

REVIEW ESSAY: ECOCOMPOSITION

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Weisser, Christian R., and Sidney I. Dobrin, eds. *Ecomposition: Theoretical and Practical Approaches*. New York: SUNY P, 2001. 300pp. Cloth \$62.50. Paper \$20.95. ISBN: 0-7914-4939-4.

Dobrin, Sidney I. and Christian R. Weisser. *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecomposition*. New York: SUNY P, 2002. 198 pp. Cloth \$75.50. Paper \$25.95. ISBN: 0-7914-5356-1.

In a 1986 *College English* article called “The Ecology of Writing” that responded to various process-based approaches, Marilyn Cooper proposed that teachers of writing adopt an “ecological model of writing” (367). According to Cooper, such a model would emphasize that writing is an ongoing process that constitutes and is constituted by the socially constructed systems within which it is written. Cooper called for an approach to teaching writing that moves beyond simply defining context—which she sees as static—to embracing the dynamism inherent in writing as writers react to and negotiate with written texts. Cooper’s vision is macroscopic; she asks that writers be aware of the complexity of systems created by discussing writing as a “web” in which one text reverberates throughout the whole (370).

Ten years later, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* was published by The University of Georgia Press. *The Ecocriticism Reader* served as a touchstone for the burgeoning field of ecocriticism, a loosely

defined approach that calls for literary studies to turn a critical eye on the way literature informs, reflects, and influences the ways in which humans relate to the natural world. Glotfelty and Fromm's book did not address ecocomposition, but, from the confluence of Cooper's ecological approach to writing and Glotfelty and Fromm's ecological approach to literature, ecocomposition began to solidify itself as one approach to the composition classroom.

Enter Sidney I. Dobrin and Christian R. Weisser. Their collective interest in propounding the benefits of ecocomposition resulted in two books: *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Practical Approaches*, a 2001 collection of essays, and *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition*, a 2002 book outlining the history and possibilities of ecocomposition. Although I review these books chronologically, I recommend reading *Natural Discourse* first for reasons that should become clear in the following paragraphs. In the Introduction to *Ecocomposition*, Weisser and Dobrin claim that they will "resist" the urge to define ecocomposition because they see the essays contributing to a "larger conversation" about the field (2). Dobrin and Weisser see ecocomp as being based upon the "premise that ecocomposition is an area of study which, at its core, places ecological thinking and composition in dialogue with one another in order to both consider the ecological properties of discourse and the ways in which ecologies, environments, locations, places, and nature are discursively affected" (2). They go on to say that "ecocomposition is about relationships" (2), which gives readers unfamiliar with ecological thinking a grounds upon which to base their reading.

Ecocomposition includes a variety of theoretical and practical essays. Theoretical essays include Dobrin's "Writing Takes Place," Anis Bawarshi's "The Ecology of Genre," and Arlene Plevin's "The Liberatory Positioning of Place in Ecocomposition: Reconsidering Paulo Freire." Dobrin's essay argues for the importance of place—literal and metaphorical—to rhetorical situations, and stresses that teachers of writing push beyond a static notion of context into the dynamism represented by ecological systems. Bawarshi echos the dynamic vision of Dobrin when he discusses

how genres not only represent certain communicative contexts but also enact them. Arlene Plevin uses Freire's liberatory pedagogy to extend social and cultural consciousness beyond class, race, and gender as Other to place as Other. For Plevin, her approach "is an opening of ethics beyond the human" that places value on the embodied knowledge of students (160).

Although few in number, some essays provide valuable practical applications for ecocomposition in the classroom. Annie Merrill Ingram's "Service Learning and Ecocomposition: Developing Sustainable Practices through Inter- and Extradisciplinarity" and Brad Monsma's "Writing Home: Composition, Campus Ecology, and Webbed Environments" fall under the praxis category. In perhaps the most practical essay, Ingram discusses how service learning revolves around work inside and outside the classroom. She documents the work that her students perform at the Catawba Land Conservancy in North Carolina and discusses the different types of writing students do at different stages in the process. Ingram supplies a syllabus for her service learning class, a valuable document for a teacher looking to inject a new dimension into the writing classroom. Monsma's self-reflexive essay discusses the successes and problems with having his students publish a natural history of their university's campus on the web. The presentation of "place knowledge" by technological means reveals one way to complicate the rhetorical knowledge of environments. In his essay "Education and Environmental Literacy: Reflections on Teaching Ecocomposition in Keene State College's Environmental House," which blends theory and practice, Mark Long suggests two approaches to ecocomposition, summed up as environmental literacy and ecological discourse. He combines both approaches by having his students start from where they are—the college campus. Using Deweyan methodology, Long's approach pivots on what students understand as "experience"; he encourages them to investigate their own experiences in terms of relationships to their college peers and grounds. As Long points out, there is always more to experience than students recognize, the awareness of which can

lead to “biocentric” or life-centered ways of thinking, rather than anthropocentric or human-centered.

Regardless of whether the essays focus on theory or praxis, all essays share the belief that teachers should take an activist stance on environmental matters. Greta Gaard’s “Ecofeminism and Ecomposition: Pedagogies, Perspectives, and Intersections” argues that ecomposition enables her to background her beliefs in ecofeminism—a critical approach that studies the interconnections among gender, race, and class oppression and the oppression of nature—because an ecological approach to writing calls for a multitude of voices. Gaard points out how some of these voices are bound to challenge her own values. Inherent in Gaard’s essay (and reflective of the others) is perhaps the most crucial component of critical thinking—the analysis of multiple perspectives or points-of-view. The analysis of multiple perspectives is, at heart, an ethical stance and decidedly postmodern. Yet, the activist stance advocated by these scholars calls for students and teachers alike to take action in support of their beliefs while constantly questioning how they arrive at those beliefs. Students and teachers are expected to interrogate how those beliefs affect others, both human and non-human.

This ethical approach is informed by and advocates for an understanding of the undying and dynamic ecological unity of humans and their environments, both written and other. Gaard, Dobrin, Weisser, and the others argue, rightly so, that all students inhabit places and environments that are changing rapidly depending upon local contexts and conditions, and these constructed spaces shape the students and their identities. By examining such local contexts, students must grapple with complex issues and, as some of these teachers point out, they can come to significant understandings of how ecological and discursive systems function. (In *Natural Discourse*, Dobrin and Weisser dedicate a chapter to “Ecomposition and Activist Intellectualism.”) For the teacher not comfortable with bringing an explicitly politicized view into the classroom, however, plenty of possibilities focus solely on the production of writing.

The interdisciplinary approach argued for by these teachers offers students a way to connect different forms of writing with different methods of understanding to increase the contextual richness of discourse production. But, as Christopher J. Keller shows in his essay in *Ecocomposition*, minority students may not be engaged by writing that focuses on place or nature as a major component of textual production. This is an area of inquiry that ecocompositionists need to explore, lest ecocomposition become a predominantly white movement like ecocriticism. One way of opening ecocomposition to minorities requires an increasing attention to what constitutes urban environments and how those environments are intimately linked with identity. Another begs for the examination of the ways in which humans define “place.” In keeping with ecocomposition’s belief in interdisciplinarity, teachers could look at feminist and cultural geographers in order to investigate these problems further as well as come to a better understanding of how places and spaces are constructed by both natural and cultural forces. John Brinkerhoff Jackson’s *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America*, Mona Domosh and Joni Seager’s *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World*, and David Harvey’s *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* offer ways in which to begin these complex explorations. From Jackson’s book, the essay called “The Vernacular City” is a particularly good introduction to this type of thinking.

In *Natural Discourse*, Dobrin and Weisser provide a more cohesive sense of combining ecological methodologies and composition. Most importantly, the pair takes on the task of defining ecocomposition, a lengthy definition that the collection of essays in *Ecocomposition* no doubt helped solidify. Dobrin and Weisser write:

Ecocomposition is the study of the relationships between environments (and by that we mean natural, constructed, and even imagined places) and discourse (speaking, writing, and thinking). Ecocomposition draws primarily from disciplines that study discourse (chiefly composition, but

also including literary studies, communication, cultural studies, linguistics, and philosophy) and merges the perspectives of them with work in disciplines that examine environment (these include ecology, environmental studies, sociobiology, and other “hard” sciences). As a result, ecocomposition attempts to provide a more holistic, encompassing framework for studies of the relationship between discourse and environment. (6)

What follows is a history of the field of ecocomposition that shows how critical approaches such as cultural studies, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and environmental rhetoric have contributed to the authors’ understanding of how ecocomposition can be enacted in the classroom. The context the authors supply provides enough grounding in the different critical approaches for teachers unfamiliar with these fields to grasp the basic tenets of an ecological approach to composition.

Perhaps the most useful chapter for writing teachers not steeped in green theory is “Ecology and Composition.” Dobrin and Weisser define ecology and explain how writing is intimately tied with the understanding of ecological concepts. Their premise is that all ecocompositionists must attempt to understand how place and environment “directly and indirectly affect discourse” (68), and that though we are not aware of how much place and environment impact our daily lives, our subjectiveness and awareness are “greatly affected by specific physical ecologies” (69). Therefore, the ecocompositionist focuses on an ecological approach to writing in order to grapple with the production of discourse as affected by and affecting place and environment. Dobrin and Weisser’s approach fits with the explicit environmental consciousness found in their edited book while at the same time rightly proposing that other environments, such as school, work, and home, are valid topics for an ecocomposition class.

Dobrin and Weisser build on these ideas of ecology and composition in the next two chapters on activist intellectualism

and pedagogy. The former argues that teachers who take a public stance on political and social issues, especially those related to the environment, can have a positive effect on the abilities of their students to “use writing to improve their lives and the lives of others” (88). This chapter builds on the activist stance found in the first book and expands the possibilities teachers have for incorporating more voices or points-of-view into public discourse and debates. The authors suggest ways for students’ voices to become a part of these debates through pedagogical approaches such as service learning. In the chapter on pedagogy, the authors discuss different approaches to ecocomposition, developing the distinction Long began in his essay. “Ecological literacy” focuses on developing an environmental awareness in students, primarily through content. “Discursive ecology” hearkens back to Cooper and “asks students to see writing as an ecological process, to explore writing and writing processes as systems of interaction, economy, and interconnectedness” (116). Though both approaches are important to the authors, their book is decidedly focused on the latter.

In the final chapter, Dobrin and Weisser argue for the importance of emotion to the ecocomposition classroom and examine the “*nomos-physis* antithesis” or norms versus nature. The authors claim that ecocomp needs to continually examine the ways in which discourse becomes “normed” or constructed in order to fully understand how such norms become “naturalized.” Dobrin and Weisser encourage teachers of writing to expand their ecocomp classes to include computer environments and beyond to considerations of what really constitutes public spaces. This is another area where cultural geographers and spatial theorists could help develop the theoretical grounding of ecocomposition. And, in a rhetorical move to add credibility to ecocomposition as a field, the authors link classical rhetoric—specifically, Aristotle’s dynamic conception of the communication act—to ecocomposition, calling Aristotle, albeit hesitantly, “the first ecocompositionist” (169).

I begin to have trouble with ecocomposition at this point. As Dobrin and Weisser implicitly point out in the last chapter by labeling Aristotle an “ecocompositionist,” the traditional conception of rhetoric sees context as a dynamic system in the communication act. In this way, ecocomposition becomes a new label for an old process. Where I see ecocomposition being most helpful is in its explicit approach to environmental matters and in treating “environment” more broadly than the green definition. As a writing instructor, I do not believe we can keep politics out of the classroom and, since the environments in which our students live affects them, there’s a lot at stake. Students could look at different environments—skateboard parks, national parks, churches, malls, construction sites, casinos, fast food restaurants—and examine ways in which these environments construct and are constructed by discourse. Crucially, students begin to see how their own identities are tied up in their relationships with these environments. In ecocomposition, places and environments become texts with which we all interact intellectually as well as physically. Understanding the ways in which language and environment shape identity, health, and behavior can be empowering.

Ecocomposition and *Natural Discourse* are useful for writing teachers, not because the texts offer much in the way of practical applications, but because the texts offer teachers an ecological approach to explore the complexities inherent in writing. After writing teachers read these texts, they can design their writing classes according to their own academic contexts or “ecologies.” As Dobrin and Weisser state at the end of *Natural Discourse*, “Ecocomposition is about all places and their relationships to discourse” (177). Given what is at stake for our students and ourselves in these turbulent times of political, social, and environmental change, *Ecocomposition* and *Natural Discourse* offer crucial ways to expand our students’ understanding of how discourse and environments are mutually constitutive and interconnected. Their understanding of such complex relationships should lead to a critical consciousness of how they

shape and are shaped by writing. Ecologically speaking, when edges come together, species co-evolve to form new relationships. This dynamic process occurs in a geographical area called an “ecotone.” By combining ecology and composition, ecocompositionists create an ecotone on the edge of writing instruction inhabited by dynamic possibilities.

Works Cited

Cooper, Marilyn M. “The Ecology of Writing.” *College English* 48.4 (1986): 364-375.

