



The Hilltop Review

Volume 8
Issue 1 *Fall 2015*

Article 10


December 2015

Advocating for Mother Earth in the Undergraduate Classroom: Uniting Twenty-First Century Technologies, Local Resources, Art, and Activism to Explore Our Place in Nature

Christina Triezenberg Ph.D.
Grand Valley State University

Ilse A. Schweitzer VanDonkelaar
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview>

 Part of the [Environmental Education Commons](#), [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Triezenberg, Christina Ph.D. and Schweitzer VanDonkelaar, Ilse A. (2015) "Advocating for Mother Earth in the Undergraduate Classroom: Uniting Twenty-First Century Technologies, Local Resources, Art, and Activism to Explore Our Place in Nature," *The Hilltop Review*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol8/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Hilltop Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



Advocating for Mother Earth in the Undergraduate Classroom: Uniting Twenty-First Century Technologies, Local Resources, Art, and Activism to Explore Our Place in Nature

Erratum

Due to editorial error, the article titled “Advocating for Mother Earth in the Undergraduate Classroom: Uniting Twenty-First Century Technologies, Local Resources, Art, and Activism to Explore Our Place in Nature” was printed incorrectly in this issue of *The Hilltop Review*. The text printed under that title was actually an article titled “The Problem of Nomological Impossibility for Epistemic Structural Realism,” by Patrick Manzanares, and can be found in the spring 2015 issue of *The Hilltop Review*. The corrected text of “Advocating for Mother Earth in the Undergraduate Classroom: Uniting Twenty-First Century Technologies, Local Resources, Art, and Activism to Explore Our Place in Nature,” by Christina Triezenberg and Ilse Schweitzer Van Donkelaar, is printed below, and will also be reprinted in the spring 2016 issue of *The Hilltop Review*.

Editor's Note

Dear readers:

Due to editorial error, the article titled "Advocating for Mother Earth in the Undergraduate Classroom: Uniting Twenty-First Century Technologies, Local Resources, Art, and Activism to Explore Our Place in Nature" was printed incorrectly in this issue of *The Hilltop Review*. The text printed under that title was actually an article titled "The Problem of Nomological Impossibility for Epistemic Structural Realism," by Patrick Manzanares, and can be found in the spring 2015 issue of *The Hilltop Review*.

The corrected text of "Advocating for Mother Earth in the Undergraduate Classroom: Uniting Twenty-First Century Technologies, Local Resources, Art, and Activism to Explore Our Place in Nature," by Christina Triezenberg and Ilse Schweitzer Van Donkelaar, is printed below, and will also be reprinted in the spring 2016 issue of *The Hilltop Review*. Because this article has been corrected, the page numbers in this issue skip from 89-97. We apologize for this problem.

Christina A. Triezenberg and Ilse Schweitzer VanDonkelaar are alumnae of Western Michigan University's Department of English, where they both earned PhDs in English Literature. This article was originally accepted for publication in the Spring 2013 issue of *The Hilltop Review*, when they were both graduate students. Unfortunately, that issue was never published. The authors have revised the article for publication in this issue. Christina A. Triezenberg is now an adjunct professor in the Departments of English and Liberal Studies at Grand Valley State University and has accepted an assistant professorship at Morningside College; she can be reached there in care of the Department of English and Modern Languages starting in the fall of 2016. Ilse Schweitzer VanDonkelaar is a Commissioning and Technical Editor with Medieval Institute Publications, Arc-Humanities, and Amsterdam University Press and a Visiting Assistant Professor at Grand Valley State University.

I would like to personally thank Drs. Triezenberg and VanDonkelaar for their patience, and to apologize for the problems getting their article to print. Please enjoy "Advocating for Mother Earth in the Undergraduate Classroom: Uniting Twenty-First Century Technologies, Local Resources, Art, and Activism to Explore Our Place in Nature"!

Sincerely,



Rebecca Straple
Director and Editor of *The Hilltop Review*

Advocating for Mother Earth in the Undergraduate Classroom: Uniting Twenty-First Century Technologies, Local Resources, Art, and Activism to Explore Our Place in Nature

By Christina Triezenberg and Ilse Schweitzer VanDonkelaar
 Department of English
 triezech@gvsu.edu, ilse.schweitzer@arc-humanities.org

Introduction: Art and Activism -- Moving Beyond the Page and Into the World

As friends since the beginning of our doctoral studies at WMU, we had been looking for an undergraduate class to teach collaboratively, yet as an Americanist and a medievalist, we found it somewhat challenging to find a subject that would dovetail with our unique interests and academic backgrounds. Given our shared interest in the environment and our desire to create a highly interactive course that would encourage our students to view the world around them in a multitude of new and hopefully transformative ways, we decided to design a section of English 3110H (“Our Place in Nature”), which was offered jointly by the English Department and the Lee Honors College in the fall of 2010. Typically, this course is constructed as a survey of the conventional canon of American nature writing, including nineteenth-century naturalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Susan Fenimore Cooper and twentieth-century conservationists such as John Burroughs, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold. However, spurred by our desire to provide our students with a learning experience that would move beyond these more traditional explorations of literature and culture, we set about designing our course around a series of interrelated texts, activities, and assignments that would enable our students to gain an understanding of the history of humanity’s relationship with the environment. With visions of the environmental impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico fresh in our minds, we also hoped to underscore the sense of urgency we ourselves felt about human beings’ current relationship with the natural world—a sense of urgency that has only increased in the intervening years since we taught the course as environmental activists and concerned citizens around the world continue to call on their governments to address the now-incontrovertible effects of global climate change.

As educators who have benefitted tremendously from our own experiences in courses which have been taught from an interdisciplinary perspective, we instinctively sought to provide our own students with a similarly enriching and multidisciplinary experience. Most educators now agree that twenty-first-century environmental education will require cooperation between disciplines, as teachers, researchers, and administrators work toward creating sustainable practices on campus and in helping to shape citizens who understand the impact that their choices and actions have on their local and global environments. As Kirsten Allen Bartels and Kelly A. Parker argue in *Teaching Sustainability*,

courses about sustainability or courses that feature components of sustainability are found within many academic disciplines, and such disciplinary-specific approaches are necessary. But what we also need are courses about sustainability that shatter and smash through disciplinary boundaries, not merely because trans- and interdisciplinary approaches are in vogue, but because our students require them to thrive in the multiple careers that most of them will face. [...] Understanding that many of our core communal problems today are not going to be solved through the insights of one discipline, nor of any one theory, is a good starting point toward integration. (21, 34)

Thus, contemporary environmental education must not only meet the varied needs and goals of an interdisciplinary classroom but should also motivate students to think beyond classroom walls to their communities and professional futures. Answering these urgent charges required us to engage our students intellectually, emotionally, and physically with the world by entering into academic and public discussions of environmental literature and issues related to the environment and by providing them with models for sustainable activism that they could employ in their own lives in the years to come. To this end, we encouraged them to engage in lively discussions with us throughout the semester as well as to share some of their coursework, including blog posts and a personal digital-storytelling project, both online and in class. We also provided them with an opportunity to workshop creative writing projects that explored their evolving perceptions of their place in nature and to complete a more conventional research essay focused on topics with which they found a personal connection.

As we exchanged the wealth of ideas that each of us had about the directions the course might take, we also quickly decided that including the voices of a diverse group of guest speakers would complement the conversation we were hoping to have with our students over the course of the semester. We hoped our slate of speakers would broaden the scope of that discussion and provide our students with the opportunity to interact with individuals who were, in many cases, experts in their field and potential role models and mentors. With this goal in mind, we invited individuals with a wide range of experience and expertise to visit our classroom throughout the semester—from writers and filmmakers to environmental policymakers and activists—in an attempt to energize and challenge our students. As one might expect, the experience of coordinating so many guest speakers in one semester was not without its challenges. Overall, though, the presence of these talented and engaged individuals in our classroom helped to motivate and empower our students to think about and respond to the world around them and deepened our own awareness and appreciation of the kind of commitment to the environment that is very much alive and well in an era in which such commitment is vital.

In order to narrow the scope of our class and to take advantage of the wealth of resources available to us here in West Michigan, we also decided to make one of our main themes throughout the semester the importance of the local. To that end, we selected a trio of contemporary texts that explicitly underscore the importance of “living in place”: Barbara Kingsolver’s bestselling 2008 exploration of her own family’s experiment with “locavore” eating, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, Alison Swan’s 2006 essay collection *Fresh Water: Women Writing on the Great Lakes*, and Tom Springer’s 2008 homage to the wild spaces of our own beloved region, *Looking for Hickories: The Forgotten Wildness of the Rural Midwest*. Though environmental activist Bill McKibben’s 2008 anthology *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* served as our anchor text for the semester and was one to which we returned repeatedly as a touchstone for discussion and reflection, these three texts provided us with a foundation for both of the off-campus field trips (the first to the Kalamazoo Nature Center and the second to the Kalamazoo Farmers’ Market) and many of the in-class activities that eventually became the highlights of our semester and collectively underscored for our students the importance of respecting and nurturing the natural places that are closest to us, a maxim which, if applied globally, would do much to reverse and repair the damage that human beings continue to inflict on the natural world today.

Finally, as academics in training in the humanities during a period in which the value of an education grounded in these vital subjects is being increasingly questioned, we also wanted to encourage our students to understand the multitude of manners in which the environment can be studied and celebrated, as a way of underscoring the commonalities between subjects and as a way of deepening their awareness and appreciation for the arts, in particular. To this end, whenever possible, we attempted to introduce them to works of art and music whose subject matter echoed and enriched their understanding of the topics that we were discussing in class. Given the abundance of material that we were attempting to present in virtually

every 75-minute class period, we weren't able to share nearly as many works of art as we would have liked. But we were very pleased with our class' responses to the pieces that we did introduce and would wholeheartedly incorporate this element of our curriculum into any future permutations of this course we may teach. The article that follows is our attempt to share our experiences with the various components, activities, and realizations that we developed over the course of a rewarding and enriching semester.

Defining Terms

Though the McKibben anthology formed the textual foundation for our class, one of its flaws (for our purposes, anyway) was its structure, locating the start of American nature writing with Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau could certainly be heralded as the father of the American environmental writing tradition, yet our course required us to start at an earlier point, to



Ilse Schweitzer VanDonkelaar leads a class discussion of creation texts.

interrogate the foundational assumptions in Western tradition concerning humanity's relationship with the natural world. Thus, for the first full day of class, we asked students to read three cosmogonical texts—the Biblical account of Genesis, selections from the Old Norse mythological *Edda*, and a Hopi Indian creation story, an ancient creation text that was passed down orally and not

recorded until the 1950s. In preparation for our discussion, we asked our students to take a few minutes to jot down answers to the questions, “How do you define ‘nature?’” and “What do you think is humankind's relationship to nature?”

In their answers, students began to unpack words that seem to have obvious meanings—*nature*, *natural*, *unnatural*, *human*—and discussed their perceptions of where they, and we as a species, stand in relationship to nature—whether inside, outside, or above. Using these responses, we directed students' attention back to those foundational texts, looking for the origins of American and Judeo-Christian attitudes toward the natural world and discussing how texts such as these can influence or reflect the worldviews of the cultures from which they spring. For example, the Old Norse mythology emphasizes the physical transformations of the earth to its present form and the creation and exploits of the Norse pantheon of gods.

Human beings have a relatively small role in this cosmology. The Hopi mythology includes several creations and cataclysms as the world changes form, and an increasing suspicion and hostility between humans and beasts as the human race drifts ever away from the divine presence. In Genesis, however, students observed the divine commandment that humans are to have dominion over the other beasts and organisms. We also brought in

artwork, including William Blake's illustration of "The Temptation and Fall of Eve" (1808), to flesh out some of these ideas. In this portrait, as Eve bites into the fruit, nature suddenly becomes threatening to humans, with darkness and flashing lightning. Each of these texts provides evidence for a separation between humanity and nature, often connected to humanity's strained relationship to God or a creator figure. In this lesson, we sought to make students aware of deep-seated Western beliefs about the relationship of humans to the earth, to lay a foundation for our future talks about how nature is depicted in much later texts, and to encourage our students to consider their personal beliefs about their individual places—and the place of humanity as a whole—in nature, moving from the extremely local (the individual) to the global or even cosmological.

Seeing and Walking in Local Landscapes

We tried to keep this balance between the global and the local throughout the course, and one way we focused on the local was to assign readings by Michigan authors, two of whom we were fortunate to be able to bring into our classroom. Three Rivers writer Tom Springer and Saugatuck poet Alison Swan each visited our class to talk about their respective collections, *Looking for Hickories* and *Fresh Water*, as well as the process of writing personal essays and their experiences advocating for Michigan's natural environments. What we found, which was surprising to us as teachers of literature who like to focus on the text at hand, was that when we tried to direct students to talk about themes, techniques, and descriptions in the texts, they inevitably responded with their own memories of growing up in Michigan and neighboring states. We observed again and again a kind of discussion where the text became primarily a catalyst for students voicing their love of their native landscapes and their reactions to natural or human-caused change in these places. Though we were initially startled by our students' reactions and sought to encourage them to voice more critical observations about the texts we were analyzing, their personal and often deeply felt perspectives provided a natural link to the kind of activism that we wanted to discuss and encourage. For Alison Swan's visit, we paired her collection of essays on the Great Lakes with "A Fable for Tomorrow," a selection from Rachel Carson's seminal 1962 environmental work, *Silent Spring*. In her "fable," Carson posits a world devoid of birdsong, a disturbing picture delivered in a familiar literary form that implies a lesson to be learned. Moving from Carson, who published widely on American oceans and marine ecosystems in her own time, to Swan, who opens and closes her collection with a personal reflection about seeing a local beach strewn with zebra mussels, we were reminded of what could be learned by observing both large and small changes in our own local ecosystems.

Drawing connections between observing, reading, and acting, we began our talk with Alison by reading a quote she had given in an interview:

I hope the existence of this book [*Fresh Water*] will encourage writers who love the Great Lakes to write about the region. We need the stories; they help us connect. When we connect, it's easier to care, and when we care, it's easier to act. Passivity is the most destructive, if understandable, habit of contemporary Americans. (Swan and Dempsey, March 6, 2006)

Here, Swan eloquently encapsulates one of the core principles of our class (and, really, any class in the humanities)—the role of literature and cultural material in helping people to connect to each other, to their society, and to the physical environment around them, and to get them to care enough that they become active citizens, wherever they may be. Following Swan's suggestion, we broke out of our passive places in the classroom and took our students "into the wild" to encourage them to engage actively with the natural world around them and to make connections between what we had been reading and discussing in class and the vital natural spaces closest to us.

One of the first books that we had assigned in the course was Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*, a hilarious account of his attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail, interwoven with his praise and condemnation of American environmental policy and our nation's attitudes toward our natural resources. We paired Bryson with some familiar names in environmental writing—notably Thoreau and Burroughs—to create a unit on “Walking and Noticing” the world around us. To encourage students to become the “keen-eyed observer[s]” (146) to which Burroughs refers in his essay “The Art of Seeing Things,” we visited the Kalamazoo Nature Center, where students learned about the Center's dedication to ecologist Aldo Leopold's mission of preservation and stewardship, took a tour through a recreated Midwestern prairie, observed migratory birds being tagged, and finished the morning with a quiet stroll through the woods. On what turned out to be a picturesque and almost perfect October day, our students exhibited a near-giddiness as they wandered through the Center and along the trails. Enchanted by this rare opportunity to walk, sit, talk, laugh, and simply observe what was under the sun instead of sitting in a classroom for our standard allotment of time, many of our students expressed a wish to stay longer, so that they might have time to wander, take pictures, or merely sit in a field and do some reflective writing. For us, this underscored our innate need to be connected to the natural world and its calming and restorative effects, as well as the impact of learning that takes place outside the classroom, since our visit to the KNC eventually became one of the activities that our students most enjoyed and remembered fondly as the semester came to a close.



Students visit the Kalamazoo Nature Center and enjoy a nature walk led by guide Elizabeth Rochow.

Following this experience, we encouraged our students to write about their outing on their personal blogs that they had created for our class. This outing was the first of several that we planned, and it's an example of a different mode of learning—place-based and individually-centered—that we felt would appeal to students on a new level as well as get them interested and

involved in the resources available to them in their home communities.

Eating in Place

As part of our focus on the local, we also decided to introduce our students to a way of living and eating that has been growing in popularity in the United States, and in agriculturally diverse West Michigan, over the course of the past decade: the local food movement. Using Barbara Kingsolver's essay “Knowing Our Place,” which was one of the selections in our McKibben text, and her bestselling exploration of her own family's year-long experiment

with growing and harvesting their own food, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, as springboards for our discussion, we encouraged our students to think about their own relationships with the places in which they lived and to consider how their food choices affected those places, as well as the larger environments around them. In both of these texts, the Appalachian-born Kingsolver does an extraordinary job of emphasizing the solace and peace of mind she gains from living and working in the beautiful rural region her ancestors have inhabited for centuries and of her “unspeakable sadness” at the burgeoning disconnection she sees between humanity as a whole and the natural world, thanks to human beings’ increasingly urban existence (“Knowing Our Place” 945).

Having spent most of her adult life living in Tucson, Arizona, a place where “[virtually] every unit of food consumed [...] moves into town in a refrigerated module from somewhere far away [...] and where every] ounce of the city’s drinking, washing, and goldfish-bowl-filling water is pumped from a nonrenewable resource—a fossil aquifer that is dropping so fast, sometimes the ground crumbles” (*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* 3), Kingsolver makes a compelling case for the reasons why she and her family decided to return to rural Virginia, “to live in a place that could feed us” (3), and for the ways in which Americans’ almost willful ignorance about where their food comes from have helped to imperil the health of our planet and ourselves. In one of the most unsettling essays in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, a piece called “Oily Food,” Kingsolver’s biologist husband Steven L. Hopp underscores the impact of Americans’ almost nonchalant penchant for consuming out-of-season foods upon the average distance our food must travel before it reaches our plates—a staggering 1,500 miles per food item—and the shocking amount of fossil fuels that are consumed as a result. According to Hopp, “If every U.S. citizen ate just one meal a week (any meal) composed of locally and organically raised meats and produce, we would reduce our country’s oil consumption by over 1.1 million barrels of oil *every week*” (qtd. in Kingsolver 5), a statistic that would hopefully motivate even the least engaged of American citizens to reconsider his or her food choices.

We encouraged our students to think about the long-term ramifications of this type of eating—on our environment, our economy, and ourselves—and of the benefits of eating foods that are locally produced, which require less packaging, preservatives, and transport, which help to sustain the local economies of which we are a part, and which, more often than not, offer greater health benefits to us physically. To help our students make a direct and meaningful connection with these ideas, we divided them into groups and embarked on what would become our second field trip—to the Kalamazoo Farmers’ Market. Armed with a budget of \$20 per group and instructions to purchase “locally grown, seasonally appropriate” foods with which they could create two dishes to share at a potluck luncheon two days later, our students arrived eager to interact with the local farmers who had brought their produce to market that chilly Tuesday in mid-October. Though it was late in the season and the farmers’ market was not nearly as crowded with either farmers or shoppers as it might have been in midsummer, our students were delighted to make their modest purchases and to mingle with the other shoppers and each other. They frequently engaged in conversations with the growers, who seemed both startled and amused by their questions about how to prepare late-season eggplant or squash or how to preserve flowers and herbs.

Our trip to the farmers’ market was fun and informative, but it was a precursor to an even more engaging event the following class period, when we and our students gathered in the lounge of the Lee Honors College to share the fruits of their culinary labors and to view and discuss the West Michigan-focused documentary *Eating in Place*. Produced by the then-



Our students visit the Kalamazoo Farmers' Market in October 2010.

president of the Humanities Council of Grand Rapids, Nurya Love Parish, and written and edited by former ABC News producer Ruth Stein, both of whom we were fortunate to have visit with us that afternoon, *Eating in Place* seeks to trace the origins of the West Michigan local food movement. The documentary also introduces its viewers to many of the key figures who have helped the movement to flourish in recent years, from the

growers themselves to the manager of the Fulton Street Farmers' Market in Grand Rapids and the owner of Meijer Foods, whose chain of grocery stores strives to support local growers by making their products more widely available to the public. After enjoying a delicious and varied potluck meal made up of the fresh ingredients they had purchased the class period before, our students, and the visiting professors and students who joined us that day, were treated to a lively discussion with us and our guest speakers about the roles that each of us can play in helping to sustain ourselves and our local economies by eating locally produced foods. We were somewhat startled to realize, as our conversation evolved, that this idea was not as novel as we had expected to our late-teen and early-twenty-something students, a number of whom came from farming backgrounds and all of whom readily acknowledged the benefits of “eating in place,” but our students’ receptiveness to the ideas we discussed—and the relative ease with which they transformed their late-season farmers’ market purchases into a wonderful variety of palatable dishes—helped to underscore the obvious benefits of this type of eating, for us and our planet.



Our students and guests enjoy a locally-produced potluck meal and discuss the documentary *Eating in Place* in the Lee Honors College lounge.

Blogging and Digital Storytelling

Given the postsecondary focus on students' development of twenty-first-century technological skills, we also wanted to include some projects that would allow our class to develop and polish their writing skills using technology that would enable them to share their work with a broader audience. To this end, we challenged our students with three interrelated projects that would build on their work from one project to the next and that would employ different kinds of writing and presentation skills: a personal blog, a work of creative writing that they would generate during a two-day writers' workshop (ideally using one of their blog posts as a starting point), and a digital story that would represent the culmination of all of their writing and thinking about the world around them that semester. Since each of these projects would probably be worthy of an essay in and of itself, we have decided to focus our attention here on the blogging assignment, since it was the only semester-long project with which our students were engaged and since it is also a project that could be easily duplicated by any instructor regardless of his or her discipline.

As one of the primary objectives of our course was to encourage our students to become more aware of the world around them, we asked them to create and maintain personal blogs, or online journals, in which they could record their reactions to texts and class discussions, as well as their evolving perceptions of their own place in nature. Though most of our students expressed a real anxiety about the prospect of posting their writing in such a public venue, we reassured them that we, too, had experienced similar anxieties but that these fears had lessened as we became more confident of our own writing and took ownership of our online personas and the information we chose to share with our (admittedly unknown) readers. Modeling the kind of online writing we were looking for on a class blog that we maintained as instructors, we encouraged our students to write about any and all aspects of the environment and their observations about the natural world around them, which resulted in some very moving responses, particularly in students' final blog posts, in which we asked them to reflect on what they had learned over the course of the semester and taken from the class as a whole. In reviewing those responses now, two strike us as being worth sharing, for they truly

underscore the outcomes that we had hoped for when we first sat down to design the class earlier that year. The first, written by a then-graduating senior, and the only non-honors student in our class, is one that any teacher would be delighted to read at the end of a long and labor-intensive semester like ours:

English 3110-Our Place in Nature is a course that should be offered to all students at Western Michigan University. This is the kind of class that can make you a better reader, writer, thinker, and a more environmentally conscious person. This could be the class that reaches out and breaks into people's consciousness about what they are doing to our planet. This could be the class that gets a person into recycling, an activist role, and even gets a group of people to care more about saving a tree. This class taught me so much, and I am glad that I could be negotiated into the course. It was a real joy, and I enjoyed going to every class.

However, the second, written by one of our most deeply engaged freshman, underscores one of the main themes that we had hoped to convey to all of our students throughout the semester:

Finishing up the book *Looking for Hickories*, written by Tom Springer, I found one of my favorite quotes that will stick with me long after this class is over. [...] It almost sums up all I want out of life and what I have learned from this class. I am leaving Our Place in Nature as a more well-rounded individual from all of the different views and experiences that I have been exposed to, and this quote is going to help me continue to positively grow and learn what I want from nature. Not only do I hope that I will be able to figure my life out and experience all the world has to offer, but I hope that I will find a way to give back and help nature. It is also important to me to help others experience nature and learn to live in harmony and love it for what it has to offer. This quote profoundly swayed how I think I will live out my life. My favorite quote award for this class goes out to Tom Springer, who put it best when he said, 'May the treasures we have at hand—in a world so filled with real need—always be enough.' (157)

May they be enough indeed.

Handling the Challenges

For the most part, as we reflect on the variety of activities and events that comprised this whirlwind semester of ours, we remain pleased with how most of our course evolved. However, the semester was not without its challenges, one of which was not immediately clear to us until the class was well under way. Though our students that semester were wonderful and a delight to work with, we did not anticipate that most of them would be incoming freshmen still learning to navigate their first semester as undergrads, a reality that became clearer to us when a few of our students would routinely come to class unprepared or bleary-eyed from all-night confabs with their roommates. We knew we were planning an ambitious class, but we were frequently reminded that freshman-level students needed more time to read, digest, process, and ask questions about assignments, which was sometimes frustrating, given how tightly we had scheduled the course and how eager we were to jump into textual analysis and more complex discourse. Five years after the fact, we can now laugh about this, but at the time, we often felt frustrated and perhaps overly anxious about the amount of time that these protracted logistical discussions required.

Another issue we had not anticipated also stemmed from the youth and inexperience of our students that semester. Accustomed to the kind of higher-level reading and discussion

skills that students typically acquire over time and are able to employ as they are nearing the end of their university experience, we found that many of our students were at times reluctant to engage critically with the texts we were introducing, often defaulting to the kinds of personal reflections we observed when they discussed non-fiction texts. As former honors students ourselves and instructors with experience working with talented-and-gifted students at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, we adapted our discussion methods in class to encourage our students to look more critically at the texts we were reading, even though we recognized that not all of our students would become as adept as others at this type of analysis, particularly in a general education course. Though, like most teachers, we both delight in working with such highly motivated and able students, we also noted, both in this class and in other honors courses we have taught, a frequent disconnection between students' expectations about the grades they will earn and the quality of the work they actually produce. While largely well prepared and capable of submitting often impressive work, a number of our students came to class with higher expectations regarding the grades they would receive and lower expectations regarding the amount of time and effort they would have to devote to their studies in order to earn those grades. Walking into a course with the scope and pace of assignments that we designed was no doubt a wake-up call for a number of them. We are thrilled to report that most of them rose to the occasion.

Another of the challenges we encountered is the significant amount of time and effort that was required to coordinate so many guest speakers and events in a single semester. Though neither of us was a novice at event planning, the sheer volume of emailing and phone correspondence that was required to assemble our lineup of visitors ended up being quite time consuming. Beyond the time required to coordinate our guests' visits and the logistics of getting them parking passes and escorting them around campus, we also didn't want to become stage managers for an increasing cast of visiting characters. While we were delighted to have such a variety of speakers, we realized that we needed to remain in control in order to



Three Rivers author Tom Springer visits our class to talk about his essay collection, *Looking for Hickories*.

shape our classroom discussions according to our vision of the class. We also were reminded that students, particularly incoming freshmen who were still finding their own voices in the classroom, needed some time to acclimate to the varying personalities of our speakers. Our two local writers, despite their radically different personalities, ended up being two of our most successful visitors. The soft-spoken Alison Swan, whose writing we were already smitten with, ended up being so warm and approachable

that her visit to our classroom resulted in one of our most rewarding and fruitful discussions, with students eagerly volunteering to add their voices to our conversation, while the towering Tom Springer's boundless energy and infectious good humor completely charmed our class, who happily lined up after our time together had come to a close to have Tom sign copies of their books and give them additional tips on how to begin writing careers of their own. Not all of our speakers connected with our students in such an immediate and personal way, but we

realize now that a certain amount of serendipity is always involved when inviting others into one's classroom, and we are tremendously grateful for the energy and expertise all of our speakers added to the dynamic discussion we were able to have with our students that semester. Our class simply wouldn't have been the same without them, and we look forward to working with many of them again in the years to come.

Final Thoughts

Though we would be the first to admit that our course was probably overly ambitious, we really wouldn't have done too many things differently over the course of this first semester. As we had intended they would, all of our activities, field trips, and events, including our cadre of guest speakers, dovetailed into one another well, offering our students a pedagogically sound and intellectually challenging educational experience that will probably rank as one of the most unique of their undergraduate years.

We ended our class with Timothy Egan's book, *The Worst Hard Time*, an account of the greatest environmental catastrophe this country has ever seen, the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Our students complained that this was far too much of a downer on which to end the semester, and to be fair, the book does provide an emotionally wrenching but well-researched chronicle of the mismanagement of resources, labor, and land that resulted in natural devastation on what must have seemed an apocalyptic scope to the residents of the American Plains. This account of the creation of an American wasteland served as a warning and a wake-up call for a class concerned with humanity's place in and impact upon the natural world, however, and we were able to come full circle with our curriculum, as the creation texts with which we began our discussions also contain apocalyptic visions of the world's end. And, perhaps most importantly, what we sought to emphasize throughout this course was that these visions of environmental ruin are *not* inevitable; that our students, if informed and passionate enough, could use activism, purchasing power, community involvement, and creativity to write a *new* future for their local landscapes and for the global community.

We learned a tremendous amount about environmental issues and about teaching throughout this exciting semester—information that we hope, ultimately, to share in a textbook focused on many of the pedagogical strategies that we employed with the help and hard work of the honors students with whom we were privileged to work. Given the urgency of our topic, we had expected to be able to find a wealth of material on teaching environmental literature at the college level and strategies for making these texts relevant to students' concerns and values in their day-to-day lives. However, a survey of recent pedagogical scholarship reveals that, while environmental education has become increasingly a part of many pre-K and K-12 programs over the course of the past several decades and students at post-secondary institutions have seen a dramatic increase in environmental education programs themselves within the past decade, colleges and universities in general have been slow to incorporate environmental education as a core component of their undergraduate curricula. Moreover, what seems to be conspicuously lacking in environmental education, particularly when it is taught in humanities courses at this level, is the activist component that links classroom readings, activities, and discussions to the realities of the wider world—something which we viewed as being critical to the success of our own course. In our experience as college instructors, we have found that most undergraduate students are well aware of the challenges facing our planet and are looking for ways to channel their concerns about the environment into sustainable actions. Their pre-K and K-12 teachers have done an admirable job of instilling in most of them a deep sense of environmental empathy and urgency. It is our obligation, as they enter this critical stage in their development as global citizens, to provide them with new and more expansive ways of looking at the world and with viable avenues of empowerment.

Acknowledgments

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the huge debt of gratitude that we owe to our then-department chair, Dr. Richard Utz, and the recently retired Dean of the Lee Honors College, Dr. Nick Andreadis, whose enthusiasm, encouragement, and financial support of our class made so many of the units, field trips, and classroom visits we have outlined here possible. We are also tremendously grateful to our friend and colleague, Dr. Gwen Tarbox, who provided us with a wealth of ideas about ways in which we might enrich our class throughout the semester, including tips on how to organize our class website, and who also took the time to gather our students' feedback about this very experimental course at the end of the term. Our class wouldn't have been nearly as dynamic without the contributions of our wonderful guest speakers: Pen Campbell, Alison Swan, Dave Dempsey, Tom Springer, Nurya Love Parish, Ruth Stein, Kate Dernocoeur, Christoph Irmscher, Bill Davis, and Geoff Kempter, who, for little to no compensation and the promise of lunch and good conversation with us after their visits to our classroom, took time out of their own busy schedules to come share their love of and concern for the natural world with our students, for which we remain very thankful. We had a wonderful time teaching this class and hope that other graduate students, in departments throughout our university, will be similarly empowered to experiment with what is possible within the classroom—and beyond it—in the future.

References

- Hopp, Steven. "Oily Food." In Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007. p. 5. Print.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007. Print.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. "Knowing Our Place." In Bill McKibben, ed., *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*. New York: Library of America, 2008. Pp. 939-947. Print.
- Springer, Tom. *Looking for Hickories: The Forgotten Wildness of the Rural Midwest*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008. Print.
- Swan, Alison and Dave Dempsey. "Interviews: Interview of Alison Swan by Dave Dempsey, March 6, 2006." *Poet and Writer Alison Swan's Home Page*. Alison Swan, n.d. Web. 14 June 2013.
- Teaching Sustainability: Teaching Sustainably*. Eds. Kirsten Allen Bartels and Kelly A. Parker. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2011. Print.

Texts Used for Course

- Bryson, Bill. *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*. New York: Anchor, 2006. Print.
- Egan, Timothy. *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*. New York: Mariner Books, 2006. Print.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. Print.
- McKibben, Bill, Ed. *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2008. Print.
- Springer, Thomas. *Looking for Hickories: The Forgotten Wildness of the Rural Midwest*. Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 2008. Print.
- Swan, Alison. *Fresh Water: Women Writing on the Great Lakes*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2006. Print.