
Reviewed by Maureen McKnight, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee

As we all know, environmental issues garnered much support during the late 1980s and 1990s because of recognition of the world’s threatened ecology; of late, however, public interest in environmental issues has become muted, even while scientific evidence of an imminent ecological crisis has emerged. James Berger, in a recent special issue of Twentieth Century Literature, speculates that governmental and corporate public relations have successfully redirected concerns elsewhere. But an ecological crisis still looms. Even President Bush, in a significant position reversal, admitted the seriousness of global warming when the findings of the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) became available this past spring. The IPCC’s most recent report, assembled by the world’s top climate scientists, indicates that without changes in our consumption habits the world stands on the verge of higher global temperatures, temperatures that will dramatically alter life as we know it.

Christian Weisser and Sidney Dobrin address these environmental concerns within the field of composition in Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches, the first collection of its kind. They assemble diverse voices to define and theorize ecocomposition, joining compositionists that have “begun to significantly inquire into scientific scholarship to inform work in their own discipline.” In taking up ecological issues as a means of theoretical inquiry and pedagogy, Weisser and Dobrin seek to rejuvenate rhetorical and composition studies by emphasizing writing as relational and dialogic. They see ecocomposition as a field that “places ecological thinking and composition in dialogue with one another in order to both consider the ecological properties of written discourse and the ways in which ecologies, environments, locations, places, and natures are discursively affected.”

This collection, however, could have benefited from a stronger editorial hand. Weisser and Dobrin, for instance, might have helpfully differentiated among the eighteen articles assembled in this volume. All entries appear without subsections, an organizing principle that fails to assist me in discerning the histories or guiding principles of ecocomposition. This lack of organization leaves many key terms unde-
fined, including the ones Weisser and Dobrin mention above. They resist carefully defining ecocomposition in the introduction, except to say that it is “about relationships,” preferring instead to state that the collection contains a diversity of approaches to “understanding and practicing” ecocomposition. Hence, they neither chart cohesively the exigencies of ecocomposition nor detail the relationships among ecocomposition, its use, and its potential value for the field of rhetoric and composition. Subsections might have assisted the editors to explicate the key terms and ideologies at stake in the field, thus helping them to make stronger interventions into both composition and ecocritical theories. Greta Gaard’s, Randall Roorda’s, and Weisser’s contributions, for example, all provide histories and might have been assembled together under one heading. As it is, *Ecocomposition* speaks to a narrowly conceived audience already familiar with ecocriticism.

Given this implied audience, I see at least four operative principles in *Ecocomposition* that indicate (1) sources of strength for a curriculum that combines ecological principles with composition theory, and (2) areas where future growth must occur for ecocomposition to thrive.

First, several contributors to the collection presume that teaching ecocomposition equates to a moral responsibility. Given that we stand on an environmental threshold, this kind of morality is understandable; however, it often and problematically goes unchallenged. Colleen Connolly, for instance, proposes an ecocomposition pedagogy that “aims to examine and think about the discursive and cultural practices that define the relations among individuals, society, and nature—providing students with opportunities to write environmentally conscious essays that locate a diverse humanness within an extended community of other life forces and ecologies.” The ethic that emerges from her work involves “a sense that each item in a web of connections is necessary for the viability of experience.” Derek Owens advocates creating a composition curriculum—and curricula in general—that emphasizes sustainability and that “moves continually toward environmental stability and community revitalization.” In response, we might ask, why is the need to teach environmentalism the moral responsibility of composition teachers? What is the implied purpose of composition in this presumption? Do composition teachers need an environmental ethic to legitimate their practices?

David Sumner, in contrast, challenges this assumption of moral responsibility. In editing a collection of syllabi for the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE), Sumner recognized the
prevalence of environmentalism and the diminution of composition theory in all but one of the ecocomposition courses. As a result, Sumner argues, "we first need to discuss, argue about, and explore what we mean when we use the term composition." He advocates an approach to ecocomposition theory and pedagogy that emphasizes argumentation. This approach, he says, prevents us from advocating any particular environmental ideology. He speculates that, while we would most likely feel no qualms about teaching an ecocomposition course, we might feel considerable discomfort in teaching a Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim composition course. He importantly asks, "How can we justify teaching a composition [course] that highlights our environmental commitments and feel that [another ideology] is less legitimate?" Sumner discerns what other contributors to this text do not: that environmentalism often functions as the primary subject of ecocomposition classes—at the expense of writing theory. Sumner thus registers his commitment to environmentalism below his commitment to argument. In so doing, he confronts two of the most problematic assumptions of ecocriticism in general: the unquestioned endorsement of environmentalism as a moral responsibility and the reliance on an essentialized concept of nature.

Gaard also avoids essentializing nature and does not rely on an unproblematized morality as the reason composition should engage with environmentalism. She details the intersections among composition theory, ecocriticism, and ecofeminism to chart how one might realize "a healthy diversity of environmentalisms in the classroom." Gaard uses a liberatory pedagogy that allows her "to 'teach' environmental ethics as an adjunct to teaching writing." In the composition classroom, Gaard subordinates environmental morality to the pedagogy of writing. She does not abandon environmentalism; instead, she encourages her students to develop their own relationships to nature and its protection. She says that ecocomposition offered her "a tangible means for sharing authority" and beliefs in the area of environmental ethics in a way that is not always possible when she teaches other subjects because of students' perceptions of her as "an invested player." Gaard provides an effective template for how we might use environmentalism in conjunction with, and not instead of, composition studies.

A second implied principle that guides this collection is essentialism. Unlike Sumner and Gaard, many contributors rely on an ahistorical and essentialized concept of nature. An ethical approach combined with astute critical inquiry, as I have noted in Sumner and Gaard, defines and theorizes more thoroughly the goals and strategies of the new field. An
uncritical definition of nature, however, though common in ecocriticism, leads to overstatements regarding nature’s authority. For instance, Stephen Brown argues in “The Wilderness Strikes Back: Decolonizing the Imperial Sign in the Borderlands” that a “native” or “indigenous” Alaska resists colonialist appropriation. I see this invocation of an essentialized nature as a retreat from, not a move toward, an understanding of relational discourse and its effects. In analyzing how “signification functions as a vehicle of cultural domination,” Brown romanticizes the Alaskan wilderness by saying it “transcends signification insofar as it refuses differentiation.” He also simplifies, rather troublingly, those “native people whose identity since the mists of time has been undifferentiated from the land.” This assumption of nature’s and indigenous people’s stable identities problematically simplifies the construction or performance of meaning. A critical definition of nature not as transcendent but as socially constructed need not impede ecocritical thinking, as we find in Mark Long’s contribution.

This essentializing of nature emerges from a third operative principle in many of Ecocomposition’s essays: a resistance to poststructuralism. Not all contributors refute anti-foundational theory, but Paul Lindholdt, for instance, says that theory “demeans good writing” by “carrying those theoretical dimensions far beyond a healthy balance, and thereby diminishing the honest promises of succinct communication.” He instead advocates an “applied composition,” resulting from “place-based or bioregional study” that, he says, offers consequentiality to composition studies. Additionally, this anti-theoretical understanding of nature exists simultaneously with a regressive form of nostalgia. Lindholdt, for example, laments the passing of a humanist belief in “nature as a site of inspiration and wonder, a route to the truth.” Edward Lotto also mourns for “the old solid ground we used to share.” He feels that the “postmodern world seems to delight in pulling the rug out from under us, in calling into question any ground we might try to stand on.” But Lotto, unlike Lindholdt, works within the seeming contradiction of an essentialized and a socially constructed nature to assert that nature operates as a “sort of nonfoundational authority.” Nature is not simply “out there,” offering “some sort of solace or power of regeneration.” Lotto’s goals in his writing classes, then, reflect how we are “shaped by cultural forces.”

Annie Merrill Ingram perhaps most directly speaks to the dual effects of ecocomposition, calling it “as much an ideological practice as a pedagogical one.” She argues that an “interdisciplinary curriculum linked to extradisciplinary service opportunities” gives students not only
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"a firm knowledge and skills base in environmental issues" but also "the trust and interactive skills that enable them to succeed in composition activities." Though this approach may seem to assert only an environmental ideology, Ingram's argument for sustainability emerges from "clear and effective communication" requiring "a sensitivity to audience and environment, an awareness of immediate purpose and long-range consequences, the ability to identify problems and propose solutions, and the commitment to include and inspire others." She theorizes ecocomposition to address environmental concerns and process theory, context, and audience.

As theoretically strong as some of these entries are, however, ecocomposition will not grow until critics address the presumptive white, affluent audience of ecocriticism; this issue constitutes the fourth operative principle in Ecocomposition. Many authors in this collection do not directly consider how race and class affect our conceptions of and relations with nature. Christopher Keller and Julie Drew both examine the work of place in ecocomposition, with Keller, for example, discovering through his students that African Americans approach, define, and experience nature differently. While his approach takes up some multicultural concerns, such concerns do not constitute his focus. He asks his students to compose their own narratives of retreat to consider "ecologically useful ways to think about voice." He questions his white and black students' relation to nature, but he assumes the stability of nature and race as signifiers. His chapter is the only one engaged with multiculturalism in this collection, though several contributors select multicultural authors to teach in their composition courses. As Keller says, both his black and white students imagined environmental audiences as white readers. This insight marks a place where much room for growth in ecocriticism in general and ecocomposition in particular exists.

Taken as a whole, this collection, though smart and incisive in many essays, suffers from a lack of editorial guidance and the problems of ecocriticism in general. Weisser and Dobrin appear to understand these shortcomings, saying in their introduction that they find it "essential that any of us working in ecocomposition studies...be willing to problematize and self-reflexively critique these initial explorations into ecocomposition." Even their SUNY Press reviewer says, as the editors report in their introduction, that this new field "must be willing to consider 'counter-hegemonic' arguments." In a way, Dobrin anticipates my reaction to his collection when he insists in his own article that
ecocomposition "must move beyond its stereotyped role of just address­
ing 'environmentalist' concerns . . . to examining concepts of environ­
ment, location, space, and place as encompassing all of the spaces we
inhabit."

Why, then, does Dobrin think ecocomposition, given its insular
tendencies, is worth enacting? Perhaps because, unlike ecocriticism—
which, Dobrin says, seeks "to establish place as simply a critical cat­
egory"—ecocomposition engages "place as rhetoric." Composition,
Dobrin argues, "is the activity of creating and reacting to environments,
and rhetorics are those environments." Dobrin argues that both our
relationships to nature and our conceptions of nature itself must be
examined carefully. His framing of the collection with Weisser,
however, and their presentation of material do not build on these
insights.

Like Dobrin, Weisser complicates our understanding of identity,
mapping the "various theoretical and pedagogical discussions in contem­
porary composition studies" since they have "as one of their primary
underlying goals the cultivation of a more complex and sophisticated
awareness of how student writers form their own conceptions of iden­
tity." He argues that through ecological perspectives "we might enable
our students to more fully understand their own relationships with
others." Students "may emerge with a greater awareness of their places
in the world." Dobrin and Weisser both consider place as relational,
finding ecocomposition's power in its destabilization of meaning. This
approach seems to have been their collection's goal, but, while some
contributors think carefully about environmentalism and its pedagogical
ramifications, others markedly veer from that path.

This alternate response develops, in part, from a lack of enthusiasm
for teaching writing. Environmentalism seems to remedy this problem for
some contributors, making composition more meaningful. Bradley
Monsma, for instance, says he wishes to "lessen the typical artificiality
of the composition exercise." Arlene Plevin reports that a more complex
understanding of place "reinvigorates composition studies by offering
the additional potential for political engagement." The editors report that
Weisser's own essay "rightly urges us as compositionists to expand our
field, and our field of vision" (emphasis added). They say, too, that
Lindholdt's essay makes compositionists' work "more meaningful and
consequential." Do these writers imply, as they seem to, that composition
studies is dull, narrow, and insignificant? If so, this implication might
explain why the joy of the text seems to reside primarily in the reports
many authors make of their fishing, backpacking, and hiking experiences in nature.

Ecocomposition thus stands both as a starting point and as a potential pivot point, one at which theoretical inquiries can complicate ecocomposition's foundation. Much future work remains possible to problematize such concepts as place, context, and environment for composition studies. This collection begins that critical discussion and points to many areas of possible improvement.


Reviewed by Bruce Herzberg, Bentley College

Our service-learning center held a planning session a few years ago. Faculty members from a dozen different disciplines attended, all of whom had taught courses that included service learning. We asked ourselves, "Why are we doing this? Are there real benefits, benefits sufficient to justify the extra work that we and the students must exert for our service learning-projects?" In response, my colleagues reported that their service-learning students made greater gains in a variety of areas than students in their non-service-learning classes. The service-learning students showed a firmer grasp of course concepts, they developed greater maturity and self-confidence, and they improved as communicators. They developed empathy for people different from themselves, demonstrated concern for public affairs, and engaged in serious critical thinking. Nobody claimed that these effects were universal or inevitable. But all agreed that they occurred more frequently in service-learning courses and that they appeared with regularity in service-learning courses ranging from accounting to biology to philosophy. And all agreed that the improvement in teaching and learning thoroughly justified the extra effort.

I have heard similar reports at a number of colleges and conferences. Even if we regard such observations as merely anecdotal, our colleagues'