

Embracing Environment: Blending Literature, Writing, and Field Experience

How can we expect students to be stewards of an environment from which they are becoming increasingly isolated? Students learn about the environment within the framework of their science

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classes, but they can also experience the conflicts, joys, and responsibilities of being part of the natural world through story and poetry. We English teachers have a privileged position; we can take students to places through their emotional and social intelligences as they read literature, encouraging them to see the natural world as part of their own story. Let's find ways to use literature and writing to bring the concerns of the environment into the classroom.

In one of the most engaging books on the issue of environmentalism, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv discusses the "de-naturing" of childhood: "Nature-deficit disorder describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses." (34) Louv cites the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard scientist and author Edward O. Wilson, who hypothesized the idea of "biophilia" as "an urge to affiliate with other forms of life." (44) Further research supports Wilson's theory that people have a strong and positive response to green landscapes, trees, and water. This is an experience of the environment on a different level, one that will possibly not be addressed in a biology class. It is the experience of nature that is captured through poetry and journaling and, at some point, evidenced through thoughtful policy-making and stewardship.

Field experiences can, however, come with their own set of very real challenges. Some administrators may balk at encouraging them; in some cases, the school policies may seem unclear. Another obstacle to field experience is that it

requires us to operate differently from our inside classroom management. Scheduling our classes outside of the building is often daunting. For every obstruction to field experiences, however, there is an equal number of benefits. Field experiences change the climate of your classroom almost immediately and have a lasting effect. This is why the end-of-the-year-only "celebratory" field experience represents a sadly missed opportunity, in my opinion. Field experiences should also not substantially add to your work load if you are willing to let students do some of the planning and implementation in age-appropriate ways. Not all field experiences have to look like the traditional model: a platoon of students on a yellow bus. Some of your experiences might be assigned observations, single class "walk-outs," etc. Most importantly, field experiences, and the literature and writing that pertain to the "field," will energize your classroom and provide students with experiences of the natural world that are authentic and powerful.

There are many ways to bring the environment into your classroom and your classroom into the environment. Ultimately, the literature that inspires you as a teacher is the best place to start. I have found pieces of American literature useful to me. I will share the ways I have used them in my classroom, along with the type of field experience that they encourage.

Poetry Individual Student Observation

Walt Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"

I have used this poem many times as a way to begin the year. Whitman's notion of the value of observation and experience over instruction and information is a great way to ignite discussion in the classroom on the very first day. Because Whitman specifically uses nature as his tool to do this, it is the perfect way to introduce this theme. Students have just experienced the end of their summer; they have an investment in this topic. This is a great

time to raise the question: should our experience of education be separate from our experience of the natural world?

I keep the field experience simple on this one. I ask students to do a personal observation of the night sky, to look up "in perfect silence at the stars," (l.8) as the poem states. I ask them to write both an objective and an artistic description of their observations. Reading them aloud in the next class period can take you in many different directions: from science, to philosophy, to memoir.

Nonfiction Single Class "Walk-out"

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*

Many of us have struggled with trying to teach the Transcendentalists to a generation that is electronically absorbed. Ironically, who better than this generation to grapple with Thoreau's call to simplicity? I have found that many students enjoy the philosophical and reflective tone of this essay, and it is a great piece to begin a conversation about observing nature that is local and up-close. After reading Thoreau's essay of observation and reflection, read James Gorman's essay "Finding a Wild, Fearsome World Beneath Every Fallen Leaf." He describes a contemporary walk through Thoreau's woods with Edward O. Wilson, who is examining the "microwilderness" at his feet. Gorman highlights Wilson's scientific and social interest in nature's little creatures and small spaces, raising great questions about seeing nature on a small scale, which is the beginning of a larger appreciation and stewardship. The essay also creates a wonderful opportunity for a single class "walk-out"; take your class outside to any nearby community green space, on or off campus. Ask students to look at something as small as a handful of dirt and write about what they see. This could be the basis of a piece of descriptive writing or poetry. Eventually, draw differentiations between planned and unplanned spaces, discuss the notion of "wilderness," write letters to city planners about keeping your community green, or plan individualized wilderness sit-outs and observations in the spirit of Thoreau.

Novel

Full-day Field Experience/Individual Student Field Project

(Assorted titles that address the environment: *Ishmael*, Daniel Quinn; *The River Why*, David James Duncan; *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson; *Call of the Wild*, Jack London; *The Secret Garden*, Frances Hodgson Burnett, etc.)

I like to pair independent reading choices with research that leads into a service learning project. I have done it with issues that include, but are not limited to, environmentalism. It could, however, certainly be done as a single focus. I ask the students to follow their reading with some written analysis of how the novel addresses the environment. This could take the form of a traditional analytical essay, double-entry journal notes, a retelling of the novel's conflict from a different perspective, and so on. In the next phase of the project, they choose an area of interest within the topic and do some research that targets both an historical and contemporary perspective. The project culminates in a "service" that addresses the problem and is designed and executed by the student.

This project has at least two field experiences built into it. The first experience is a trip to the library to conduct research. Many students have never been to a large "research" library, and if we aim to create life-long learners, we need to teach them where to shop. I have taken the class to the library on city transportation and the school bus, but some teachers might be lucky enough to have a library within walking distance. Also, when on a large-scale field experience with your class, it is always a great opportunity to find a greenspace or park for lunch.

The other field experience in this project is one that students are going to conduct on their own. This will be the service component of their projects, what I refer to as "the call to action." You, as a teacher, can define "service" in many ways, as long as the action still feels meaningful to the students. Their service will allow them to spend some

individualized time in nature, sent with ideas and information, and ready to effect change. This could take the form of an "awareness" project, a fund-raising project, a clean-up project, etc. Finally, they will share these experiences with the class in a presentation that fits the objectives of the course. This becomes a great culminating activity, and if the students are gearing towards a Senior "project" at some point, it could be a suggested beginning point.

Many powerful pieces of writing address the natural world; our challenge as English teachers is to not only see their value, but to use them as a catalyst to allow our students to interact with that world. Field experiences create very dynamic learning. Our students will benefit from seeing the many ways that they are interconnected with nature in a classroom environment that fosters creativity, experience, and reflection. Louv notes E. O. Wilson's comments on creating a spirit of naturalism in the young. "Hands-on experience at the critical time, not systematic knowledge, is what counts in the making of a naturalist . . . Better to spend long periods of time just searching and dreaming." When we allow students to experience the natural world alongside powerful literature, we are providing them with such a place to search and dream.

Works Cited

- Louv, Richard. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006.
- Whitman, Walt. "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: Norton and Company, Inc., 1999. Pp. 1044-1045.

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Perhaps Now I Will Stand Still

*I've loved the slender forest paths
along the falling rivers,
the sounds of water and birds,
drumming the Earth with my footsteps,
but my bones are decaying,
the connections weakening with age.
I try to remember the light
filtering down through the firs,
glistening spider webs with tiny creatures
appearing and disappearing as if by magic.
I hold the vision in my imagination,
breathing carefully, following the guidance within.
Perhaps now I will stand still.*

— Don Hynes

Her Undamaged Self

*The coldest snow and ice,
frozen like rock,
carries in its crystalline memory
April warmth and returning life.
The hard rain scours the land
and our upturned faces.
We look down for relief
and there, between the sidewalk cracks,
a green shoot appears, piercing our grief
like the concrete mass,
speaking to our despair and longing
of our Mother and the complete mystery
of Her undamaged Self.
We're too weak to celebrate,
but the seeds of a new joy are emerging.
Nothing can deter
this most insignificant omen.*

— Don Hynes
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