Reflection, Agency and Advocacy as Feminist Pedagogy

Rethinking Online Environmental Education

Patty Born

This chapter describes the evolution of one online class, "Foundations of Environmental Education," which has typically been offered to graduate students at a liberal arts university in St Paul, Minnesota. The class, developed some 15 years ago by another faculty member, was originally structured in a traditional way, based on a teacher-student hierarchy, with teacher-identified outcomes, priorities, learning tasks, and assessments based on specific outputs defined and evaluated by the teacher. My position as an ecofeminist educator is that environmental education courses should be grounded in care, particularly since so many people are motivated to learn about and act on behalf of the environment as a result of their own positive feelings toward nature and animals. My belief was that the course needed a full deconstruction, reorganization and reconstruction grounded in an ethic of care. I wanted to disrupt the existing approach and move toward a more student-centered, care-oriented experience that valued students' lived experience, their own passions and questions, and explored issues that they identified as important. I also wanted to facilitate their own process of self-evaluation, and free them from any pressure that a traditional grading structure had previously created. I discuss my process of reflecting on student agency, and my impressions of the traditional, hierarchical structure of the original class and its impact on the student experience. Further, I describe how I applied feminist pedagogical approaches to my course, and share excerpts from student reflections and responses to these changes. In conclusion, I describe the impact the shifts had on my teaching and thinking, and how I have used the process to help me apply these principles to additional courses I teach.

This chapter describes the evolution of one online class, *Foundations of Environmental Education*, which I have been teaching for several years. I first describe the major outcomes and artifacts associated with this class as it was originally structured, and explain how they upheld traditional, hierarchical, neoliberal approaches and paradigms. Next, I explain how my positionality as an ecofeminist scholar-activist informed my process of redesigning the course, grounded in care, constructivism, and community. I applied feminist pedagogical approaches to redesign the course, and share excerpts from student reflections and responses to these changes. As a final take-away, I offer readers tangible suggestions should they wish to apply any of the strategies to their own courses.

The Context

The class that I focus on in this chapter is *Foundations of Environmental Education*—a graduate-level course designed for students with a variety of backgrounds and experience. Offered at a liberal arts university in St Paul, Minnesota (US), it is a required part of a Master's degree in Natural Sciences and Environmental Education, which has been a program at Hamline University for 25 years. The program is fully online, with field-based elective courses and independent study opportunities for students no matter their physical location. Hamline's School of Education has been offering online graduate courses since 2011. While it may seem ironic to offer environmental education courses online, this approach presents a number of important benefits: attracting, as it does, a much greater diversity of students, including those from rural areas, those from outside the state of Minnesota, those serving in the military, those with physical disabilities or limitations, and who couldn't otherwise access the campus. In many ways, online courses are accessible in ways that physical, face-to-face courses simply are not (Aneja, 2017).

The course *Foundations of Environmental Education* is one of the so-called core courses for the degree, which means that every degree-seeking student is required to complete it as part of their program. In the time that I have been program director and lead faculty in the program, I have taught the class eleven times. Other courses that I teach in the Master's program have focused on animals in environmental education, environmental education for early learners, sustainability education, environmental justice, and an overview course on learners and learning. Every year, I supervise at least 50 Masters students across our education graduate degree programs as they complete the culminating work of their program: either a written thesis or capstone project. For the most part, students in the program are working adults with a deep commitment to teaching and learning about the environment. Many work in traditional classroom settings. Others work in nonformal settings such as nature centers, parks, or zoos, and some work for environmental or civic non-profit agencies.

A commonality among these diverse backgrounds and professions is that the students are passionate about saving the planet, advocating for nature, and creating a hopeful future. Most share stories of childhoods spent exploring natural places with loved ones, memories of animals or wild places that have been important to them. In their initial applications to the graduate program, almost to a person, prospective students unabashedly talk about love: how it drives their passion for their work, how deeply they care for the planet and are concerned with environmental issues, how important it is that their own children and future generations can experience and feel that same deep love for Earth and its inhabitants. They have a vested, very personal interest in environmental education, and in many cases, a desire to learn more so that they can bring their passion and commitment to the environment to their own professional settings.

Environmental Education in Context

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, environmental education is defined as

> a process that allows individuals to explore environmental issues, engage in problem solving, and take action to improve the environment. As a result, individuals develop a deeper understanding of environmental issues and have the skills to make informed and responsible decisions. (epa.gov, 2018)

Others, including myself, take a more holistic view of environmental education, calling for it to include "critical thinking about issues of quality of life and human-nature interrelationships" (Stevenson, Wals, Heimlich, & Field, 2017, p. 52). It happens in classrooms, parks, nature centers, zoos: the list goes on. Wherever people are making connections to and learning about the environment, environmental education is happening.

For too long, wary of being too political or controversial, environmental education practitioners, particularly those in the United States, have espoused the mantra of teaching students how to think, not what to think [about environmental issues]. This approach carefully sidesteps any discourse or critical reflection on the role of advocacy in environmental education, which has arguably been a barrier to equipping students with the tools and agency to create change (Jickling, 2003). At times (although this is improving in some cases and spaces), environmental education's focus has felt somewhat neoliberal in the way that it tends to instrumentalize learners, promoting individual actions rather than looking more holistically at the intersections of environmental, social, and economic issues (Jickling, 2003; Lloro-Bidart, 2017; Meek & Lloro-Bidart, 2017) and the emotional components associated therein. The program in which I teach seeks to support students in a deeper interrogation of problematic anthropocentric behaviors, along with reflection on environmental advocacy, and offers an examination of multiple perspectives on environmental education pedagogies. It responds to students' love for the subject matter and honors their commitment to doing meaningful work on behalf of the planet.

My Positionality

I have worked as a faculty member in higher education for 15 years. I arrived here through a circuitous route: my early career included positions as diverse as park naturalist, wildlife research aide, natural resources specialist, museum educator, education director, and classroom teacher. That I have spent my adult years working as an educator in one form or another belies my own history as a struggling student.

Fortunately, I vividly recall what it felt like to really be seen: my fifth grade teacher seemed to recognize that I was happiest outdoors. She found whatever excuse she could to send me outdoors to take care of our school's resident "pets"—the chickens and ducks who lived in a courtyard between wings of the school building. An animal and nature-lover from a young age, I felt most comfortable and free outdoors among the animals. Out there, no one was expecting me to sit up, keep still, complete the worksheets, or print neatly. I simply needed to scatter cracked corn on the ground and I was doing enough. I was free to lie in the grass, talk to the animals, and enjoy the sun on my face.

But by the time I reached middle school, the expectations and requirements of schooling began to take their toll: I struggled to live up to the expectations of my white, upper-middle class suburban district. Teachers labeled me "sloppy" and openly mocked my messy handwriting. I didn't have the right clothes, the right hairstyle, the right friends. I became shy and introverted, and internalized the disapproval of others. Although I maintained decent grades, school felt like a daily struggle to me: having to ask permission to go to the restroom, having to consume everything on my plate before being allowed to leave the lunch room. Not being able to choose where I sat, or even *how* I sat (I was uncomfortable at the tiny plastic desk to which I was assigned and would have been much happier sprawled on the floor), having to take timed tests. Being taught a whitewashed, male-dominated version of history, social studies, and science, and being publicly derided or punished by the teachers when I questioned their version of truth. My painful (but sadly, not unusual) experiences in public school in the US taught me the education system was created to maintain legions of obedient

children who did what they were told, when they were told, how they were told.

I was lucky enough to have supportive adults in my life who helped me figure out how to navigate high school and eventually, college. I ultimately received a doctorate in education where I deepened my commitment to educational equity and critical pedagogies. I have been fortunate to make my professional home at a University with a commitment to social justice: for me that means actively working to dismantle systems of oppression, particularly within teacher education and traditional educational power dynamics (McCusker, 2017) and environmental education settings.

My early experiences as a student fundamentally informed and impacted my teaching. I disagreed with the oppressive approaches and indoctrination I had experienced throughout my years as a public school student and wanted to somehow undo them. It seemed to me that the purpose of education seemed to be centered around compliance and production, which felt harmful and wrong. But that memory of the ducks and chickens and my fifth-grade teacher continued to remind me that there was actually something beyond compliance and production. It was love. It was agency, freedom, a chance to learn from and with animals, to breathe fresh air and have time to reflect. It was a recognition of individual personhood; to that teacher, I was more than just a student who wouldn't sit still. Those hours spent outside with the chickens and ducks had a profound experience on me as a learner, one which has taken me years to unpack and which has affected my entire educational approach. Having shared my personal experience, I hope to have conveyed my own grounding as a teacher-educator and the elements of my own past which have inspired me as an educator and scholar-activist.

The Course

Originally developed some 15 years ago by another faculty member, *Foundations of Environmental Education* was structured in a very traditional way: based on a teacher-student hierarchy, it was characterized by teacher-defined outcomes, priorities, learning tasks, outputs, and assessments. It was developed and taught by a colleague prior to my "inheriting" it when I became director and lead faculty for the Master's degree program. The early version of this class contained a mix of history, research, and writing. It was intended for those who were working or interested in working in the environmental education field. The course has been taught online since its creation, and at its beginning, the class coincided with early versions of online teaching platforms, whose structure and functionality were limited. These early versions were taught using the Blackboard Learning Management System, and were set up in a read-respond-reflect format.

Requirements for the course included the three "R's" of online learning: reading, research, and wRiting. The assignments, their ostensible purposes, and the assessment tools used are detailed in Table 1. In the original version of the course, students were assessed largely on their ability to make regular, substantive, coherent discussion posts, to meet minimum requirements for word count and other details, and to produce artifacts such as essays and powerpoint presentations. These assignments were rather superficial, and their assessments were designed to show that students were reading the material and engaging with the online discussions. While filled with important content and the potential for rich supplementary material, the course felt somewhat lacking to me, focused as it was on one [white, western, masculine] perspective of environmental education, and requiring students' efficient production of artifacts: descriptive environmental timelines, discussion posts, and lengthy writing assignments. There was a significant amount of reading included with the course, but very little material reflective of perspectives of anyone other than the western, white, masculine identifying-scholars who dominate the environmental education literature.

The assessment rubrics I inherited focused strictly on the quantifiable elements of each assignment such as word count, number of research sources, and APA adherence. I was frustrated at having to constantly monitor students' discussion posts and written assignments, counting words and responses, and felt there must be a better way to engage them. Prioritizing quantity over things like quality or authenticity felt, to me, like a form of policing and had a rigidity that did not feel conducive to the sort of deep reflection or engagement that the subject matter demands.

In my mind, this approach seemed disrespectful to the students. Most of the students were working professional adults who had pretty clear ideas about what they wanted and needed out of a graduate degree. The structure of the course afforded them little to no agency, limited choice as to the resources available and assignments required, and it privileged the written word and adherence to the administrative minutiae of rubrics as evidence of success. As is clear in Table 1, the course requirements and grading criteria were stringent and narrowly focused.

Table 1

Assignments and assessments in the original course prior to curriculum redesign.

Original course assignment/requirement	Ostensible purpose	Assessment tool used by instructor
Instructor-selected readings related to each week's theme.	**To provide information about that theme and/or examples.**	**None.**
Discussion posts and responses (weekly or more often).	To engage students with one another.	Checklist: • 1-2 "original ideas" • 2-4 responses to others' posts • Each post should be less than 200 words
Environmental Timeline: Written or submitted as a slideshow presentation.	To contextualize the role of environmental education within the past 100 years of US history.	At least 15 events included for a grade of B. At least 20 events included for a grade of A.
Environmental Elder Research: 5000 word essay describing one person's contribution to the field of environmental education. Students select a person from the list provided by the instructor.	To offer an in-depth study of one person's perspective on or contributions to the field.	Writing rubric, APA adherence.

The structure of the original class upheld an oppressive educational hegemony where the instructor held the power to decide what information was important, how students should engage with the content, and evaluate the quality of their engagement based on criteria determined by the instructor. The end result was that the students were reliant on the instructor to make a final determination as to their knowledge, capability, and command of the material. Table 2 provides some examples of how the course as it was originally designed reinforced hegemonic educational practices.

Table 2

Traditional educational hegemonies reinforced in the original class prior to curriculum redesign.

Tasks	Hegemonic educational practices reinforced
Weekly themes pre-selected and static.	**The instructor has determined what students should focus on and when. Course structure, pacing and flow are established before the course even begins, eliminating flexibility or response to student questions/priorities.**
Initial discussion threads are created by instructor. Requirements for student work are rigid and based on word count and quantity of submissions.	Prompts and responses are centered on instructor's perspective on "what matters" each week. Students are graded on word count and frequency of submissions. Students are incentivized to create lengthy, frequent, often verbose responses. Students are discouraged from introducing new ideas or challenging others' perspectives, since the number of responses to others is prioritized over content.
Readings selected ahead of time and all are required.	Readings and additional materials offer only that perspective which is prioritized by the instructor; scholars and authors are limited to instructor's knowledge base/comfort level. Students are required to consume all reading materials in order to receive credit.
Envrionmental Timeline Project grade is based on number of events included.	Students are given two grades to choose from and grade is based on number of timeline events rather than other, more meaningful criteria. Timeline represents one perspective.
Environmental Elder Research Project. Students choose an individual from a list provided by the instructor or must "seek approval" to choose an alternative.	Term "environmental elder" hints of cultural appropriation. List provided by instructor is comprised of mostly white American males who impacted environmental history, many of whom also had problematic, colonialist mindsets and behaviors. Many voices and perspectives are erased. Requiring students to seek approval discourages students for whom "challenging authority" is difficult or culturally discouraged.
Final paper has rigid requirements related to word count and APA adherence.	Favors only the written word as a means of effective, meaningful communication; disadvantages students for whom writing is difficult or those for whom English is a second language.

An Ecofeminist Perspective

I first taught the class about six years ago, but after teaching it just a few times, it started to feel jarring. Something wasn't quite sitting well with me. I grew convinced that the course needed a full deconstruction, reorganization, and reconstruction. Instead of a focus on historical events and white male influencers, I felt the class should instead contextualize environmental education, present a variety of perspectives, and recognize the interconnectedness of environmental education. I felt that the learning community should be responsive to the varied and diverse lived experience of the students. I wanted the class to reflect some of the values that are central to environmental education: love for the planet, a desire to dismantle power structures and practices that are harmful to Earth and its inhabitants. Tenets of ecopedagogy (Gaard, 2008, Khan, 2008) drove me to recreate the online class to be one that valued collaboration, community building, and recognition of the multitudes of ways of knowing, feeling, and engaging. As it turns out, these values also intersect with many paradigms of feminist pedagogies (McCusker, 2017) and with Richards' cyberfeminist pedagogy (2011). I wanted to create an online class where students would be free to take time to reflect deeply on material and create thoughtful, considered responses. As others have noted, shy or introverted students find a freedom to contribute to virtual discussions or be vulnerable. These students may feel

stifled, threatened, or discouraged in the face-to-face setting (Aneja, 2017; Russell, 2019) where they are subjected to other students' body language, gestures, rolled eyes, and implicit or explicit verbal or visual critiques of identity and ideas.

I sought to disrupt the existing approach and move toward a more student-centered, care-oriented, shared community that valued students' lived experience, their own passions and questions, and explored issues that they identified as important. I wanted to create a space for them to express their own feelings about the environment and to let those feelings, questions, and curiosities guide their work in the class. I also wanted students to interrogate the binaries typically associated with environmental education: people/nature; good choices/bad choices, science/emotion, hope/despair (Fletcher, 2017). Finally, as a way of honoring their individual journeys and cognizant of the deeply personal nature of the class, I also wanted to facilitate their own process of self-evaluation, and free them from the need to perform in the ways that the traditional grading structure had previously demanded.

I have long tried to maintain an approach to teaching that challenges students to question, among other things, the role and impact of power structures that have dominated their educational experiences. I seek to support students in reflecting on their own positionality, the systems of privilege in which they were raised (or not), their own relations with nature, and their notions of community. As a scholar-activist, I'm concerned with the intersections of individuals' relations with self/other, nature, and social systems. Feminist pedagogy gives emphasis to empowering student voices, collaboration, community building and lived experience (Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009). To me, an ecofeminist pedagogy calls for interrogating the human/animal/nature connection to help students expand their thinking beyond traditional—and highly valued in western cultures—anthropocentric paradigms. Ecofeminist values intersect with feminist pedagogical approaches to create communities of learners, democratic classrooms, and engage with social [and environmental] justice. My position as an ecofeminist educator is that environmental education courses should be grounded in care, particularly since so many people are motivated to learn about and act on behalf of the environment as a result of their own positive feelings toward nature and animals. I aim to work within the intersections of social, ecological, and interspecies justice (Humes, 2008) and I seek to teach for a "just, democratic, and sustainable planetary civilization" (Kahn, 2008, p.9). I seek to do this at the "micro" level in my teaching, as well as the macro-level in my work as a scholar-activist.

Above all, I didn't want the class to reproduce that neoliberal, individualist mindset so prevalent in environmental education approaches. This mindset tends to isolate practitioners and those they teach: focusing on individuals and events without context, often burdening the individual with guilt, anxiety and overwhelm, without seeing the intersections that are so prevalent in environmental work (Lloro-Bidart & Semenko, 2017). I felt it was important to move away from environmental education's tendency to focus on the responsibility of the individual alone to solve environmental problems. It seemed appropriate, then, to reconfigure the class to be more just, democratic, and sustainable, a central tenet of many feminist pedagogies (Llewellyn and Llewellyn, 2015). Finally, realizing the class would continue to take place online, I sought to engage in a sort of eco-"cyberfeminist pedagogy" as Richard (2011, p. 7) describes, creating an online class grounded in an "ethics of care, community-based curriculum, collaboration, and embodied praxis."

Most of all, I wanted the class to be a place where students could engage with the content as an act of "political love" (Tolbert & Bazzul, 2019), acknowledging that "the possibility of remaining neutral has never existed" (p. 305) letting their love for the subject matter drive the ways in which they interacted with material and with one another, and ultimately with themselves as learners. Tolbert

and Bazzul's notion of teaching as an act of political love has helped me to clarify my thinking and positionality as an educator, allowing me a freedom and courage to assert my own stance as an eco-feminist educator.

I reflected deeply on these values as I redesigned the class. Knowing that my goals were to ground the course in an ethic of care, create community, elevate student voice and agency, attend to power dynamics, and engage in the course as an act of love, I knew a complete overhaul was in order. I looked at everything from the readings to the assignments, to the deadlines and assessment tools and sought to re-generate the course, aligned more directly with ecofeminist pedagogical approaches.

I placed reminders in the syllabus and in each daily announcement about how we, as a learning community, could care for one another, and invited students to share their own ideas. In addition, I sent out weekly email notes to students, checking in on their well-being, their level of energy for the week, and their perceived level of commitment to the class at that particular time. I threw out the expensive and outdated textbooks, replacing them with resources students could access and download free of charge such as those from the [North American Association for Environmental Education](#) and [Learning for Justice](#) (formerly Teaching Tolerance). I also added additional resources by Black scholars and scholars of color, as well as scholars identifying as LGBTQIA (refers to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual). I identified several overarching themes as "possible pathways" in the course, but left each module (a duration of about two weeks) to take shape based on student questions, discoveries, or ideas. I included content related to the development of environmental education, but sought to include diverse perspectives and urged students to do so as well. I grounded the content in the idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), an idea presented quite early in the course. My aim here was that students would apply lenses of gender, race, class, ability, and socio-economic status to their readings, assignments, and experiences in the class. My aim was to employ feminist research methodologies (Abusaa et al, 2020) as I approached the activities in the course re-design. I also established a "Go and Do" activity, an expectation that students would venture outdoors each week (or more often, if possible) to reconnect with Earth and remember their own deeply personal reasons for engaging in this work.

Table 3 describe changes I made to main course elements, indicate which ecofeminist pedagogical approaches they reflect, and provide specific examples to illustrate.

Table 3

Examples of ecofeminist pedagogical strategies used in the class.

Course activity	Action	Ecofeminist pedagogical approach	Examples from course
Readings and supplemental resources	**Updated to reflect scholars who identify as BIPOC (refers to individuals who identify as black, indigenous, or people of color) and/or LGBTQIA and present important, previously silenced perspectives on environmental education. Optional guiding questions or "nudges" offered to help students frame their responses.**	**• No voice is privileged over another** **• Disrupt hierarchy** **• Student ideas and contributions are valued and may drive discussions or other activities** **• Clear and transparent objectives, assessment measure, and expectations**	**• Readings and resources come from a variety of sources; more than half are written by BIPOC and LGBTQIA scholars.** **• Students are invited to share resources they want to contribute or feel has value to the course.** **• All materials are free to students (our library pays).** **• All instructor-selected readings and course material is shared ahead of time to ensure students have access and to allow students to prioritize time and reflection, rather than busywork.** **• Any rubric that was used was shared with students ahead of time.**
Course themes	Redesigned away from "dates and faces" toward more meaningful engagement with the subject matter. Loose themes identified at the start but openness to change as student needs emerge.	• Interrogating binaries in environmental education • Hope • Advocacy/social change • Engaging in pro-environment behaviors	• Themes that reflect ecofeminist and ecopedagogical values including environmental equity and access; the role of advocacy. • Student and class needs drive the themes which emerge as the course progresses.
Discussions	Students invited to create their own discussion fora and topics. No requirements as to word count, number of responses, etc.	• Dismantling hierarchies • Intersectionality • Student agency	• Students led and guided discussions—I didn't intrude or guide unless asked.
Environmental Issue Project	Students identify an issue that is important to them, conduct research, seek out multiple perspectives.	• Research that calls for reflection on issues as well as focusing on marginalized communities • Recognizing and honoring emotion as central to environmental education	• Students had freedom to choose the topic, urged to seek resources from BIPOC scholars. • Students were asked to research multiple perspectives on the issue. • Students had freedom to present or write, illustrate, make a video, create multimedia, etc.
Go and Do assignments	Students were encouraged to go outdoors on a regular basis and ground themselves in their own "why."	• Sustainability • Regeneration	• Students were invited to go outdoors every day or as often as possible to tune in to nature and remind themselves why. • Time outdoors is healing. • Workload determined and managed by students.
Portfolio assignment	Student collection of impactful work and reflection on their experience	• Student voice and agency • Disrupting power dynamics • Hope • Learning as an act of political love	• Students are asked for feedback about course structure and content
Final meeting	Students initiate and lead a one-to-one meeting with instructor, either in person or virtually.	• Student voice and agency • Community building • Connection • Interrupting hierarchy	• Students choose what to share and why. • Students and I connect personally for a period of time. • Student reflects on their whole experience in the class. • Student shares what was important, what had an impact, etc. • Student determines final grade for the course.

Perhaps the most radical and meaningful change I implemented was to *eliminate grading altogether*. Instead, I shifted to a portfolio-based approach. I wanted students to look to themselves for assessment of their learning and to reflect on their own growth and development. I also wanted to know what they most valued about the course, what resources meant the most to them and why. I described this approach as follows in the syllabus:

Throughout the course, you will compile a collection of resources that you deem to be of high value and which will likely serve as resources during this class and as you progress in your program here at Hamline University. The purpose of your portfolio is to share with me the elements of the class that you felt had the most significant impact on you as a learner. Hence, you have total freedom about what to include. Your portfolio should include a variety of elements; and may include the following:

- summary of your thoughts on the environmental education programs you visited during this course (you should have visited at least 4 programs over the course of the semester);
- your environmental education philosophy;
- examples of environmental education lessons you developed that you are particularly proud of;
- articles or readings that were especially powerful for you;
- examples of your best work during the course: for example, discussions that you participated in where you felt particularly engaged, video presentations you submitted that you felt demonstrated a high quality contribution, notes that you took during your research project, or something else.

Students compiled their portfolios over the course of the semester, and I reserved the final two weeks of the semester for one-on-one meetings. I invited students to respond to the questions shown below. Many chose to write letters to me, and then to present their portfolio collections as they read their letters. Many submitted letters to me and approached the portfolio sharing process as a very informal

conversation. Some created multimedia presentations that responded to these prompts. I was open to receiving this communication however students chose to share it with me.

Toward the end of the semester, we will have a face-to-face or virtual meeting, where you will share your portfolio with me, and the following questions will guide our agenda. This approach may feel challenging, confusing, or liberating to you (maybe all of the above!). I encourage you to give it a try and continue to stay in communication with me throughout the semester so that I can best support you.

- What about this course challenged you the most?
- What did you most enjoy about the course?
- How engaged were you in the various course expectations; such as the readings, discussions, research?
- How productive and constructive were your discussion contributions?
- What helped you to develop or grow as a practitioner of environmental education?
- How did you contribute to your colleagues' growth and learning during this course?
- How did you select your portfolio materials? What did you choose *not* to include and why?
- For some students, self-assessment is challenging. For others, it's empowering. How did you experience it? What was it like to be in charge of your own assessment and performance in the class? How comfortable were you with that level of control?
- What is the final grade that YOU think best reflects your performance in the course this semester? Why? For help with this, review assignment requirements and rubrics, guidelines for posting "good" discussion topics, my feedback, feedback from your peers, etc.

Admittedly, meeting with each participant over coffee or virtually is time-consuming. With an average of 23 students every semester, I'm committing myself to well over 23 hours of meetings in what is usually a very busy time of the year. It is tiring. Many of my students are only free on evenings or weekends. I open up my calendar and try to accommodate meeting preferences, but this means missing dinners with my family and a lot of weekends. On the other hand, I am energized by each conversation. I am always so happy to have created this opportunity to meet with students so that they can share their experiences with me. I feel it allows me to get to know each student at a much more intimate level than I would otherwise. I also get good feedback on my instructional style, course content and pacing, and suggestions for improvement. I'm struck by the generosity that the students bring to these conversations: they are consistently willing to share their successes, challenges, learning, impacts, as well as how the course affected their own teaching practice and stance toward environmental education.

Conclusion

Following is some of the feedback that I have received which has underscored the importance of these approaches.

> This past semester has been a real challenge for me, from teaching in the classroom for the first time (during a pandemic) and beginning my grad school journey, it has all been an adjustment. But I feel that I have handled all the challenges and come out the other side a better educator and better able to manage my time.

> To be honest, I feel I put forth as much effort as I could. I read all of the readings and completed my assignments, but with all of the chaos of this year I didn't do anything beyond what I felt was the minimal expectation. I still feel I was engaged and learned a lot, however I think I could have done a little better if I had more mental stamina to put towards this work. However, being a teacher this [pandemic] year has proven to really push me to the ends of my work limits.

Based on this feedback, it is clear to me that students assess their own performance and expectations of themselves. Even when they find that challenging, they are willing to do so with frankness and honesty. They candidly reflect on their own participation, energy level and investment in certain course activities. Since they are the ones doing the reflecting there is no hierarchical judgement or valuation of their participation or contributions—any of that comes from them, not me. They reflect on their learning and growth, and in so doing, have become more clear about their own expectations of themselves as learners and participants.

It is important to me to also share some feedback about the "go and do" activity, which encouraged students to venture outdoors as often as possible to reconnect with nature in whatever way made sense for them: drawing or writing, hiking or running, camping, canoeing, or simply sitting and being. Students consistently share that this experience, perhaps more so than any other, is important to them and reconnects them to their love for the environment. This speaks to the need described earlier to create environmental education spaces as places of political love, and to freely and unabashedly encourage students to seek out opportunities to feel safe, loved, and supported by nature.

> The readings and discussions that have been presented in class [have] influenced my relationship with nature... when I find myself being outside, I allow myself to almost surrender to the emotions and feelings that arise while I bathe in nature's medicine. I don't take the natural environment that surrounds me for granted because the readings and discussions have reinforced this idea within me that we are not only connected to nature, but we are nature.

> I feel like with the way things are right now it is so easy to get lost in a daze, and much harder to find the motivation and desire to do things and to keep pushing. I feel like the [Go and Do] assignment for me is something worth doing. When people come to me for advice about being stressed, angry or lost, I always tell them to imagine that they are a tree, that they are grounded, and to close their eyes, and imagine they can hear the leaves in the wind. I have always found that this makes me feel calm.

Taking an ecofeminist stance toward the redesign of this course, and maintaining an ecofeminist pedagogical approach has been deeply rewarding. I have seen students be challenged by reading material, new ideas and paradigms, and by the self-evaluation process. In my situation, the ecofeminist approaches were supportive of student growth, reflection, and application to their own practice as educators. Perhaps most importantly, though, the ethic of care and the willingness to approach the subject matter as an act of political love was the most transformative of all.

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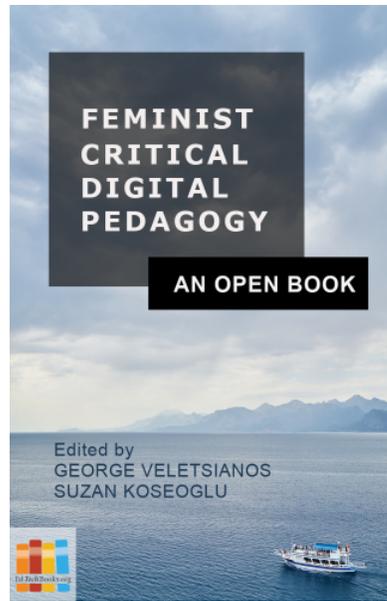
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