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## Ethics in the Field: Notes on Making Environmental Ethics More Inclusive

Charles W. Wright

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, cwright@csbsju.edu*

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# **Ethics in the Field: Notes on Making Environmental Ethics More Inclusive**

## **Abstract**

Students enrolled in my PHIL 322: Environmental Ethics should finish the semester with deep ethical reservations about the way of life they have taken for granted for most of their lives and with a measure of resolve to change some of their habits and life expectations. This essay first discusses how pursuit of these pedagogical goals already has resulted in curricular changes in the direction of greater inclusivity. I then review compelling reasons for further changes brought forcefully to my attention during my participation in the May 2016 Mellon Grant sponsored workshop on inclusive pedagogy, led by philosophy Prof. David Concepción. The curricular changes prompted by this workshop, I then show, brought about a transformation in the fundamental ethical issues examined in the class, which, in turn, led to the development of a field experience requirement. After a review of class members' reflections on the effectiveness of their time in the field as a learning experience, I finish the essay with some reflections on how I might more effectively assess the learning fostered by this requirement.

## **Keywords**

Inclusive pedagogy, teaching environmental ethics, experiential learning, transformative learning

## **Introduction**

At their inception institutions of higher education in the United States had a formative purpose.<sup>1</sup> Over the past century and a half the business of fostering the development of students' character has gradually been abandoned

at our nation's leading universities in favor of the pursuit of disciplinary knowledge.<sup>2</sup> To an extent, liberal arts colleges remain an exception to this trend, particularly those institutions still closely associated with a particular faith tradition. For that reason it is a blessing for me to be able to teach at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University because I have felt myself free to pursue such formative goals in my classes.

The particular class I will be discussing in this essay is Environmental Ethics. My goals in it are to make my students uncomfortable with some basic values, assumptions, and priorities that they never had thought to question; to encourage them to reflect deeply on whether they can endorse in good conscience the ethical priorities embodied in the way of life they have for most of their lives taken for granted; and to prompt them to consider whether there are any habits, expectations, or life practices that they may need to change. These goals guide my selection of curricular materials and pedagogical techniques.

In what follows I would like to share how the curriculum and pedagogy of my Environmental Ethics class has evolved as a result of these teaching goals and how my participation in a two-day workshop in May 2016 on inclusive pedagogy led by Prof. David Concepción accelerated this process. After first reviewing some preliminary steps I have taken to make the curriculum of the class more inclusive, I will then share my reasons for joining the "Mellon Cohort." I will then show how curricular changes made in an effort to make the curriculum yet more inclusive ended up changing the basic themes investigated in the class. The biggest innovation in the class arising from this workshop was the introduction of a field experience requirement. In addition to the details of this requirement, I will share what I learned from student reflections on their experiences and finish with some reflections of my own on the future directions for this requirement.

### **Initial Steps toward Inclusive Curriculum**

Environmental Ethics satisfies the Ethics Seminar requirement for the Common Curriculum at CSB/SJU. Though designated an "advanced,"

300-level course, it is populated almost entirely by students for whom this will be the first and only philosophy class during their academic careers. Further, since the students are all third- and fourth-year students who have already declared a major and who will be completing their studies in one to three additional semesters, there is little reason to expect that the class will serve to recruit students to major or minor in philosophy. Additionally, as an Ethics Seminar the class is meant to provide meaningful insights into current ethical problems facing contemporary societies. “Meaningful insights” is not the language that we will find in the document endorsed by the Joint Faculty Assembly<sup>3</sup>, but that is my general interpretation of the institutional learning goals.

These three factors have already pushed the class in the direction of a more inclusive curriculum, where “inclusive” should in this instance be understood to be a curriculum that appeals to as broad a range of student backgrounds and interests as possible. For this class, in other words, I have concluded that it makes little sense to have a course curriculum that is configured to serve or attract students with an interest in philosophy. Instead, the curriculum should serve and be attractive to students with little or no particular interest in philosophy.

The outcome of trying to develop a curriculum that is more inclusive in this sense has been that I have progressively deemphasized mainstream, academic writing by professional philosophers. Environmental Ethics is a late 20th century development, created largely by members of the academy, writing for other members of the academy, seeking to identify and correct the anthropocentric bias of the received historical canon of Western philosophy. The particular problems that academic philosophers are interested in tend to be conceptually abstruse, presented in dense, dry, and technical prose, and—most worrisome for me—address issues that are remote from students’ own concerns and experiences.

It might be objected that these problems only arise because I insist on using primary source materials. If instead I was to use a textbook written specifically for undergraduates—of which there are many—the problems

of inaccessible prose would largely be resolved. There is some truth to this, but the difficulty I am concerned with is not so easily resolved. It can be illustrated with an example.

Consider this question: Why shouldn't a big chunk of the St. John's Arboretum be converted to an amusement park or some kind of vacation resort? Economically speaking, it would be a highly efficient use of resources that would likely eliminate some financial difficulties that SJU has recently experienced. (For the purposes of the thought experiment, let's just ignore the little issue of who owns the Arboretum.) There are lots of reasons not to do this, of course. The Arboretum is beautiful. It has an interesting and instructive history. It serves important educational purposes. The labor of generations of monks gave it shape. We sense that there is something ethically significant about the place that deserves our concern and protection. These are all good reasons. Turn philosophers loose on these ideas, though, and you end up with contending theories of natural beauty, disputes about whether and why historical artifacts (which the Arboretum is) are valuable, ingenious rational justifications for different varieties of intrinsic value that can be embodied in living systems, and so on.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such intellectual exercises, of course. And they are great fun for academic philosophers. But most students—except for the few philosophically minded ones—do not much care about these kinds of subtle conceptual investigations. The students I will work with in my Environmental Ethics classes will (mostly) want to protect the Arboretum because they care about it. They feel personally attached to it. I can give them a vocabulary to help them be more articulate about these feelings—intrinsic value, instrumental value, moral considerability, and so on—but they are not going to be much moved or inspired by debates about the contending systems of philosophical thought that try to provide a final rational justification for such concepts.<sup>4</sup> Most students will just want to protect the Arboretum. They would feel ethically outraged by such a course of action. So even if the concepts and arguments of mainstream environmental ethicists can be offered to students in a linguistically simplified form, that still does not mean that such material will matter at all to them.

To return to the theme of inclusiveness—my conviction is that for the students I will work with in this class, writing by mainstream, academic philosophers would be *exclusive*. Only a few people with minds and temperaments that happen to incline toward abstract conceptual thought will, so to speak, find themselves in such a curriculum. An *inclusive* curriculum will be one that allows as many students in the class as possible to engage in the ethical reflection that is the goal of their learning. Ironically, a less academically philosophical curriculum may in certain circumstances better enable students to engage in authentically philosophical inquiry.

Another objection to my approach might go as follows. Grappling with nuanced debates between representatives of rival philosophical theories provides necessary, though perhaps unpleasant, mental training. After all, this is one of the learning goals for the Philosophy Department—learning to take pleasure in the struggle with difficult ideas.<sup>5</sup> So it might well be the case that I should have my students grapple with such theories and debates simply because it is good for them. There will be no real development of their intellectual capacities, the argument goes, without the painful struggle that comes with working through conceptual confusion. This is a popular stance among many members of the academy. And I think that in some circumstances this is all to the good—when the business of the class, for instance, is rigorous intellectual training, rather than fostering deep ethical reflection.<sup>6</sup>

Having been socialized by the academy, I have in the past subjected my Environmental Ethics students to just such a regime. For the most part, when I have, they have dutifully struggled with the texts. The evidence from their writing suggests, though, that most of them were simply confused. Few were able to successfully employ the arguments and concepts that academic philosophers work with to *engage in their own thinking*. Nearly their entire effort went into deciphering what the ideas and arguments in the texts actually amounted to, and that with limited success. What most of the students were not able to do, in other words, was to use these complex philosophical ideas to gain meaningful insight into ethical problems concerning the impact of human activities on the well-being of the earth's living systems that matter to *them*.

So I have concluded that, to the extent my curriculum in this class emphasized mainstream literature from the academic discipline of Environmental Ethics, I failed to provide my students with the curricular tools that would allow them to grapple with the kinds of issues that mattered to them. In effect, the use of such literature excluded most students from the learning opportunity that the class was meant to offer. An inclusive curriculum—inclusive in the sense that it made a significant philosophical learning opportunity available to as many people in the class as possible—would require unconventional approaches to philosophy.

In these last few paragraphs I have emphasized that the curriculum needs to be meaningful to the students, that the ethical concerns we address need to matter above all to them (as opposed, say, to myself or to the academic discipline of environmental ethics). Now, why should I place such stock in what matters to my students? Aren't they still students, after all, because they do not yet entirely know what matters in the world? While there is certainly truth in this concern, my experience, as well as a lot of pedagogical research, suggests that the issues my students are interested in—the ones that will give rise to insights that will stick with them after they have left the class—are issues that emerge after deep reflection on their own lives, experiences, hopes, and aspirations.<sup>7</sup>

### **Why Join the Mellon Grant Cohort?**

My interest in the Mellon Grant sponsored workshops and reading groups on inclusive pedagogy is rooted in three separate but related concerns. The first is the Eurocentric and patriarchal character of philosophy as a discipline. That Western philosophy is currently and has for its entire modern history been dominated by males of European descent is now simply an acknowledged reality—more troubling to some than to others in the discipline. More contentious, though, is the question of what this demographic reality means for the knowledge and insights produced by the discipline. I tend to think that insofar as philosophers have occupied a particular gendered, racial, and class position for the past several centuries, the ideas they have developed

must reflect that position. And if philosophy—as a human endeavor—aspires to insights and understandings that have some plausible claim to universal validity, then it is vital that the discipline becomes more diverse, that current philosophers begin to take non-Western and pre-modern perspectives (to name just two kinds) seriously as sources of knowledge and insight, and that teachers of philosophy incorporate perspectives from outside the professionally recognized philosophical canon in their classes. As a teacher I hoped that the Mellon Grant sponsored workshops and reading groups would give me some support in my effort to develop greater curricular diversity.

Jon McGee is the second reason for my interest. Since I have been teaching at these institutions he has directed the attention of faculty and institutional leadership toward the changing demographics of the student population emerging from high schools in the Upper Midwest as well as throughout the nation. The white, middle class demographic that has been the traditional mainstay of the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University is shrinking, while the population of lower income students of color is rapidly growing. According to the Pew Research Center, for instance, the U.S. Department of Education projected 2014 as the first year in which there would be more children of color than white children enrolled in the nation's Kindergarten classes.<sup>8</sup> Consistent with these figures, McGee informs us that according to projections by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, "The number of white high school graduates will drop by more than eight percent over the ten year period [2013-2023] ... while the number of graduates of color will collectively rise by nearly 19 percent."<sup>9</sup> This demographic trend is already driving recruitment policies at St. Ben's and St. John's. McGee tells us that in Fall 2005 the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University "together enrolled 53 new entering students of color," which amounted to less than 5% of that year's entering cohort.<sup>10</sup> In 2010 American students of color as a proportion of the first year cohort at St. John's increased to 10.0%, and then again to 14.4% in 2015. The comparable change during that period at St. Ben's was from 9.6% in 2011 to 14.4% in 2015.<sup>11</sup>



One factor, among many, shown by educational research to support academic success among students of color is for them to find people like themselves represented in the curriculum they study.<sup>12</sup> This condition is likely to be particularly true for the humanities, since disciplines such as history, literature, languages, philosophy, and theology purport to illuminate the human condition. While there is little I can do about being a white and male representative of the academy in the classes I teach, I can make it my responsibility to diversify what I do in the classroom in such a way that, at least to some extent, students of color (as well as women) find themselves reflected in the material we study and supported in the pedagogical strategies I employ. The Mellon Grant sponsored workshops and reading groups on inclusive pedagogy were, to me, an obvious opportunity to augment my capacity to fulfill this responsibility.

Finally, my aspiration to provide a transformative experience for students in my classes also prompted me to sign on with the Mellon Cohort because more inclusive pedagogy promised to be of benefit for our mainstream white students as well. I can imagine that this might be true in many ways, but for me the key issue is a matter of perspective-taking. Whether it is a matter of ethical or political deliberation, the capacity to understand the perspective of individuals and groups from backgrounds significantly different than one's own is a fundamental condition for the possibility of achieving mutual understanding. One of the characteristic features of white experience in the United States is our comfortable assumption that our own life experiences and perspectives are normative and the accompanying supposition that people of every racial, ethnic, gender, or class background will experience and view the world in the same way we do. To learn about the profoundly different life experiences and world perspectives of people from other circumstances is, I think, a vital step toward ethical maturity, civic responsibility, and—to a certain extent—professional success. In other words, by incorporating diverse perspectives into my curriculum and by developing pedagogical skills that allow me to better facilitate learning through these perspectives I will benefit mainstream white students as well as students of color.

## Further Steps toward a More Inclusive Curriculum

I already have mentioned how the work of environmental ethics professionals tends to be inaccessible to most students in both concept and execution. There are two further features of such academic philosophy that, in my view, impedes its effectiveness as teaching material for this class: its reliance on argument and its secular character. First, arguments. Philosophy proceeds largely through closely reasoned argument and conceptual analysis. In itself there is nothing wrong with working in this fashion—indeed, there is much to recommend about reasonable argument and analysis as modes of discovery. But it is also the case that for the vast majority of human beings reasoned argument and conceptual analysis have a limited motivational effect—a feature of human psychology that has been amply documented by moral and social psychologists and cognitive scientists.<sup>13</sup> People are rarely *argued* into changing their minds about their ethical convictions, life priorities, religious beliefs, and so forth.

My goal in Environmental Ethics is to get students to see their inherited values, assumptions, and priorities in a new light and possibly even to encourage changes in their behavior. If I proceed according to the standard model of curriculum development for a philosophy class, I would try to do this with the assistance of carefully reasoned, conceptually abstract, and (for the students) personally remote secular philosophical arguments. Certainly I can make students work with these intellectual tools—but I am not sure that these are the words and ideas that would reach into their hearts. To be sure, there is a certain subset of the student population that find such a scholarly approach to be engaging, even transformative. (Such people tend to be vastly overrepresented in the academy, as it happens.) Curriculum and pedagogy suited to just this population, of course, would be inappropriately exclusive of the rest—the majority, as it happens.

By contrast to the standard model of philosophical pedagogy, I could instead try to adopt more inclusive texts—ones that address issues that students care about, written by recognizable authorities, in accessible

language, and articulated within the framework of religious faith traditions that are familiar and, for a great many students, personally significant. For that reason an inclusive curriculum in Environmental Ethics needs to be mindful that CSB/SJU are Catholic Benedictine institutions. Further, 83% of the students identify themselves as Christians (54% Catholic, 13% Lutheran, 16% other Christian). This is the first set of reasons why it makes good sense to include Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si* in the course readings.

Further reason to include this text is that philosophers are, by and large, secular materialists—particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries. Environmental ethicists tend to be somewhat less dogmatic in their rejection of religious teachings, but still, as philosophers, there is a shared supposition that basic tenets of religious belief are a matter of rationally unwarranted dogma. But since a significant portion of students accept these religious doctrines, an argument framed in these terms will have greater cognitive appeal to them. Thus Pope Francis's religiously based arguments for conversion to *ecological* Christianity will, at these institutions, have a greater capacity to catch students' attention than, say, deep ecology. I am pretty sure that his insistence that authentic Christian ethical practice requires a transformed relationship both with the earth's living systems as well as with the world's poor and marginalized human communities will possess greater power to encourage students' self-reflection than mainstream environmental ethical writing.

A second step toward a more inclusive curriculum was the addition of indigenous voices, in this instance through a text titled *Original Instructions*, a collection of speeches given over a couple of decades at the annual Bioneers Conference<sup>14</sup> by leaders of Indigenous communities in North and South America, as well as from Africa. Students had been prepared for these texts by their encounter with Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* earlier in the semester. This text has enduring influence because it highlights the ethical significance of the *interrelation* of humans and the natural world. Students are attracted to Leopold's thinking, but are troubled by the question of whether his idea of a land ethic can be practiced more generally, instead of just by uniquely gifted individuals (like Leopold himself). This is where

the indigenous teachings step in, offering students fuller insight into what it means to actually live according to the land ethic. The indigenous conception of a *kincentric* relation between humans regards the land, animals, and the rest of creation, human and non-human, as being equally significant parts of one great family. This perspective resonates strongly with Leopold's land ethic, but adds the further dimension of having been the ethical perspective that informed the way of life of *entire nations*, not just one individual. Students are impressed by the testimony of people who continue their struggle to live in harmony with their non-human kin despite having suffered generations of genocidal violence and discrimination.

Indigenous voices also make a vital contribution to the goals for the course discussed above. Their stories provide a kind of mirror turned back onto dominant white culture—one that reflects the legacies of racism and colonialism at the root not only of the devaluation and destruction of Indigenous cultures but also in the ruthless exploitation of their traditional lands. The mirror also reflects the complicity of Christianity—its teachings, missionaries, and assimilationist policies—with this legacy. Students have been prepared for this profound inversion of perspectives by the curriculum leading up to *Original Instructions*. The indigenous voices enable students to see that their lives of material abundance not only are based on an exploitative attitude toward the earth and its living systems, but also have roots in the devaluation and destruction of communities of people whose life ways embodied deep respect for creation.

A final step toward inclusiveness was to try to ensure that a greater portion of the curriculum consisted of writing by women. This introduced a kind of paradox. In a standard Environmental Ethics curriculum the inclusion of women's perspectives most often takes the form of ecofeminist philosophy, which develops a critical assessment of the patriarchal presuppositions embedded in both the historical canon of philosophy, as well as in mainstream environmental ethical thinking. This means that their work is, again, typically written for an audience of professional philosophers. Further, since ecofeminism is a critique of mainstream thinking, understanding the force of

ecofeminist arguments and ideas requires a prior familiarity with the figures and traditions to which they are responding. The result is that including ecofeminism does not pull the course curriculum away from a conversation among specialists, but rather pushes it right back in that direction. As a result, though I have in the past made use of ecofeminist writings, I decided in this case to find some other source.

So to ensure the inclusion of a female voice this year I introduced Juliet Schor's groundbreaking (though somewhat dated) book *The Overspent American*. This text serves as introduction to the dynamics of consumer culture from the perspective of economics, psychology, and sociology. Her text also highlights a theme that unites pretty much every author studied in class, which is how modern consumer society both builds on and reinforces a narrowly instrumental attitude toward the earth's living systems that has been inherited from both Enlightenment natural philosophy and pre-twentieth century Christianity. As a result, her analysis allows students to see that the values, institutions, and practices that form the cultural sea in which they swim fosters ethical, spiritual, and epistemological disengagement from the earth's living systems.

### **Inclusive Curriculum Transforms the Questions Addressed by the Class**

The outcome of these curricular changes was that the thematic focus of the class shifted quite decisively away from the kinds of problems that environmental philosophers typically discuss to a series of deep reflections on the conditions making it possible for modern humans to establish an ethical relationship with the earth's living systems. A brief summary of the course curriculum will help make this change more explicit.

The class opened by examining traditions of philosophical and religious thought that are, on the one hand, foundational for the civilization that emerged in the Western world, but that, on the other hand, fostered *ethical and spiritual disengagement* from the earth's living systems. Students

learn how ideas central to the early modern (a.k.a. Enlightenment) tradition of philosophical thought grounded a basic cultural idea that the earth possesses only instrumental value for human beings—in other words, that the earth has value only as a resource. We also examined sources showing how this perspective was embedded in Christian theology prior to the second half of the twentieth century.

Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, Pope Francis's *Laudato Si*, and the indigenous voices in *Original Instructions* each in its own way try to articulate the conditions making possible a *restoration* of a caring ethical relationship between humans and the earth's living systems. Juliet Schor's analysis illuminates how the cultural values and economic practices of consumer society both depend on and reinforce the ethical and spiritual disengagement from the earth that emerged in the modern era. The class finishes with Colin Beavan's book *No Impact Man*, a kind of memoir that documents—in a deeply reflective manner—the efforts of an ordinary middle class family in Manhattan to establish an ethically responsible relationship with the earth and its living systems even while living in the center of one of the world's great cities.

So the two defining themes of the class became ethical disengagement (or disconnection) and the possibility of restoring ethical relationship. Accompanying the theme of restoring relationship is the idea—first articulated by Leopold, but also woven throughout nearly every class reading—that a condition essential to the restoration of an ethical relationship with the natural world is for people to *actually interact with it* in a caring manner. This idea prompted the creation of a new course requirement.

## **A Step Toward a More Inclusive Pedagogy**

Up to this point the discussion has emphasized how the class curriculum significantly deemphasized the role of mainstream academic writing (rectifying one kind of exclusion) and incorporated texts that would foster greater diversity of perspectives (making the curriculum more inclusive

in terms of religious faith tradition, gender, and ethnicity). Given the guiding themes of the class, and inspired by the workshop lead by David Concepción, the next step toward inclusiveness was the introduction of a *field experience requirement* for the class. Students were required to spend at least ten hours over the course of the semester working or playing in the outdoors. Inclusiveness here is to be understood in the sense of utilizing a greater diversity of *learning modalities*. The standard model of philosophical pedagogy is textually focused. The field experience requirement was meant to augment that focus.

Students started by assisting Kate Ritger and her crew at the Common Ground Garden located on the grounds of the Monastery of St. Benedict. There they helped with weeding, harvesting, and breaking down the garden at the end of October. A second set of opportunities involved assisting the Kyle Rauch, Director of the Outdoor University in the St. John's Arboretum, with some of his projects. These involved removing invasive species, completing construction on a new bridge on the Chapel Trail, assisting with splitting and stacking firewood at the Sugar Shack, assisting with the Colledgeville Colors celebration, and removing offensive graffiti in a remote area of the Arboretum.

Other opportunities included assisting local organic farmers with their operations and participating in a controlled burn in the St. John's Arboretum. Later in the semester students were encouraged to go out into either the St. Ben's or St. John's arboreta, walk off trail into the woods, find a supply of downed branches, and build some kind of structure. Or else to explore areas unfamiliar to them, ideally to the point of getting a little bit lost. (The idea of unstructured activities was inspired by Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Forest*.) Students were required to work at least two hours at the Common Ground Garden, and another two hours at St. John's Arboretum, but after that they were free to choose which kind of field experience they wanted to pursue.

Small 8" X 5" record booklets were issued to students for the purpose of documenting their field experiences. Supervisor's signatures were required to

document the structured activities and students had to provide photographic documentation of their unstructured activities. The booklets also contained space for five short reflections on the learning they experienced as a result of their direct engagement with the land. These booklets were collected several times over the course of the semester as well as at the end.

The final reflection on their field experience asked two questions: Did they find the field experience to be helpful or meaningful for learning about environmental ethics? And do they think such experience is necessary for such learning? To a person the students agreed that they found the field experience to be an important part of their learning experience in the class. While there was not such unanimity in their responses to the second question, a strong majority nonetheless also asserted that they believed such experiences to be necessary for developing an authentic understanding of environmental ethics.

Several different themes emerged in these reflections. One was that the field experience helped students to understand the concepts and ideas studied in class. As one student stated, "...one can't really understand the reasoning behind environmental ethics if one does not have any experiences out in the environment." Students were particularly emphatic about the role of their time outside in helping them to gain a visceral understanding of one of the core themes of the class, the need for people in developed societies to reestablish direct, caring relations with the earth's living systems. As one (Chinese) student succinctly put it, the field experience meant that "I can feel the ethic rather than read the ethic." Another said, "I think it really helped me to connect to what we discussed in class and why environmental ethics is important. It also helped me realize how disconnected we are to [*sic*] the land."

Students who did not have a history of regular interaction with the nonhuman world (i.e., who did not hunt, hike, canoe, or garden) found their time in the field to be a particularly powerful learning experience. One young man from Los Angeles, for instance, stated that "I found the field experiences were the most crucial to my learning in this course, at least for



an individual like myself that has no environmental experience at all.” But even students who did have a history of interaction with the earth’s living systems found that the field experience requirement introduced a dimension of informed reflection that they had not had before. One young woman’s thoughts illustrate this aspect particularly well and deserve a closer look. She is an experienced gardener who sells produce at a local farmer’s market during the summer. She reports that prior to taking this class “my garden experience consisted of planting and using the fruit as an instrumental value... The only reason I enjoyed my time in the garden was because I knew in the end it would be helping me fund my school tuition.” The field experience alone did not have her interact with the natural world in any new ways. But combined with the class curriculum and the short reflections, her attitude changed. “I was able to view the garden as one of God’s creations. It opened my eyes and allowed me to see the garden for its moral values instead of its instrumental. I will no longer work in my garden at home [just] for its instrumental values and will [instead] soak in its beauty...”

Another theme that permeated students’ reflections was how their field experiences provided them with opportunities to slow down, de-stress, unplug from their devices, and take a mental vacation from the anxieties arising from their many responsibilities. A few even mentioned how at the beginning, learning of the field experience requirement *added* to their anxiety, since it was just one more thing to schedule into their already over-scheduled lives. But once they began to spend time physically engaging with the earth and its living systems they found that their time outdoors was both physically and emotionally refreshing.

I would like to close this section with an extended passage from one young woman’s final reflection. Two things need to be said to provide context. The first is that she was one of the strongest students in the two sections of this class. Her writing reflects her gifts. The second concerns a concept with which we started the class, since she managed in the course of a few sentences to weave together themes from the beginning to the end of the semester. This concept is “self-validating reduction.”<sup>15</sup> It names the dynamic set in motion

when humans approach the earth's living systems with the belief that they only have value as resources. When our capacity to perceive the natural world is structured by this stance, our actions reduce nonhuman nature in such a way that it only *can* be a resource and its potential to be more than what we expect is lost.

One example that the author, Anthony Weston, uses to illustrate this process is chickens. He reports a conversation with a reputable environmental philosopher who exclaimed to him, "You don't really believe that I can have an ethical relationship with a chicken, do you?" Weston points out, first, that had this person actually lived and worked with traditional breeds of domestic chickens she would know from first-hand experience that it is indeed possible to have such a relationship. But he also notes that she was probably imagining chickens as created for industrial methods of animal production—such birds have been engineered so that they are as near to being mere meat production units as modern science and technology can make them. Such chickens have quite literally been reduced to natural resources, and in being so reduced, the possibility of an ethically meaningful relationship has been nearly eliminated. All that remains is to minimize suffering.

Here are this student's reflections:

I think field experience is helpful and even necessary for an environmental ethics course. While our world is reduced, as Weston explains, it will become even further reduced if we don't get outside and begin to appreciate and care for it. By experiencing the natural world yourself, you learn more than anything a book can teach you—you know the feel and smell of soil in your hands, the warmth of sunlight as it falls through the branches of a maple tree, the crunch of snow under your boots. These experiences build a more personal connection with the land, whether it be a relationship of kinship as in *Original Instructions*, or a scientific and emotional love as in *Sand County Almanac*, or a blend of many different relationships we've learned about this semester. The personal connections promote the awareness of our impact on the land. Only with this

awareness, this ecological conscience, can we begin to imagine the world as something fuller, brighter, healthier and thus begin to break Weston's cycle of self-validating reduction. By experiencing nature on a personal level, you become familiar with it, as you would with a good friend. This familiarity breeds concern for well-being and the concern for well-being ethical responsibility. This realization of profound responsibility prompts you to look for ways to improve the world. Thus field experience is necessary for environmental ethics.

Based on these student reflections it seems clear that the addition of the field experience did make the course more inclusive—in this case, by adding a learning modality that significantly augmented the power of the insights students gained through the in-class curriculum.

### **Future Directions**

Not one single student suggested in his or her final reflection that the field experience had been a waste of time. All stated unequivocally that they thought it was a valuable part of their learning experience in Environmental Ethics. This is encouraging, of course, but needs also to be taken with an appropriate quantity of salt. In the first place, these reflections were not anonymous. I knew who each author was. Further, the reflections were scored assignments. While the scoring was exceedingly lenient, and the value of each reflection amounted to just over 1% of the final grade, students are still not going to risk squandering easy points by criticizing the requirement (even if the instructor invites them to do so, as I did). So these reflections are a biased source of information about the actual learning outcomes resulting from the field experience. Despite this obvious shortcoming, there are still reasons for optimism.

One of the strongest impressions I took away from the Mellon workshop with Prof. Concepción, in particular, and from nearly all of the other Mellon Cohort learning opportunities as well, was the extent to which *inclusive pedagogy* could also be understood as a practice of teaching genuinely

oriented toward learning how to become a better teacher. The moniker of *inclusivity* simply indicates the particular domain of this learning. This fundamental commitment to improving one's effectiveness as an instructor made it easy for me to see two possible ways to respond to the evidentiary biases mentioned just above. The first is straightforward. Add an anonymous student evaluation of the field experience requirement to the end of semester student course evaluations. With one or two appropriately formulated, open-ended questions, it should be possible to get a more honest assessment of what students really think about the educational value of such a requirement. Of course, such honest assessments still have their limitations. Evidence from self-reports—especially of learning—can be unreliable. Just because students think they learned something (or did not) does not mean that they did (or did not).

This leads me to a second approach, one substantially similar to work I have done assessing the development of philosophical dispositions in philosophy students at CSB/SJU. At the risk of being tedious I will emphasize here that—properly done—assessment of student learning is just another way for faculty to evaluate their effectiveness as instructors. Though some of my colleagues may beg to differ, I see the movements for learning outcomes assessment and inclusive pedagogy as sharing this fundamental aspiration for self-improvement.

In that spirit, the second approach I see would involve developing a questionnaire-based measure of student attitudes toward their relationship with the earth and its living systems. The scales on this questionnaire should get at questions such as the following: What kinds of value do students perceive in the natural world and how important do they think each of these values is; whether students feel themselves to have a relationship with nonhuman systems of life, how important they think it is to have such a relationship, and why; how students conceive of such a relationship; how important they think it is to have regular interaction with the natural world and why; and whether they think spending time working or playing outdoors can contribute to ethical learning and development.

With such an instrument at my disposal, students would complete it once at the beginning of class and then again at the end of class. Then statistical analyses would tell us whether there was any change in student attitudes over the course of the semester. At a minimum such an instrument would provide another source of evidence concerning whether students believed that the field experience requirement made a significant contribution to their learning. In addition, though, this approach might also help me to learn whether students really do come to think differently about the need for and value of a relationship with the earth and its living systems, or whether they are a self-selected group already disposed to agree with the class's core themes from the get go.

I look forward to finding out.

## Notes

1. Standard histories of American higher education document the original formative mission of Colonial institutions of higher education. Two more recent such histories are: John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 2nd Ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), and Arthur M. Cohen & Carrie B. Kisker, *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, 2nd Ed. (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2010)
2. In addition to Thelen and Cohen & Kisker see in particular George M. Marsden, *Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), which documents in detail the process by which growing commitment to the practice of scientific scholarship gradually displaced the traditional pedagogical goal of character formation in American colleges and universities. In *Excellence Without a Soul* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007) Harry R. Lewis examines the comparative neglect of the formative pedagogical mission at Harvard University, in particular, which as an institution pioneered

many of the changes in American higher education during the twentieth century.

3. A key paragraph in the description of the learning goals for the Ethics Common Seminar stipulates that it “has the purpose of helping students develop the ability to recognize ethical issues, examine them from multiple perspectives and articulate the reasoned arguments that support their normative judgments as a means of developing students’ ability to make responsible decisions.”
4. In *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) Bryan G. Norton argued in a similar vein that environmental philosophers should stop worrying so much about determining which particular system of philosophy would provide the most rationally defensible justification for this or that conception of natural value and should instead concentrate their energies on actually protecting the environment. Despite their technical differences, he showed that most leading approaches led more or less to the same value commitments. Given the professional incentive structure of the Academy, it is not terribly surprising that environmental philosophers carried on with business as usual.
5. <http://www.csbsju.edu/philosophy/mission-statement>
6. Not that rigorous intellectual training and deep ethical reflection need necessarily to be mutually exclusive. I have simply found that in the context of this particular class, the former tends to impede the latter. And my job is to promote the latter.
7. Educational researchers who have highlighted this point for

me include: John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), Ch. 7; L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), Chs. 2-4; Susan Ambrose, Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPietro, Marsha C. Lovett, & Marie K. Norman, *How Learning Works* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), Ch. 3.

Faculty critics also have argued that the loss of meaning in the curriculum of higher education is responsible for students who are disengaged from learning. See William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite* (New York: Free Press, 2014), as well as Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End. Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

8. Jens Manuel Krogstad & Richard Fry, "Department of Education projects public schools will be 'majority minority' this fall," Pew Research Center Fact Tank, August 18, 2014. Available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/18/u-s-public-schools-expected-to-be-majority-minority-starting-this-fall/>
9. Jon McGee, "The New Demography Has Arrived," *Headwaters* 29 (2016), 85.
10. McGee, "The New Demography," 87.
11. See Table 13: Undergraduate Headcount Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity from the *Undergraduate Student Profile* in the CSB/SJU Fact Book on the web site for the office of Institutional Planning and Research. <http://www.csbsju.edu/ipr/csb/sju-fact-book/student-profile>, accessed 31 January 2017.

12. Ambrose, et. al., *How Learning Works*, Ch. 6. For an account of how one philosophy teacher experienced this factor in practice, see Monique Whitaker, "Updating Syllabi, Reimagining Assignments, and Embracing Error: Strategies for Retaining Marginalized Students in Philosophy," *American Association of Philosophy Teachers Studies in Pedagogy* 1 (2015), edited by Emily Esch and Charles Wright. Available at: <https://www.pdcnet.org/collection-anonymous/browse?start=0&fq=aaptstudies%2fVolume%2f8999%7c1%2f&fp=aaptstudies>
13. Augusto Blasi is credited by contemporary moral psychologists as being the first to systematically raise the question of moral motivation in relation to Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental account of moral judgment. The difficulty he highlighted was that scores on Kohlberg's measure were only weakly related to the likelihood that a person would actually act in a manner consonant with their reasoned moral judgment. See Augusto Blasi, "Bridging Moral Cognition and Moral Action: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Psychological Bulletin* 88.1 (July 1980), 1-45; Blasi, "Moral Cognition and Moral Action: A Theoretical Perspective," *Developmental Review* 3.2 (June 1983), 178-210; Blasi, "Kohlberg's Theory and Moral Motivation," *New Directions for Child Development* 47 (Spring 1990), 51-57.

More recently Jonathan Haidt created something of a tempest by arguing that available psychological evidence suggests that human moral action isn't motivated by reasoning at all. He started the discussion with his 2001 article, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108, 814-834. His views have been more fully developed and extensively documented in his recent book, *The Righteous*



*Mind* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

On the basis of fMRI imaging of human brains at work making moral judgments, philosopher Joshua Greene also has argued that in certain kinds of judgments, humans are reaching conclusions on the basis of emotional reactions rather than reasoning. See J.D. Greene, R.B. Sommerville, L.E. Nystrom, J.M. Darley, & J.D. Cohen, "An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment," *Science* 293.5537 (2001), 2105-2108.

A comprehensive collection of essays documenting the current state of moral psychological thinking (at its time of publication, in any case) that highlights many of the thinkers currently arguing that human moral judgment is at least as much a matter of feeling as of thought, see Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Ed.), *Moral Psychology* (3 Vols.) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

14. See <http://conference.bioneers.org/>
15. Anthony Weston, "Self-Validating Reduction: Toward a Theory of Environmental Devaluation," *Environmental Ethics* 18.2 (1996), 115-132.

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