		
T – Dec 8	In class work day: Collective Publication Work with JooMag.com	Your (ALL) final must be ready to get published next class!!!!
R – Dec 10	Work day JooMag.com Publish it!!!	
Week 16		
T – Dec 15	Finals Due	Finals Due
R – Dec 17	Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!!!	

*<https://orionmagazine.org/article/stillness/>

** <https://orionmagazine.org/article/mind-in-the-forest/>

*** <http://www.gaiatheory.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Gaia-Theory-Model-and-Metaphor-for-the-21st-Century1.pdf>

**** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqwZJDEZ9Ng>

Appendix C

Bibliography of Class Readings

- Blanche, J. D., (1989). *Native American reader: Stories, speeches, and poems*. Juneau, AK, Denali Press.
- Caplow, F., & Cohen, S. A., (2010). *Wildbranch: an anthology of nature, environmental, and place-based writing*. (Contemporary)
- Herndl, C. G., (2014). *Sustainability – A reader for writers*. New York, NY: Oxford. Lost River Press.
- McKibben, B., (2008). *American earth: Environmental writing since Thoreau*. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam Inc.
- Rulseh, T., & Petrie, C., (1995). *Harvest moon: A Wisconsin outdoor anthology*. Woodruff, WI:
- Sanders, S. R. (2001). Stillness. Retrieved from
<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/80/>
- Sanders, S. R. (2009). Mind in the forest. Retrieved from
<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/5099/>
- Tigerman, K. (2006). *Wisconsin Indian Literature*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Wendell, B., (2010). *What are people for?*. Berkley, CA: North Point Press.

Supplemental Reading - for theoretical background

- Cahalan, J. M. (2008). Teaching hometown literature: a pedagogy of place. *College English*, 70 (3), 249-274.
- Cooper, M. M. (1986). The ecology of writing. *College English*, 48 (4), 364-375.

Fleckenstein, K. S., Spinuzzi, C., Rickly, R. J., & Papper, C.C. (2008). The importance of harmony: an ecological metaphor for writing research. *College Composition and Communication*, 60 (2), 388-419.

Hothem, T. (2009). Suburban studies and college writing – applying ecocomposition. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 9 (1), 35-59.

Appendix D

Rubric for Student Writing Evaluation

(based on Owens, 2001b; Hothem, 2009; Mauk, 2003; Balgopal & Wallace, 2009; Reynolds, 2004)

Level	Description	Present	Absent	Comments
Superficial/subjective	Students write clearly about personal experiences relevant to the topic but do not successfully express an understanding of their role within the larger environment			
Objective	Students understand issues and concepts pertaining to their larger environment but cannot incorporate personal connections to the material			
Authentic	Students successfully combine the knowledge and awareness of the larger environment, which they are part of, and “make personal connections to their role” (Balgopal & Wallace, 2009, p. 21) within the environment			
Authority/Power	Students clearly demonstrates identification with her/his place. It is clear that student has researched or reflected on her/his place sufficiently to write confidently about it			
Agency/Responsibility	Student writing suggests that student is aware of her/his active role within the environment, that she/he has responsibility for her/his place, and the extended environment beyond			

Appendix E

Recruitment Email to Former Students for Interviews

THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (Phone: 724-357-7730).

Dear Former Environmental Literature and Writing Students,

I hope you are having a fantastic semester and are enjoying the great outdoors!

I am emailing you because I would like to invite you to participate in my research study that I am currently working on for my doctoral dissertation.

My study is titled “Placing Ourselves in Our Environment: Students’ Perceptions of Their Writing and Role in Nature Following an Environmental Writing Course”, and it is my goal to gain a better understanding of how you, as my former students, might perceive your role in nature after having taken my class.

If you would like to participate in my study, I would like to talk to you about the course, its components, your writing and writing process, and how your perceptions of yourself within nature might have changed (or didn’t change) due to having taken Environmental Literature and Writing with me! I would like to review and talk to you about any materials you might still have from our class, but I would also like you to participate even if you’ve gotten rid of all your writings and notes! If you decide to participate in my study, you will need to do the following:

- Respond to this email
- Read and sign an informed consent form that I will provide
- Read six interview questions that I will email you prior to setting up interview dates. I will send you the interview questions ahead of time in order to give you a chance to become familiarized with the questions so if you’re unclear or unsure about something, we can discuss any comments or questions prior to the interviews!
- Schedule an interview date with me at a time and day that works best for you.
- Participate in one 60-90 minute interview during which you will be asked to answer questions pertaining to our class, your own experiences with the environment, and your writing.

Of course, you are not obliged to participate in my study.

Please email me back if you are interested in learning more about my study and/or would like to participate in it! I really hope to hear from you!

Have a great day!

Yasmin Rioux

Appendix F

Student Informed Consent Form



Indiana University of Pennsylvania
GRADUATE STUDIES IN COMPOSITION AND TESOL

Leonard Hall, Room 111
421 North Walk
Indiana, PA 15705-1015
www.iup.edu/english

P 724-357-2263
F 724-357-3056
grad-eng@iup.edu

Dear _____,

You are receiving this email because you told me that you would like to participate in my doctoral dissertation research study. This is an informed consent form, which will give you a better understanding of the research procedures. Please note that you are eligible to participate in this study because you are a former student of Environmental Literature and Writing. The information in this email is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate in this study! If you have any questions, concerns, or comments, please don't hesitate to email, text, or call me.

As mentioned in my previous email, I am researching how my former students perceive their role within our natural surroundings after having completed the Environmental Literature and Writing course that you completed last December. Further, the study examines how your writing might have been affected by you taking and completing Environmental Literature and Writing. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about your perceptions of your general natural environment, role within it, the Environmental Literature and Writing class, and your writing during one 60-90 minute interview. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed to help me gain a better understanding of your personal experience!

It is important for you to understand that your privacy is of utmost importance to me and that none of the information you provide during the entire research process, including the email correspondences we may have, will be shared with other persons or the university, even if you are still enrolled there. Also, you will be able to give yourself a pseudonym, or a "fake" name, that you select for yourself. I will also ask you to bring whatever written materials you still have from our class so we can discuss them together. Your name will be erased from your written texts in order to protect your privacy. Please also note that all your materials, written documents or interviews, will be stored securely in my file cabinet and remain inaccessible to anyone but me as I am the only key-holder.

Your participation in this study is **voluntary**. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the researcher, me, or the University. Your decision to withdraw will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you choose to participate, you may still withdraw at any time during the research process by contacting me via email, phone, or text message. Upon your request to withdraw, all information regarding you will be destroyed. It is also important to know that your participation or non-participation in my research will **NOT** affect your grade in any other courses you might take with me during future semesters. Also what you say during the study's interview process or what you have written in our Environmental Literature and Writing course will also **NOT** affect your grade in courses you might have with me in the future!

If you choose to participate in my doctoral research study, all of your information and the data you provide will be securely stored and protected so no one, besides me, will have access to your information. You will be able to see all the information I have about or of you at any (reasonable) time throughout the research process. You will be able to review the transcriptions of our interviews if you like, and make sure you are represented fairly and accurately.





Indiana University of Pennsylvania
GRADUATE STUDIES IN COMPOSITION AND TESOL

Leonard Hall, Room 111
421 North Walk
Indiana, PA 15705-1015
www.iup.edu/english

P 724-357-2263
F 724-357-3056
grad-eng@iup.edu

Participant’s Rights

Please read the following carefully and thoroughly. Make sure you understand the information and don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

I have read and discussed the research description with the researcher, Yasmin Rioux. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.

My participation in this research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without jeopardy to future medical care, employment, student status, or other entitlements.

The researcher, Yasmin Rioux, may withdraw me from the research at her professional digression.

If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available that may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide this information to me.

Any information derived from the research that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.

If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the researcher, Yasmin Rioux, who will answer my questions. The researcher’s phone number is 319-450-5979. I may also contact the researcher’s faculty advisor,

Dr. Gian Pagnucci, at 724 – 357 – 2261.

If at any time I have comments or concerns regarding the conduct of the research, or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. The email address is: irb-research@iup.edu.

I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant’s Rights document.

I plan to audiotape the interview as the insight gained through the interviews and assessment of your writing are part of this research. Only the principal researcher, Yasmin Rioux, and the members of the research team will have access to written and taped materials. Please check one for each:

- I consent to being audiotaped. I consent to having my written materials being assessed
- I do NOT consent to being audiotaped. I do NOT consent to having my written materials being assessed

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant’s signature: _____ Date: ____/____/____

Name (please print): _____



Appendix G

Interview Questions

Question	Focus	Purpose
How have you viewed yourself as part of the environment throughout your life?	Broad – life experience; Past to present	Understand the student within environmental context; view student within their lives and how they have constructed their roles and themselves within nature and made meaning of themselves as part of nature (or not) prior to taking Envs. Lit & Wr.
How has taking Environmental Literature and Writing affected your perception of your role within the environment?	Broad – Narrow; Past to present	Understand Envs. Lit & Wr. as experience and as event that has affected their perceptions of role within nature
How do you see your role within the environment now, after having taken Environmental Literature and Writing?	Narrow; Present to future	Student explains experiences within environmental context; connecting experience to meaning of current/new role
How did you establish this new role for yourself?	Narrow; Past to present	Student reflects on meaning making; making sense of experience
What aspects of the course contributed to this new meaning of yourself within the environment?	Narrow; Past to present	Understand what elements of the course were impactful and challenged the student to review their role within their environment; connecting concrete event and experience to meaning of current/new role
How do you see yourself as a writer (within an environment) after having taken Environmental Literature and Writing?	Broad-Narrow; Past to present	Understand how writing in the Envs. Lit & Wr. course has affected student writing
How did writing help you create your current understanding of your role within the environment?	Narrow; Past to present	Understand how writing aided in the establishment of currently held environmental role

Appendix H

Anonymous Student Questionnaires

Environmental Literature and Writing

Fall 2015

This is an anonymous questionnaire! Please omit your name!!

- 1) What is your overall perception of the course at this point?

- 2) What would you like to change about the course?

- 3) Has the course made you stretch your thinking on environmental issues, perceptions, and ideologies? How?

- 4) What is, in your opinion, the best part about the class?

- 5) Anything else?

Environmental Literature and Writing
October 13, 2015 - Fall 2015
Anonymous Questionnaire 2

Regarding all you have read and discussed in and outside of this class, briefly address the following questions and how your perception of their "answers" has been affected by having been taking this class for the past 7 weeks:

What is the relationship between humans and nature? Historically? Contemporarily?

What is our position within nature?

What is the purpose of nature?

What is the purpose of humans?

What are conflicts and tensions between humans and nature?

What are our responsibilities towards nature?

**Environmental Literature and Writing
Questionnaire #3- Fall 2015 – November**

- 1) What is your overall perception of the course at this point?
- 2) What would you like to change about the course?
- 3) Has the course made you stretch your thinking on environmental issues, perceptions, and ideologies? How?
- 4) What is, in your opinion, the best part about the class?
- 5) What is the relationship between humans and nature? Historically? Contemporarily?
- 6) What is our position within nature?
- 7) What is the purpose of nature?
- 8) What is the purpose of humans?
- 9) What are conflicts and tensions between humans and nature?
- 10) What are our responsibilities towards nature?

Appendix I

Final Publication Data

Student Name	Subjective	Objective	Authentic	Authority/Power	Agency/Responsibility
Cassidy Babcock	x			Yes	No
Nicholas Felske	x			Yes	No
Karsen Vance	x			Yes	Yes
Brandon Steward	x			Yes	No
Chad Jones			x	Yes	Yes
Joseph Garetson	x			Yes	No
Abbie Kaiser	x			Yes	Yes
Michael Killian			x	Yes	No
Nick Costello			x	Yes	Yes
Robyn Maxey		x		N/A	No
Alyssa Miller	x			Yes	No
Total	7	1	3	Yes: 10 No: 0 N/A: 1	Yes: 4 No: 7