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Teaching “Global Learning” through the Ecotestimonio: *Ojos negros* by Eduardo Sguiglia in Class

Abstract

This essay uses Eduardo Sguiglia’s *Ojos negros* (‘Black Eyes,’ 2010), a border-crossing, transnational ecotestimonial novel, to demonstrate step-by-step how instructors can effectively use ecotestimonial narratives in teaching undergraduate students to achieve global learning outcomes. Ecotestimonial texts prompt readers, and especially those readers removed from problems depicted, to confront the multiple facets of wicked problems of environmental degradation and to become aware of how the representation (or lack of representation) of those problems in different contexts shapes social responses to them. By moving students intentionally from comprehension of narrative and context to a focus on higher order thinking and on the process by which one interacts with a text and with others, instructors of humanities classes can create course units in which students both meet global learning outcomes and reflect upon the process by which they have done so.

Keywords

ecocriticism, ecotestimonio, Latin American literature, pedagogy, global learning, *Ojos Negros*, Eduardo Sguiglia

Teaching “Global Learning” through the *Ecotestimonio*:
Ojos negros by Eduardo Sguiglia in Class

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The earth has become a place of global cultures, in all of their valued particularity, and increasingly a global commons, in all of its necessary interdependence. An appropriate university education for everyone, not just a privileged elite, must prepare women and men for participation in these cultures and this commons. (Bennett, et. al., 34)

We need to adjust our classrooms to focus less on content and more on application of material to new contexts, development of intellectual curiosity, investment in the material, evaluation, synthesis, challenging personal beliefs, development of higher order cognitive processing, oral and written communication skills, construction and negotiation of meaning, information literacy, connection of information across disciplines, teamwork, and reflection on the significance of content. (Bowen 21)

Ecotestimonial texts, such as those discussed in the present collection of essays, represent an important component not just of the scholarship, but also of the teaching work of academics. These texts can readily serve as a vehicle for interdisciplinary discussions of “wicked problems,” the exploration of which highlights a vital role for the humanities in fostering skills, literacies, and competencies for a globalized twenty-first century.¹ In relating “urgent accounts of violence” and in making “a collective, cultural critique of hegemonic power structures that reinforce and reproduce political, economic and social violence in myriad forms,” testimonial texts in general lend themselves to discussions of perspective, positionality, rhetoric, and voice (Finzer n.pag.). Ecotestimonial texts in particular prompt readers, and especially those readers removed from problems depicted, to confront the multiple facets of wicked problems of environmental degradation and to become aware of how the representation (or lack of representation) of those problems in different contexts shapes social responses to them.

My brief piece to accompany the translated excerpt of Eduardo Sguiglia’s *Ojos negros* (‘Black Eyes,’ 2010), a border-crossing, transnational ecotestimonial novel, focuses on how instructors might use ecotestimonial narratives to help undergraduate students attain important learning outcomes by considering the representation of environmental issues articulated by voices from the Global

South. I frame my piece against the backdrop of influential movements in higher education, particularly work currently in progress in the Bologna Process in Europe (“About the Bologna Process” 2014) and through the assessment movement in the United States, as advocated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Lumina Foundation (AAC&U 2014; Lumina 2011). Then I specifically walk readers through ways in which instructors might employ ecotestimonial texts to guide students toward desired outcomes in global learning, integrative learning, and reading (AAC&U VALUE).

Late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century ecotestimonial narratives and the learning, “tuning,” and assessment movement in higher education are both products of the globalized moment in which we work.² Both *ecotestimonio* and numerous public statements by organizations promoting higher education also often point to what Michael J. Sandel has called the “moral limits of markets.” Markets, according to Sandel, do not just “allocate goods; they express and promote certain attitudes toward the goods being exchanged,” and when market values move into spheres of life previously governed by nonmarket norms, they can produce inequality and corruption, two problems ecotestimonial novels feature prominently (8-9). AAC&U and the Bologna Process statements about the need for education in the service of democratic, inclusive, and sustainable societies, though another “genre” altogether, do the same.³ This concern about how best to imagine and deliver an education, not just for economic growth but for societies that are more sustainable and inclusive, is one of several interrelated areas of focus in higher education: the need for institutions to articulate desired learning outcomes across multiple dimensions, with a concern for the future economic well-being of societies and also for democracy; the increasing demand that organizations provide meaningful evidence of the attainment of desired outcomes by students; and the need for international agreement about what credentials mean in order to facilitate mobility by graduates across borders over the course of their careers.

Meanwhile, in the United States, public intellectuals like philosopher Martha Nussbaum and Nobel Prize winning economist Michael Spence call for an education that draws on the humanities and social sciences to prepare students to grapple with questions about how human societies are to proceed as we approach or exceed the carrying capacity of the planet. Spence, for instance, asks, “Can we learn over time to manage something as complex as the emerging and evolving global economy, with its rising interdependence and complexity? . . . Can the environment withstand a fourfold increase in the ranks of the relatively wealthy?” (5). Against the backdrop of such broad, public discussions, a key question for us instructors in the humanities might broadly be framed at the classroom level in this way: how might we most effectively engage students with texts such that they are prepared to be “resilient, ethical, global citizens” (Davidson n.pag.)? And are

there ways we can demonstrate students’ movement toward higher levels of competency in areas of learning we value?

Narratives like *Ojos negros* and other ecotestimonial texts analyzed by scholars in this special issue can occupy a central place in a classroom in which global learning is a goal.⁴ Ecocritical scholarship about literary works already reflects “increasingly transnationally oriented paradigms of study,” and the remaining step is to use what we explore in research to construct curricular frameworks that advance engaged, global learning by our students (Heise 251). In the next few paragraphs, my goal is to suggest how instructors might do so, using *Ojos negros* as an example.

Ojos negros, broadly understood, is an ecotestimonial critique of neoliberalism, in the same Latin American literary vein as *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* (*The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, 1989) by Luis Sepúlveda (in which the central environmental feature is the tropical rain forest, threatened by internal migration, petroleum exploitation, mining, and sport game hunting) and *La loca de Gandoca* (*The Madwoman of Gandoca*, 1991) by Anacristina Rossi (with the central environmental feature being the coastal ecosystem, menaced by tourism), among numerous others. *Ojos negros*, for its part, constructs a landscape and history that bring into the foreground the disintegration of revolutionary, leftist movements (and the master narratives upon which they were premised) on two continents, Africa and Latin America; the dislocation of subjects socially, economically, and intellectually in post-revolutionary, post-war societies; and the “moral limits” of market societies (not just market economies), in which hyper-monetization generates psychic, social, and environmental crises. The narrative structure, with long passages in the recorded voice of Miguel, the Argentine protagonist, emphasizes the displacement of subject; readers hear Miguel’s voice because it is being listened to by corrupt Mexican police investigator Vargas, presented in brief passages heavy with focalization that emphasizes Vargas’s own insecurities, alienation, and ambition.

The narrative about Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, by Miguel, conveys a sense of being placed into the middle of a world ordered by powerful players, in which structures, rules, and relationships are not readily visible to him, and absent obvious structures that encourage pro-social behavior, the social milieu incentivizes him to act in self-interest with increasing violence. His willingness to accept the commission to go to Africa (to secure a signature for an alienated sibling of diamond mining overlord Tony) for cash, and the resulting actions to which Miguel becomes party, serve as a metaphor for neoliberal society, in which market values guide all or most decisions, not just economic decisions. Other characters underscore the realities of marginality and mobility: Laura, the Italian expatriate physician; Vargas, rural Mexican turned big-city investigator; Tony, Argentine expat diamond miner; and an array of named and

nameless Africans displaced by war, poverty, drought. Visible on the periphery of a largely human drama are animals: Tony's beloved dog; a half-tame monkey Tony keeps chained to a tree near the house; and, of course, the elephants.

As I consider how to unpack a rich ecotestimonial narrative in the classroom, I situate the unit outline against the backdrop of the call for an "education for the global commons" by Bennett, et al., which emphasizes the need for students to acquire literacies (or knowledge), skills, and dispositions (attitudes; 34). AAC&U VALUE rubrics take into account all three dimensions of learning, and for this sample unit, I have selected three rubrics for reference: global learning, integrative learning, and reading. I imagine a curriculum progression that guides students toward higher order thinking (according to Bloom's revised taxonomy) and significant learning (Fink 2003) over the course of the unit in which *Ojos negros* is the central text and desired outcomes are those articulated in the three VALUE rubrics.⁵

In considering the design of instructional material, the most important step for instructors is to think first about the purpose and desired outcome (the "why") of any given unit or course and to work backwards to the "how" and the "what." In business, the method has been popularized by Simon Sinek; in education, it is known as "backward instructional design" (Wiggins and McTighe 13-14); and in project management, logic models steer leaders and teams to follow the same basic progression to make results happen and evaluate project success (McLaughlin and Jordan 65). By articulating to ourselves purpose and desired outcome, we instructors equip ourselves to practice the Heideggerian principle of "leaping ahead" of students, so that with thoughtfully framed questions and assignments, we can nudge students forward, rather than "leaping in" and telling them the range of thoughtful answers (Heidegger 114-15).⁶ A good starting point for instructors, even before interacting with students, is this set of questions: Why am I teaching this text? What is my desired outcome? Preparation for teaching then takes the shape of mapping out elements of a narrative (and its context) for exploration and familiarizing oneself with available resources. Figure A is a mind map of possible topics for exploration in *Ojos negros*.

The most effective shift instructors can make next, then, is from a tendency to be "content providers," in which we dispense solid, critical thinking about a text to students and ask them to reproduce it (thereby teaching for remembering and not explicitly for higher order thinking), to a new role as facilitators of learning who "leap ahead" of students and frame thoughtful questions and activities. The unit we teach is then more likely to allow students to participate in understanding the purpose of activities and to provide students with a sense of autonomy, both of which increase motivation and learning (Winkhelses n. pag.). The instructor role, in interactions with students, changes from delivering content to providing transparency about the meaningful purpose

the class shares and to drawing attention to progress in achieving outcomes as activities unfold. A sense of progress in meaningful work is a key motivator for most individuals, in learning and in the workplace (Amabile and Kramer 72).

In the particular case of *Ojos negros*, or *ecotestimonio* in general, the “why” of studying the text might be to better understand, through the vehicle of literary narrative, the complexities of global systems built around the desire to consume/trade/derive benefit from highly-valued natural resources and to appreciate how the study and discussion of literature can help each of us question our understanding of our place in the human and natural world in which we participate daily as consumers and citizens. In terms of the logistics of teaching, the beginning of a course or unit is a propitious moment to introduce an external assessment instrument (which, ideally, course objectives reference), such as the AAC&U VALUE rubrics, and in the modern language acquisition setting, ACTFL proficiency standards. As an introductory activity, instructors might introduce rubrics and frame their desired outcome statements into “why” questions for students to consider: “Why might we use literary narratives to understand complexity (or wicked problems)?” For each answer students generate, instructors can ask follow-up questions: “What do we need to do as a class to assure we are accomplishing X when we study this text? How, as your instructor, am I going to know you have accomplished that?” Students can then generate ideas for possible assignments or select from, approve, or adapt an outline of tasks (such as the table in Figure B) the instructor has designed ahead of time.

A possible unit with *Ojos negros* might unfold with the series of activities in the table in Figure B. At the very start of the unit, before students even read the novel, the instructor might provide a topic-focused, pre-learning activity, such as this one: “When I say ‘diamond,’ what associations does it have for you? Take five minutes to write; any and all associations you have are acceptable.” Upon conclusion, students can compare what they wrote with other students. This activity generates a baseline document to which students and the instructor can circle back throughout the unit, and the comparison with classmates should help students understand how associations vary by person and what they have in common.

After students read the novel (or chapters in the novel), activities can guide students first to understand language, plot, and context, and then direct their attention toward more difficult, higher order tasks. This intentional structure can be especially useful in an undergraduate classroom where levels of reading proficiency and cultural competency in the language of the text may vary widely. Each column of activities in the table might be completed in a 60-90-minute instructional period at the undergraduate level and progresses from low-stakes

writing activities to paired and group work and finally large group discussion, which might sometimes be followed by a short, concluding writing activity.⁷

As a class works its way through a unit into higher order tasks, midway through it is useful to remind students of the desired learning outcomes (the big “why” for studying the novel), reference the rubrics again, and ask for feedback on categories of learning that still need to be covered. Similarly, the proposed unit might be expanded to include more time on lower-order thinking activities, for example, in a course in which departmental or institutional objectives emphasize knowledge of literary genres or literary history. After students read the entire novel and come to a baseline understanding of content and context, for instance, the instructor can circle back to the lower order tasks (the first three columns of the table) and guide students in an exploration of literary, historical, and ideological landscapes. In such a set of activities, students can generate a mind map of literature, including testimonial, post-dictatorial, environmental, animal studies, and post-colonial literature and literary criticism; be introduced to literary research tools and databases; and have a day of presentations that situate the novel in a literary landscape. After that, the instructor can nudge students toward the most linguistically difficult and highest order thinking tasks involving analysis, evaluation, and creation (the last three columns in the table).

Finally, the concluding activity in a curriculum unit should guide students to evaluate what they can now do that they could not do previously and how they learned to do it. Whatever unit instructors undertake next can begin by asking students to adapt and apply the process they used previously to the study of a new text. With a focus on higher order thinking and on the process by which one interacts with a text and with others, our humanities classes can become a significant part in shaping “global learners” equipped to “apply knowledge and skills. . . to address complex, contemporary global issues” (Hovland 10). In such a way, the environmental or ecotestimonial texts that motivate us to read and to publish as scholars can occupy a meaningful place in our teaching and prepare our students to confront, with others, the wicked problems of our time.

Figure A: Mind Map for *Ojos negros*

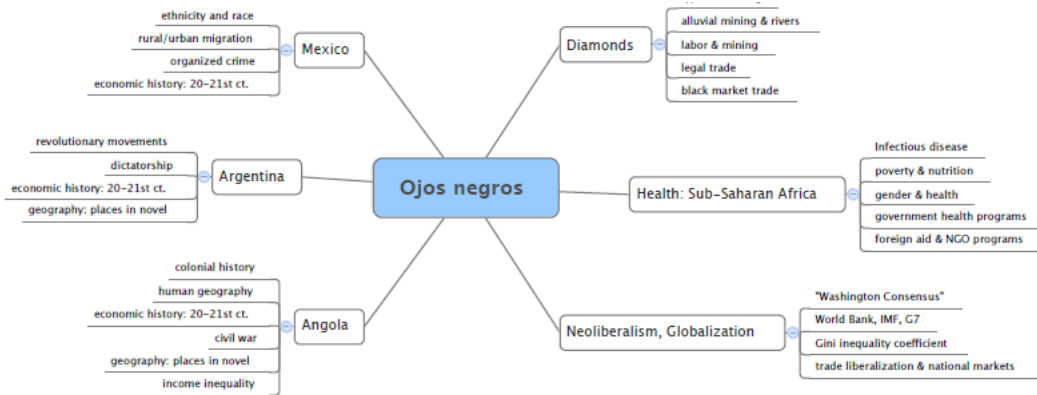


Figure B: Rubrics

AAC&U Global Learning, Reading, and Integrative Learning Rubrics; ACTFL Written Proficiency “Advanced” Level Criteria							
Bloom	Fink	Remember	Foundational Knowledge	Understand	Foundational Knowledge	Apply	Apply; Learn to Learn
Write. <i>Low stakes, daily writing activity done in class or before. (5-8 minutes if done in class)</i>		1. What happens in this novel/passage? 2. Pick three passages that were hard or confusing.		Make a mind map of topics that come up in this novel. Think particularly of both the human and natural world as you do so.		Research ethical, social, and environmental dimensions of your topic and educate your peers about it via tweets; forum posts; or group mini-presentations.	
Think-pair-share. <i>Oral or oral & written activity gives students opportunity to learn from peers.</i>		Compare responses to 2-3 classmates. How are they different/similar? Are there difficult passages you have in common?		Explain mind map to 2-3 classmates. Add to yours.		Explain 3 interconnections you see among topics. How did what you learned about topics change your understanding of the novel?	
Class. <i>Large group or whole class discussion (which might be followed by writing again) that leads to next level of learning.</i>		1. Plot out summaries in drawings on whiteboard or digital platform. 2. Analyze why passages were difficult (language, unfamiliar literary conventions, context).		Draw comprehensive map on board; as class, discuss “what resources do we have to learn more about these topics?” and pick topics based on interests.		Return to topic mind map; as class, formulate “how might we” questions for positive social, environmental change, based on research class has done so far.	

Analyze	Human Dimension	Evaluate	Integrate	Create	Care	Self-Assessment
Select 3-4 moments in the novel. Characterize the state of mind and describe the physical location of the protagonist at each point.		What commentary does this novel make about the realities (for humans the and natural world) of globalization, post-dictatorial and/or postwar societies, market values in society?		Re-tell a passage from the perspective of another character. Use the comment function 3-5 times to explain what the expert quoted in the last exercise might say about changes you made.		Review all your work about this book. Find your level of competency at beginning/end on the AAC&U and ACTFL rubrics. Give specific examples as evidence in support of your self-assessment.
Build a timeline of key moments. Enumerate choices the protagonist had for action at each one. What motivated him to take the action he did? What were the ethical, social, and environmental dimensions of the action?		Read quote (several selected ahead of time by instructor) from philosopher, critic, or expert from another field. What details would she or he pay most attention to in this novel? In your exploration of topics? What would you learn from her/his analysis?		Read your new narratives to each other. Then return to the “how might we” questions for change from the previous exercise. Suggest worries the character you chose might have upon hearing the questions and what might motivate him/her to engage.		Think back to all the activities we did as we studied this novel. Which ones helped you learn the most? Do they correlate in any way with your own personal strengths? Compare with 2-3 peers.
Thinking back to research topics, discuss “what determined the parameters of possible action at each moment?”		Draw insights from all quotes. How did your understanding of the opening question for today change after you discussed quotes?		Select 2-3 “how might we” questions. For each, make map of actors, interests that must be included to shape change.		Revisit our objectives at the start of this unit. Rate our attainment of the outcomes we wanted on a scale of 1-5. Explain each rating.

Notes

1. C. W. Churchman authored the first published reference to the concept of “wicked problems,” referencing a seminar by Horst Rittel. Rittel himself elaborated the characteristics of “wicked problems” in a 1972 publication, noting that wicked problems are complex, unique, and resistant to solutions by individuals, and admonished problem-solvers that “the people who are the best experts with the best knowledge, are usually those who are likely to be affected by your solution” (1972: 394).

2. “Tuning” refers to the effort on the part of educators to identify what a degree holder at a particular level, in a particular discipline, should be able to do. The objective of the effort is to come to some national and international agreement

about what degrees mean, in order to facilitate the movement of students across borders, whether those borders are institutional, state, or national ones.

3. Consider, for example, the statement regarding the Bologna process on the official website: “The envisaged European Higher Education Area will facilitate mobility of students, graduates and higher education staff; prepare students for their future careers and for life as active citizens in democratic societies, and support their personal development; offer broad access to high-quality higher education, based on democratic principles and academic freedom” (“About the Bologna Process” n.pag.).

4. “Global learning,” as defined by the AAC&U VALUE rubrics, explicitly includes an emphasis upon the understanding of interrelationships between human and natural systems.

5. Bloom’s revised taxonomy emphasizes a progression toward higher order thinking: first is remembering; then, understanding; applying; analyzing; evaluating; creating, with the last item requiring the highest order of thinking (Anderson, et al.). Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning, rather than being linear, emphasizes six dimensions: foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, learning how to learn.

6. As scholars, we often have a good idea of the range of thoughtful answers to the “why” questions, and in teaching, we “leap in” to deliver them to students because most of us are products of educational systems with an orientation toward covering content.

7. For more on the place of writing in promoting critical thinking and active learning, see John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*.

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