

Green Humanities: A Journal of Ecological Thought in Literature, Philosophy & the Arts

Volume 1 *Eco-Gencies: Eco-Critical Responses to Contemporary Environmental Crises*

Article 8

2015

Eco-Digital Pedagogies: Why and How Teaching the Green Humanities Can Shape Change

Laura BarbasRhoden
Wofford College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/gh>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Environmental Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barbas-Rhoden, Laura. "Eco-Digital Pedagogies: Why and How Teaching the Green Humanities Can Shape Change." *Green Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015, pp. 126-55.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Green Humanities: A Journal of Ecological Thought in Literature, Philosophy & the Arts* by an authorized editor of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

Green Humanities, vol. 1 (2015), pp. 126-155
www.greenhumanities.org
© 2015

Eco-Digital Pedagogies: Why and How Teaching the Green Humanities Can Shape Change

Laura BarbasRhoden
Wofford College

In *Now You See It*, interdisciplinary scholar and education leader Cathy Davidson points out a stunningly obvious truth about human perception: “Whatever you see means there is something you do not see” (290). Practitioners of the environmental humanities have long taken on tasks of seeing and saying what is not seen, what is not heard, from the vantage point of dominant ideologies, from consumerist economic models to the instrumentalist, anthropocentric rationalities that undergird them. Meantime, over the last few decades, we green humanities scholars have broadened our range of vision: studied more diverse texts, deepened analyses, and engaged one another in lively debate in publications, conferences, and symposia. The field of ecocriticism, which began to be articulated in the academy in the 1970s, has matured, and our teaching of the green humanities has expanded.

But what is the broader, educational and material context in which our teaching, scholarship, and writing occurs? What do we see, and what might we not be seeing as we do our work of education? Are there new ways for our teaching to acknowledge and engage our present context, so that we and our students become aware of what we see, how we see it, and why that awareness matters for effective engagement of environmental issues? Specifically, are there ways we might use the “otherness” of our field vis-à-vis the

STEM disciplines and social sciences (and vice versa) such that we enrich our pedagogies, sustain our institutional presence, and most importantly, increase the impact upon our audiences of what we write and teach? And if so, what pedagogical tools might we use to build the capacity of our students to effect change, to shape the imaginations the general public has of environmental realities, and to mobilize people for effective actions for more sustainable shared futures? In short, how might we best imagine, articulate, and execute our teaching and writing projects in the “green humanities” so as to shape positive change?

Our educational and material context is one of worrisome convergences. We ecocritics work in an academic milieu in which we ourselves question the relevance of environmental humanities (Major and McMurray 1) and worry about the future of the humanities in general (Nussbaum 1-2). For many of us who are educators, we work in a transitional moment for higher educational institutions, a world of budget cuts and the privileging by politicians of STEM and vocational disciplines.¹ More immediately in our field of ecocriticism, leading scholars like Greg Garrard express concern that “ecocriticism may be at something of a crisis point ... Not because of institutionalization and professionalization, nor because of the incursion of Theory, but because the growing nature-skepticism of the field, which in some respects represents increased scientific and philosophical sophistication, and risks subverting its ethical and pedagogical *raison d’être* (497). Garrard worries such tendencies “may have serious pedagogical consequences” (510).

In material terms, we educate students daily amid alarming headlines on climate change, species extinction, epidemic disease, and habitat destruction. Meantime, as

economic growth has shifted to poorer nations, first-world environmentalists face a new challenge of articulating environmental concerns in ways that acknowledge economic privilege and income inequality within our own nations and around the globe. Orienting our teaching toward this global reality is an imperative, since as Nobel prize-winning economist Michael Spence points out, the world economy is likely to grow such that “perhaps 75 percent or more of the world’s people live in advanced countries with all that entails: increasing income levels, with likewise increasing patterns of consumption and energy use” (Spence 4). Spence postulates that the second revolution (following the Industrial Revolution) is the “Inclusiveness Revolution,” in which the pattern of growth of advanced countries spreads in the developing world (4-5). Given the potential environmental repercussions of the spread worldwide of Western patterns of consumption, just what kind of teaching should we be doing in the environmental humanities?

Those of us who are ecocritics in places of economic privilege must consistently bear in mind what it looks like to teach toward a new, digitally and materially connected, sustainable future. Our students must have opportunities to engage regularly in dialogue with those who live quite differently all around the globe: the marginalized educated by Khan Academy or other digital experiments, the poor dreaming of better futures in emerging economies, the children of the burgeoning middle class in places like China, India, Brazil, and other high-growth economies. We can do so by using the humanities to engage the resources of other fields of inquiry in ways that will equip our students with the wisdom to decide, as Mexican environmentalist and writer Homero Aridjis said in a presentation before the Americas Society, what to conserve and how to keep it (Aridjis,

“Keynote Lecture”). In this critical moment, as never before, we educators can leverage the power of the humanities to teach in ways that invite our students to behold the world before them, appreciate its complexity, and develop the critical capacities and courage to act for “stewardship of our global commons” (Bennett, et. al.).

How? In this article, I outline a framework for course development, from identification of purpose to development of methodology, and finally, to generation of content, that practitioners may use to create environmental humanities syllabi designed to show students “how study in the humanities may shape, suggest, or even demand certain responses to the ecological challenges” (“Inaugural CFP,” *Green Humanities Journal*). The examples I share here have a global and urban orientation, to advance my own purpose of increasing ecocritical dialogue about relatively underdeveloped areas of work in the green humanities.

From Purpose to Process to Content

The most important task in the creation of a course or teaching unit is a clear articulation of our purpose in pursuing the endeavor. William E. Smith, in a theoretical text about organizational development, discusses the power fields of appreciation (openness to context), influence, and control and argues that “Power comes from Purpose” (70, *capitalization in original*). Informed by years of strategy meetings in the private sector, a colleague of mine often enjoins cohorts to consider first the “why,” a question that draws individuals toward articulating a deep purpose; then the “how,” which insists upon careful thought about effective methodology that will deliver concrete outcomes to realize that purpose; and then the “what,” that is, the material, content, or

action steps, of any particular endeavor, and especially new ones. The observations, from the theory and praxis of organizational development, offer a useful prompt for ecocritics seeking to communicate as teachers, scholars, and public intellectuals: Why am I teaching this course? How might I most effectively do it? What should I include in my syllabus, by way of texts and assignments?

My answer to the question of “why teach green humanities with a global orientation” is drawn from a growing awareness of the broad context in which my own career unfolds as an educator. With regard to the humanities, contemporary research and theories of change, and especially studies on the role of emotion in sparking change, point to our opportunity in the humanities to leverage the power of creative works (and the study of them) to motivate the desire for change. With regard to the purpose of doing work in the green humanities in particular, dramatic anthropogenic effects on climate and biodiversity daily signal to human communities that we must begin to imagine and shape positive, environmental change, if only for our own futures. With regard to the “why” of having a global orientation in coursework, I draw from conversations about the evolving purpose of higher education and the expansion of capitalism worldwide, and especially the relationship between the two.

As Paul E. Lingenfelter points out in *Liberal Education*, “We have a more crowded planet; increasing standards of living and energy consumption threaten the ecosystem; disease still plagues human life; and scarce resources and weak intercultural understanding and tolerance continue to generate wars and threats of war. These challenges—economic, health, environmental, social, and political—make widespread educational attainment more essential in the twenty-first century than it has ever been

before” (32). The call for ethical citizenship and innovation echoes through the private sector as well. Tim Brown, design-thinking leader and CEO and President of IDEO, points out that “we are increasingly aware of the underside of the revolution that has transformed the way we live, work, and play” (2). Brown declares that we need “new choices –new products that balance the needs of individuals and of society as a whole; new ideas that tackle the global challenges of health, poverty, and education; new strategies that result in differences that matter and a sense of purpose that engages everyone affected by them” (3). The kind of education we deliver in this context must move beyond knowledge transmission. As Lingenfelter emphasizes, “now that the objective is helping each student realize his or her potential, the main event must become teaching and learning, building capability” (36), rather than sorting out “how many students could reach gradated levels of competency” (36).

As practitioners of the green humanities, we can articulate powerfully how our disciplines are crucial in delivering results, like those cited above, that are desired outcomes for higher education, especially liberal education. In fact, we have the opportunity to link what many of us desire within green humanities disciplines –to use our work to make the world better in environmental terms– to a broader conversation about the purpose of education. Furthermore, we have additional incentive to help each student realize her potential because each person has the capacity to become an agent of positive environmental change. And if part of our purpose is to shape graduates that are thoughtful and cognizant of the complexity of human interactions, as well as interspecies interactions, we must avail ourselves of the tools available to us in higher education

research so that we can articulate the value of what we do to ourselves, our institutions and politicians, and our students and alumni.

Publications by powerful educational advocacy groups, like the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Lumina Foundation, increasingly point to the value of an education that graduates individuals able to “demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, and the capacity for continued new learning,” characteristics that 9 out of 10 employers surveyed in an AAC&U-commissioned study reported as important in hiring decisions (Hart Research Associates 22). Furthermore, the same study pointed out that employers “endorse several educational practices as potentially helpful in preparing college students for workplace success. These include practices that require students to conduct research and use evidence-based analysis; gain in-depth knowledge in the major and analytic, problem-solving, and communication skills; and apply their learning in real-world settings” (Hart 22). The green humanities are an exceptionally conducive environment for advancing such skills and also shaping students for “responsible citizenship,” (9), an educational outcome the Lumina Foundation identifies as one of five areas of importance in their degree profile research (Lumina 9).

Within the field of the green humanities, of course, educators and writers may tap into the inherent power of art to shape emotion. Popular press articles, such as the work of Chip Heath and Dan Heath in *Switch* and myriad articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Fast Company* point to the power of emotions in shaping change, and stories in particular, for sparking emotions and directing feelings toward action. Peter Guber, for example, argues that “the ability to articulate your story or that of

your company is crucial in almost every phase of enterprise management” (Guber).

Similarly, *Forbes* has featured articles explaining that most people “make decisions based on emotion, and then look for the facts that support these decisions. Thus it behooves every entrepreneur to learn how to craft stories from their personal experience and the world at large that make an emotional connection, as well as tie in the facts”

(“Entrepreneurs Who Master Storytelling”). If entrepreneurs acknowledge the power of stories, why not expose our students to powerful stories and tools they can use to analyze their own responses to them?

In our present reality, we teacher-scholars in the green humanities have at hand an incredible opportunity in which we might match our pedagogies to our context –one that is connected, digital, global, and in flux. In fact, the connected and digital nature of our world offers us and our students the ability to practice the kind of collaboration that lets us all begin to see what we do not see, to become aware of our own positionality in terms of gender, geography, class, education, and disciplinary training as we engage with others unlike us in different ways. When environmental challenges are complex and globally situated, as most are, we have an obligation to help students appreciate the realities of the crisis at hand and how the crisis is read through different interpretive lenses. Students must learn by practice how to understand, analyze, and evaluate different discourses, while they at the same time articulate and refine their own positions.

In short, to teach effectively in the 21st century, we in the green humanities must be purposeful about how we adapt to our new environment as educators and citizens. We must take the time to make clear to learners at each step in their educational experience why we do what we do and how our classroom methodology flows from our purposes.

Only in doing so can we increase learners' capacity both to analyze actions and messages (including our own) and to craft their own actions and messages, such that more of us are thinking critically and taking effective action toward sustainable human futures.

A "Purpose-Process-Content" Method for Digital Eco-Pedagogies for Faculty

When Cathy Davidson notes that for everything we see, there is something we do not see, she might very well be talking about a course syllabus as any other aspect of reality. We scholars and educators often share our syllabi on disciplinary listservs and websites, yet much less frequently (and then most often in casual conversation) do we share with one another the processes by which we constructed such syllabi. My objective in the following paragraphs is to detail, via a concrete example of an environmental humanities unit, the purpose-process-content method of course development. I use a globally oriented unit on urban environmental topics to present the process and point out how we educators might use digital media to anchor student inquiry in a broader global context. In the subsequent discussion of the application of the method, by faculty with students, I show how we can use the purpose-process-content method to engage students in greater metacognitive awareness so that they can understand how to approach complex topics and shape change on their own.

Engaged, globally-oriented digital pedagogies, designed thoughtfully, can offer students an opportunity to vet ideas with collaborators different from themselves; acquire knowledge for problem-solving, analysis, and debate; and build skills for lifelong learning. Furthermore, digital pedagogies also offer faculty an opportunity for decolonial praxis in our teaching of the green humanities. As Walter Mignolo emphasizes, "the anchor of de-

colonial epistemologies shall be 'I am where I think' and better yet 'I am where I do and think,' as they become synonymous. What that means is... that you constitute your self ('I am') in the place you think. And that place is not, in my argument, a room or office at the library, but the 'place' that has been configured by the colonial matrix of power" (xvi). Mignolo points out that though a "capitalist economy is globally shared, the colonial matrix of power . . . is today disputed" (xviii). Writing from a perspective grounded in the business world, the authors of *Standing on the Sun* echo the same sentiment when they point out that "the vibrant economies of new global players like China, India, and Brazil will not simply win more hands for the increasingly global game of capitalism. They will also rewrite its rules" (25). Indeed, in economic terms, we will move from a world in which rich countries produce 77% of world GDP in 2000 to 32% in 2050 (Meyer and Kirby 19). Our teaching should heed the admonishment of Spence, who emphasizes to advanced-world readers with regard to their counterparts in developing economies that "we need to see the world through their eyes, just as they will need to be able to see it through ours" (7). In order to help our students see diverse perspectives, our green humanities syllabi can make use of technology to advance engaged and collaborative learning by students and to draw their attention to ways new mobile technologies have diminished the digital divide. By engaging our students in broader inquiry, as I outline below, we can also move beyond what Andrew Delbanco calls the "fundamental problem of the explosion of specialized knowledge" (89) in the academy.

I offer the following unit on urban environments as an example of a personal response to the changing educational and economic reality in which I teach. In laying out, first at the faculty level of idea generation and then at the student level, as an

example of process-oriented learning, I emphasize how we might increase the impact of our teaching by (1) clearly articulating purpose-process-content to ourselves, so that we might “leap ahead” and guide students to articulate purpose for themselves; (2) using digital resources to increase student engagement with opinions, representations, and debates in different places, so that they become aware, to paraphrase Mignolo, that we are *where* we do and think (Mignolo xvi); and (3) directing our students toward metacognitive awareness of the means by which we constructed the course by letting them “do” at least part of the course construction.

The first step in the elaboration of a course plan is for the faculty member (or better yet, faculty team) to ask “why” questions: Why are we teaching this material? Studying this text? Writing this article? In designing a green humanities unit around the topic of urban realities in the global South, I might respond that I am choosing this material because cities are emblematic of modernity, and humankind is not likely to retreat, in the immediate future, from modernity, despite that fact that retreat figures prominently in many texts with an environmental imagination. More of us live in urban spaces, there are more megacities in the developing world than elsewhere, and life in rural areas is often a life of extreme poverty, a fact which continues to drive the growth of cities worldwide. In responding in disciplinary language to that “why,” I might cite that increasing numbers of practitioners of ecocriticism comment upon texts with a global reach, and yet relatively few of us, in our scholarship and syllabi, acknowledge the geopolitics of knowledge creation in our work.² Finally, since my teaching is often conducted in Spanish for non-native speakers of Spanish, I want my selection of course content to acknowledge the geopolitics of knowledge and identity construction to

students who might not ever have considered their own positionality as first-world learners.

After we articulate to ourselves why we include certain topics, themes, theories in courses we teach (or articles we write), then we must shape our methodology (our “how”) such that we guide students toward desired learning outcomes. In searching for answers to the “how” questions, we need to turn to studies about the multiple (and sometimes competing) learning outcomes valued by our higher educational community, our democracy, and our students’ future employers. The Lumina Foundation Degree Qualifications profile, for example, describes five basic areas of learning in which graduates of institutions of higher education in the United States should show competency: “Broad, Integrative Knowledge; Specialized Knowledge; Applied Learning; and Civic Learning” (4). Similarly, an AAC&U-commissioned survey of employers found that “nearly all those surveyed (93 percent) agree that ‘a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is *more important* than their undergraduate major.’ More than nine in ten of those surveyed say it is important that those they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, and the capacity for continued new learning” (Hart 22). In fact, as Davidson argues, given the realities of the new global world order, “learning to think in multiple ways, with multiple partners, with a dexterity that cannot be computerized or outsourced, is no longer a luxury but a necessity” (77). In order for our higher education community “to meet the educational imperatives of our age, we need to reinvent instruction” (Lingenfelter 38).

As we look to reinvent instruction, we can ask important “how” questions: How does current work we do produce desired educational outcomes? How have others demonstrated the effectiveness of their teaching? How might we integrate what worked for them into what we do next? For example, to have a better sense of the learning outcomes my courses produce, I have applied qualitative research techniques to identify recurrent themes in students’ reflective writing work and end-of-course surveys and coded the themes according to AAC&U VALUE rubrics. For information on how others have discovered and tested effective teaching methods, we can look to research by our peers in the academy and cohorts in other fields, like talent development experts working in other sections. For instance, research on action learning, first articulated as a concept by a physicist and applied to multiple settings now, indicates that people learn best when a coach or mentor points out *how* they are tackling a task before them, as they tackle that task, often collaboratively.³ In a similar vein, the Transparency Initiative, an academic undertaking involving more than 25,000 students and 27 institutions in 7 countries, has produced research that demonstrates that “students’ learning outcomes improved when they understood how and why instructors had structured their learning experiences in particular ways” (Winkelmes 49-50).

In light of the above research, “how” questions we might consider as instructors include the following: How might I most effectively imagine the course plan (focus, goals, objectives) so that it maximizes opportunities for optimal learning outcomes for students? How can I balance the need to teach within a curriculum, defined collectively by my program, department, and/or discipline and also create the space to integrate methods that allow for “learning to think in multiple ways, with multiple partners”? In

the green humanities specifically, how might we broaden our concern for delivering content so that we guide students to develop metacognitive awareness, that is, an understanding of how their own learning, textual interpretation, writing, and collaboration happens? By what means might we instruct students such that they are able to duplicate practices and conditions for skills and literacies to be put to use outside the classroom, where actions to effect positive environmental change must happen?

In answering the “how” questions myself, I often bring primary humanities texts into dialogue with texts from other disciplines, such as behavioral psychology; economics; environmental, economic, and social history; anthropology; gender studies; and innovation and business studies. I draw on resources like John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas* to formulate frequent, low-stakes writing assignments, conducted in class and out of class. And finally, most of my class sessions are “flipped,” and create environments for action learning, such as the group tackling of a problem set before them, with my faculty role limited to that of a mentor drawing attention to the strategies the collective uses to solve a problem, present an idea, or argue a position in a debate. Most of the “how” questions, though, I explore with students, as I explain below, because doing so builds instruction in metacognitive awareness efficiently into my classes.

My answers to the “what” questions for a syllabus or course unit on urban environmental topics best take the form of a conceptual map. I’ve selected Latin American texts on urban realities and globalization, since Latin American literary and cultural studies are my own field of expertise. I might use conceptual maps to solicit input on additional texts from colleagues and then to generate a list of grouped readings from which the class as a whole would build a syllabus, culminating in a collaborative project of

my design or in the case of smaller classes, their own. This particular map uses a selection of Mexican texts as its core (see Concept Map A).



Concept Map A: Urban Landscapes (texts from Mexico)

The film and literary texts in the above map feature adolescent or young adult protagonists coming of age in a crucial, liminal period for the nation in which they live. All the texts capture the realities of emerging “post-national scenarios,” realities created by “the flux of migration, the importance of ecological issues, the application of flexible regimes of labor, the transnationalization of markets, the accelerated relocation of material and symbolic commodities, and the proliferation of virtual and provisional forms of social *affiliation*” (Moraña 17, emphasis in original). Below follows a sample list of texts for such a unit, and of course, many other selections are possible:

Core Fictional Narrative Text

- *En quién piensas cuando haces el amor?* (1996). Homero Aridjis (if teaching in Spanish)
OR *Batallas en el desierto* (1981). José Emilio Pacheco (if teaching in English, since available in translation, or if instructor needs a short book in Spanish).

Primary Non-Fiction Texts

- “Declaración del Grupo de los Cien” (1985). (available in both languages)
- “The Fourth World War Has Begun” (1997). Subcomandante Marcos (available in both languages)

Primary Spanish-Language Films

- *Temporada de patos* (2004). Fernando Eimbcke (available with subtitles)
- *Y tu mamá también*. (2001). Alfonso Cuarón (available with subtitles)

With regard to secondary texts, my investigation of the “what” question often prompts me to read widely before I teach a new class, so that I can identify relevant scholarship, green and otherwise, that I can later pull upon readily in order to prompt students to produce deeper commentary on the works. The unit above, for example, draws on readings from Latin American cultural studies, like the work of Néstor García Canclini, Carlos Monsiváis, Walter Dignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Enrique Leff; North American scholarly texts, such as articles from the social sciences on urban studies, eco-psychology, and environmental justice; and pieces from popular business publications like *Harvard Business Review*, *Fast Company*, or the *Wall Street Journal*. Reading from a variety of sources helps students gain a sense of different perspectives on shared experiences like urbanization, migration, or economic change.

Guiding Students in Purpose-Process-Content Thinking

Once purpose, process, and content are clear to us as instructors, we are leap-ahead ready for work with students. The temptation, of course, is to “leap in,” to deliver packages of content in the style in which most of us were trained. If we limit ourselves to transmitting knowledge and evaluating student mastery of it, however, we limit the opportunity we have to guide students to a growing awareness and confidence in their ability to read texts, interpret ideas, and apply new thinking to the world around them.

Our goal as faculty, over the course of the academic term (or the major), should be to make ourselves obsolete because we have given students the opportunity to develop all the skills, literacies, and dispositions they need to fulfill the purpose for which the course (or major) was designed. As a first step in doing so, very early in the course, I often pose leap-ahead questions interspersed with citations from studies about desired outcomes from higher education and also the particular discipline in which I am teaching. My questions tend to move from the general to more nuanced, and they introduce new information little by little to prompt students to deepen and refine their thinking. For example, I might first ask students to respond to questions like “why are you taking this class?” and “why might we choose to study environmental literature?,” for which I elicit answers by various means (shared inquiry in paired interviews, quick writing assignments, sheets passed among students or online forums).

Following a basic method of Socratic inquiry, I formulate new questions based on their answers, and with each one, I can guide students to use new information to question their own assumptions. For example, I might draw attention to the fact that the growth and expansion of ecocriticism in the United States and Europe comes at a moment of

comparative wealth and power in both regions and could be thought of as reactionary; parts of the world (most especially the tropics) previously imagined in “abundant nature” tropes by the West, are industrializing, urbanizing, and growing in economic power.

Given that context, I might ask these questions: Why might it be useful for us, in a class in the green humanities in the United States, to look closely at texts from Latin America? Why might we choose to study texts about cities and not simply “natural spaces,” like rain forests, deserts, and plains?

As we as a class explore “why” questions, usually on the first or second day of a course or unit, I pull in provocative quotes and facts to draw out deeper thinking. Often, I have students do a quick reading about what employers want in new hires, drawn from AAC&U research or a *Harvard Business Review* blog. I also ask students with smart phones or laptops to look up quick queries, like “what percentage of the population of Latin America or ‘X’ country lives in urban environments?” so that they equip themselves with facts to formulate (or reformulate) their answers. Doing so also allows me to ask questions about sources and reliability of sources, as well as to guide students to resources about which they might not be aware.

In exploring “why” questions with students, faculty should be prepared for a fair amount of improvisation, within a certain range, and I usually acknowledge to students that our exploration might feel unsettling to them and to me at first. Having done a broad reading of related texts prior to teaching the class helps me frame questions and provide information so that students –who generally have not been encouraged in k-12 education to take charge of their own learning– feel more comfortable exploring “why” questions, answers to which often increasingly acknowledge ambiguity and complexity. If

students in an English-language, introductory environmental humanities class, for example, have limited responses to the “why” questions regarding the relevance of Latin American texts in their own studies, I might point out that economic and political decisions of the United States, and to a lesser extent, Canada, have dramatic impacts on Latin America. Equipped with that knowledge, class members can begin to imagine answers that give them a foothold in the topic. As a class, we might shift our “why” questions to the political and economic context of environmental issues. Here, I might point out that cultural studies scholars like Mabel Moraña have observed that Latin American societies, at the start of the 21st century, involve “a complex and heterogeneous arrangement of social actors and political projects severely impacted by the effects of neoliberalism and globalization” (9). We might conclude class with an activity in which students articulate why the study of texts on the topic (described generally; in a list or conceptual map; or in some other form) might advance the learning outcomes that employers, or alternatively, an advocate of the value of the humanities like Martha Nussbaum, articulate as desirable.

“How” questions flow readily from exploration of the “why” questions. Students who consider the purpose of learning and can thoughtfully articulate it are more predisposed to think of how to achieve their own purposes and the collective purpose of the course. Again, my strategy for tackling “how” questions in class has often been to guide students to take personal answers to broad questions like “in what life experiences have you learned best?” and “how did that learning happen?” and apply them to the setting of our shared course. Often, because I find students to be quite honest about their own learning experiences (and in response to “why” questions, their motives), I find

asking them to take an active role in building a course plan for attaining desired learning outcomes provides me with insight about them that I would otherwise have lacked.

In my specific work in teaching Spanish in the second language acquisition (SLA) context, with a population of primarily non-native speakers in class, any course I teach will always require a design that balances progress toward proficiency (often the foremost, articulated desired student learning outcome) with work that guides students to acquire skills and competencies related more generally to the study of the humanities (communication, analysis, ability to contextualize and synthesize). Depending on proficiency level of the target student population for the course, progress toward the humanities-oriented competencies might require more scaffolding. I often ask students how they themselves can provide their own scaffolding with my help. For example, I might provide basic contextual information and ask students questions like “what do you think might help you understand this story better?,” then divide up the answers, most of which will revolve around issues of cultural context or vocabulary, and ask students to generate helpful information (like lists of locutions or background on a particular historical moment) using digital resources I share with them.

Once we tackle the “how” of achieving comprehension of language, I follow up with questions to emphasize cultural competency skills, in addition to strictly linguistic ones. My questions prompt students to consider cross-cultural comparison, for example: “How could you find out if your reading of this text (or understanding of this issue) might be different from someone reading in a border city?” Based on student responses, I might guide them to specific Twitter hash tags, for example, on topics trending in border cities or news stories available in digital media outlets. We might then move toward a

discussion of how the stance different populations take toward environmental topics is informed by their positionality and shapes collective debate and political action.



Concept Map B: Topics around Aridjis' novel

In another exercise (see Concept Map B), I emphasize how students can use their differences to improve understanding of literary works when they collaborate with others in ways that emphasize each contributor's unique strengths or background.⁴ After students do a quick writing exercise, with a purposefully basic prompt like "what is this story about?," I ask students to think about how their knowledge of their own strengths and predispositions helps them understand how they reacted to a certain text. For this exercise, students draw on their Strengths Quest results, made available to them by our institution as part of first-year orientation.⁵ Students with high empathy often comment upon the struggle of the protagonist, while more analytical students quickly draw out a moral or political message. We then might generate related topics to investigate in groups, with choices selected by students as directed by their strengths. For example, students who have "input" high on their list of strengths often enjoy following numerous leads to collect information about a topic like "megacities and the global South" while students with a strength theme like "intellectualize" are drawn to a topic like "theoretical approaches." As we conclude our discussion, often with debriefing from a collaborative,

creative activity in which students apply what they have learned, I can guide the attention of the class to noticing how different strengths might be brought together to analyze particular challenges, solve them, and potentially, rally support for change effectively.

Frequently, I dedicate the first unit of a class guiding students to explore the various ways we can answer the question “how can we achieve ‘X?’” as we study a set of texts and measure that we in fact have done so. That is, for the first unit, I set the content, explain transparently why I selected it, and as a class, we explore how we might effectively learn what we have decided we desire to learn. Following that first unit, I let students construct the rest of the units and assignments, such that we build toward a final project or product, the parameters of which I outline and guide them to develop. This practice is one of action learning, in which students try out ways to direct their own learning toward a particular desired outcome, connect close readings and discrete elements of a course plan to a “big-picture” objective, and constantly stretch toward new and more difficult goals, all in dialogue with their peers and me.

In tackling the “what” questions, such as “what should we do in class and for homework now that we’ve built this course plan?,” I prompt students to think about effective tools for analysis, discussion, debate, and collaboration as we study each discrete item they have selected for inclusion. As a matter of fact, all of the preparation work the class has done thus far primes students to apply the “why-how-what” method at the textual level to produce close readings of texts: Why is the author telling this story? Why might I be having the reaction I am experiencing to this particular text? Such questions guide students to explore the context of the moment of enunciation of the text, as well as their own preconceptions and ideas. “How” questions direct students to focus on rhetoric

and structure: How have the authors chosen to tell this story? For film, Adrian Ivakhiv poses a series of questions which can guide students toward the environmental inflections of ideology, such as “How are nonhuman animals, landscapes, and “nature” (environments and places, ecological relations, “the Earth”) portrayed and represented? How are relations between humans and nonhuman nature represented?” (22). Questions to elicit more self-reflection might include the following: How do your own ideologies and beliefs about the world become more visible to you as you articulate and analyze your reaction to this text with your peers? As you learn about the perspectives of others by participating in on-line chats or Skype sessions with conversation partners abroad or scanning trending Twitter topics related to the text?

Forestalling “what” questions until later in discussion and in formal writing assignments means students are less likely to engage in convergent and reductive analysis prematurely. Guiding “what” questions that might follow the “how” questions above could include any of the following: What does this text do? What ideology does it reveal? What is the snapshot of urban life that the work captures? What spaces do members of different social classes inhabit? What about nonhuman animals? What spaces do they share? How do they come into contact with each other? What image does the work present of urban infrastructure? Of government, other forms of social organization, “nature” and leisure spaces? If absent, why might they be absent? What brands appear in the works of fiction or film? In what context? Where does violence occur and where do the characters fear it? Is violence gendered? Does the text represent violence occurring against humans and nonhuman nature? What does “nature” represent for different characters? In the arc of the narrative? Does the text have an ethical stance? Does the text

guide you to an awareness of limits? If so, how (by what narratological, rhetorical, or other means) does it do so?

Finally, since the most important task of the green humanities (or education in general) is to point students toward connections between themselves and the world beyond the classroom, at the conclusion of a class, unit, or course, we can ask students to articulate how their own metacognitive awareness has grown. To formulate provocative questions for generating connections, the faculty member might elicit from students concepts or ideas students find applicable from studies in other disciplines or their own life experiences. Students might then reflect on how their own understanding of a concept like “moral hazard,” that is, a situation in which a person might take risks because they are unlikely to feel the consequences of them, or “externalities” has changed as they read (or saw or listened to) texts from the green humanities. Likewise, a favorite assignment of mine is to have students produce a short creative piece, in which they use comment boxes or other means, to explain why they communicated the message the way they did. These latter activities, anchored solidly in the green humanities, guide students closer toward what many popular observers say students want in their educations: relevance to “real life.”

Conclusions

Probing the complexity of texts, in interdisciplinary, collaborative ways, often leads students naturally back to the panoramic “why” questions the humanities are adept at posing (and sometimes answering). Students begin to ask challenging, analytical questions themselves, and those who already have done so, even before taking our classes, enjoy dialogue in an expanded community of learners. In such a way, students will begin to see what they have not seen before, and so will we educators. In fact, we are likely to discover again and again “how study in the humanities may shape, suggest, or even demand certain responses to the ecological challenges” (“Inaugural Call for Manuscripts,” *Green Humanities Journal*). And in the daily, mindful practice of our purpose as educators, we in the green humanities can lead our campuses in becoming what Andrew Delbanco says “a college should strive to be: an aid to reflection, a place and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others” (16).

Notes

1. Florida governor Rick Scott, for example, generated controversy in October, 2011, when he announced the state would shift funding away from liberal arts majors to STEM fields (“Florida Governor May Divert Taxes to STEM Majors”).

2. To cite an example of efforts toward more inclusive conversations in the green humanities, and the possibilities for building on them, I cite Cheryll Glotfelty’s recent review of *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies* (2012), edited by Greg Garrard. Glotfelty comments that the volume offers a “trans-Atlantic conversation about texts with a global reach” (592), an important contribution and yet one still marked by the fact that the contributors to the volume all teach in advanced, industrial nations in the northern hemisphere (the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada) .

3. According to *Harvard Business Review* blogger Karissa Thacker, action learning consists of two essential ingredients: “Participants learn genuine collaboration while tackling the task at hand. Working in real time with their colleagues on immediate problems, participants are motivated and more likely to confront inconvenient truths —if prompted. That's the second ingredient: Intervention.”

<http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/05/your_team_needs_an_interve.html>

4. My example uses personal strengths and inclinations as an example. If international students are enrolled in a class (I have few), one might alternatively ask all students to find sources from their own countries, cultures, or languages that have relevance for any of the topics to be explored.

5. Strengths Quest is a commercial product used by several hundred schools and universities to help students identify talents and to develop those talents by using the

online Clifton StrengthsFinder instrument and follow-up materials (StrengthsQuest).

Lists of strengths “themes” are available for free on the product website.

Works Cited

- Aridjis, Homero. *En quién piensas cuando haces el amor?* México, D.F.; New York: Alfaguara, 1996. Print.
- . "Keynote Lecture: The Birds, or My Life as a Writer and Environmentalist Activist." *Americas Society/Council on the Americas*. Web. 20 Aug. 2013.
- Aridjis, Homero, and Betty Ferber. *Noticias de la Tierra*. México, D.F.: Debate, 2012. Print.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities. "VALUE Rubrics." Web. 20 Aug. 2013.
- Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011. Print.
- Bennett, Douglas C. et al. "An Education for the Twenty-First Century." *Liberal Education* 98.4 (2012): 34–41. Print.
- Brown, Tim. *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Can Transform Organizations and Inspire Innovation*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009. Print.
- Cuarón, Alfonso. *Y Tu Mamá También*. 2001. Film.
- Davidson, Cathy N. *Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science Will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century*. New York: Penguin Books, 2012. Print.
- Delbanco, Andrew. *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. 2013. Print.
- Eimbcke, Fernando. *Duck Season*. 2005. Film.
- Garrard, Greg. "Nature Cures? or How to Police Analogies of Personal and Ecological Health." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19.3 (2012): 494–514. Print.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl. "Review of *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19.3 (2012): 592–93. Print.
- Green Humanities Journal*. "Inaugural CFP." Web. 20 Aug. 2013.

Guber, Peter. "The Four Truths of the Storyteller." *Harvard Business Review* (December 2007).

Web. 20 Aug. 2013.

Hart Research Associates. "It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success." *Liberal Education* 99.2 (Spring 2013): 22-29. Print.

Heath, Chip, and Dan Heath. *Switch*. New York: Crown Business, 2010.

Ivakhiv, A. "Green Film Criticism and Its Futures." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 15.2 (2008): 1-28. Print.

Koebler, Jason. "Florida Governor May Divert Taxes to STEM Majors." *US News and World Report*. Web. 20 Aug. 2013.

Lingenfelter, Paul E. "American Education Second to None? How We Must Change to Meet Twenty-First-Century Imperatives." *Liberal Education* 99.2 (2013). Print.

Lumina Foundation. "The Degree Qualifications Profile." Lumina Foundation, 2011. Print.

McMurry, Andrew, and William Major. "Introduction to Special Issue: The Function of Ecocriticism; or, Ecocriticism, What Is It Good For?" *Journal of Ecocriticism* 4.2 (2012): 1-7. Print.

Meyer, Christopher, and Julia Kirby. *Standing on the Sun How the Explosion of Capitalism Abroad Will Change Business Everywhere*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2012. Print.

Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Moraña, Mabel, and Bret Darin Gustafson. *Rethinking Intellectuals in Latin America*. Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert Pub. Corp., 2010. Print.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2012. Print.

- Pacheco, José Emilio. *Las batallas en el desierto*. México, D.F.: Ediciones Era , 2012. Print.
- Smith, William E. *The Creative Power: Transforming Ourselves, Our Organizations, and Our World*.
New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Spence, Michael. *The Next Convergence: The Future of Economic Growth in a Multispeed World*.
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. Print.
- StrengthsQuest. "About StrengthsQuest." Web. 20 Aug. 2013.
- Subcomandante Marcos. "The Fourth World War Has Begun - Le Monde Diplomatique -
English Edition." Web. 20 Aug. 2013.
- Winkelman, Mary-Ann. "Transparency in Teaching: Faculty Share Data and Improve Students'
Learning." *Liberal Education* 99.2 (Spring 2013): 48-55. Print.
- Zwilling, Martin. "Entrepreneurs Who Master Storytelling Win More." *Forbes*. Web. 20 Aug.
2013.