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Imagining Across Disciplines for a Sustainable Future

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Title: Imagining Across Disciplines for a Sustainable Future

Abstract: At present, the words sustainable and sustainability tend to be associated with environmental issues. Yet, the word sustain comes from the Old French *sostenier* meaning, “hold up, bear; suffer, endure” and Latin’s *sustinere* that adds, “hold upright; furnish with means of support; undergo.” Latin’s *sustinere* can further be broken down into the elements *sub* and *tenere*, the root of which, *ten*, means, “to stretch” (Harper). This paper reflects upon the ways in which the concept of sustainability affects my role as a writing tutor and composition instructor as I seek to help students stretch their abilities to develop ideas through writing. I detail experiences in which the research process has helped students realize that there is truth to both sides of any given argument. The question that I pose for other tutors and instructors is: How can we understand the reality and truth of this moment and maintain intention to shape a livable future?

Keywords: argument, audience awareness, composition, critical analysis, critical thinking, environmental stewardship, imagination, rhetorical awareness, sustainability.

Imagining Across Disciplines for a Sustainable Future

Emily James

As part of my contract as a first-year graduate instructor, I was required to serve a couple of hours a week as a tutor at my campus' writing center, in addition to teaching a freshman level composition course. I ended up as a graduate student in Utah State's Literature and Writing program with the desire to improve my own understanding of language and the craft of writing following initial study in the field of environmental stewardship and working professionally as an ecologist. During the course of my first semester in this new role, I often found myself feeling as though little of my discipline of origin informed my responsibility to now help students in the Writing Center or in my classroom improve their writing until I began to think more broadly about the concept of sustainability.

At present, the words sustainable and sustainability tend to be associated with environmental issues. According to Google Book's ngram viewer, a tool that tracks the frequency of the use of a given word over time, the use of the term sustainable began to steeply rise with the onset of the environmental movement in the mid-1960s, coinciding with the publication of three key works: Murray Bookchin's *Our Synthetic World* (1962), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Paul R. Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968).

In fact, even in the book *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation*, a text intended for composition instructors, sustainability was defined predominantly in an environmental context,

Sustainability is an intergenerational concept that means adjusting our current behavior so that it causes the least amount of harm to future generations. ... Sustainability means recognizing the short- and long-term environmental, social, psychological and economic

impact of our conspicuous consumption. It means seeking to make conservation and preservation inevitable effects of our daily life styles (Owens xi).

Despite this, the word sustainable first appeared nearly three centuries prior to the environmental movement in an observation on laws and customs (“Sustainable, adj”). This suggests that there might be more to sustainability.

We are given the opportunity to consider sustainability more broadly if we separate it into its root words: sustain and able. The word sustain comes from the Old French *sostenier* meaning, “hold up, bear; suffer, endure” and Latin’s *sustinere* that adds, “hold upright; furnish with means of support; undergo.” Latin’s *sustinere* can further be broken down into the elements *sub* and *tenere*, the root of which, ten, means, “to stretch” (Harper).

But what does this have to say about my role as a writing tutor and composition instructor? Despite the fact that I personally have strong beliefs about environmental ethics and often understand the world from a land and ecosystem-based perspective, these ideas still remain absent from my conversations with tutees and from my curriculum. I’m certainly not giving either audience etymology lessons, either. To the contrary, my role as both a writing tutor and an instructor asks for neutrality in regards to the content of students’ writing.

As a tutor, students come with a given assignment on preselected topics. My job is to ask open-ended questions to help students write successfully in their assigned genre, expand upon their thinking or further develop their ideas. I help not only see if their argument *stands*, but ask them to *stretch*.

Take for example a session I had with a student from a 2010 composition course. The student came to the Writing Center with the goal to narrow her question for an argumentative paper exploring the ethical treatment of rodeo animals. For this assignment students first write

smaller papers articulating both sides of the argument before they are asked to take a final position that they support with external sources and evidence.

A long-time participant in rodeos herself, the student acknowledged concerns voiced by organizations like PETA about shocking horses to get them out of the gate, doping bulls to behave more aggressively and the strain on calves' necks when they are roped, but felt PETA sensationalized these incidents. Besides, she claimed, rodeos have outlined rules regarding the treatment of animals.

Although the use of animals in rodeos tends to be against my value system, we worked together to identify different organizations – The American Professional Rodeo Association, The Woman's Professional Rodeo Association and The International Professional Rodeo Association – that have governing documents on the treatment of animals and came up with criteria together for rules/language that would need to be included to support her argument that animals are in fact protected.

Even after just a few minutes scanning these different organizations' rules surrounding animal treatment, the student noticed differences between the organizations. Eventually, the student realized that there was truth to both sides of the argument; the rules of many organizations do advocate for the ethical treatment of animals but some of these rules needed to become more universal. It was through openness to consider the other, research, critical analysis and the elements of the argumentative genre that the student was able to see her own position with more nuance and complexity and could argue for a holistic solution.

To my mind, at its core, sustainability is the capacity to see and create a livable future. This begins with a clear seeing of the present and the use of imagination to envision the steps to move forward on this continuum of time.

It has been in teaching English 1010 and gaining language along with my students around rhetorical awareness and situations, that I have discovered that exposing students to the fundamentals of strong composition also provides them with skills to see situations more clearly and begin to imagine the path to future outcomes and solutions.

One of the genres in my course's curriculum is a proposal letter. Students are asked to identify a problem and write a letter to a specific audience with a solution to the problem. Students, however, are asked to do research and consider several different solutions, weighing the pros and cons of each solution and consider their audience's perspective when justifying why their solution is best suited to solve the identified problem.

To help students fulfill this aspect of the assignment, students participated in an in-class workshop. After stating their problem at the top of the handout, students were tasked to set up a table where they defined three different stakeholders in the first column of a table and described their solutions across the first row of their table. Each of the empty middle boxes were left blank to fill in what the given stakeholder had to do, gain and lose if each solution was implemented. Instead of having each student fill out the entire table for all of their stakeholders and possible solutions for their own problem, students passed their worksheet to their classmates who completed one of the nine middle boxes.

By participating in this exercise students were introduced to nine different problems and got to flex their imagination. By thinking about the different stakeholders affected by a problem and their varying gains and responsibilities depending on the solution perused, students got to see the complexity and nuance surrounding issues facing our world today. Further, they had to consider how different people might react to a problem and different solutions.

When I consider texts from my discipline of origin that have been seminal in my own

development as a thinker and person, I often return to Wendell Berry's Jefferson Lecture, *It All Turns on Affection*. Central to Berry's argument about how we sustain the living earth is his understanding of the term imagination. Berry writes that, "The sense of the verb 'to imagine' contains the full richness of the verb 'to see.'" He explains further that,

From my [Berry's] own belief and experience, imagination thrives on contact, on tangible connection. For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it. ... By imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place (Berry 14).

As I reflect on my experience tutoring students on critical thinking, analysis and argument where they are asked to consider multiple perspectives and the structure of my own course with its emphasis on imagining the position of a given audience, I find that students are continually being led to imagine in the fullest sense of its meaning; to see issues fully, understand their own position on issues and then to empathize with the other before making a final judgement and action forward. It seems to me that, although disguised with different language, the basis of my study in environmental stewardship and the foundations of strong composition both speak sustainability. How can we understand the reality and truth of this moment and maintain intention to shape a livable future?

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