

# Editors' Introduction: Sustainable Communities and Environmental Communication in Higher Education

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Environmentalist David Orr lamented some twenty years ago that universities “still educate the young for the most part as if there were no planetary emergency” (27). This emergency, as *Reflections* readers are well aware, refers to the shifting and collapse of massive ecosystems and agricultural systems because of human-caused pollution and climate change coupled with exponential population growth. The planetary shifts call on us to reconceive our positions as activists, scholars, and teachers in relation to our communities, to the earth, and to one another. These shifts provide an opportunity for us to rethink the stark and often arbitrary distinctions between our research, teaching, and service or between our colleges and universities and our communities. Students and fellow community members need to be prepared for, and feel agency in, our changing world. In many ways, higher education has heeded Orr’s call.

Accordingly, in recent years, colleges and universities have rapidly increased their

offerings of sustainability-related courses, adding majors, minors, certificates, and graduate programs to their curricula. Today undergraduate degrees in sustainability are available at more than 77% of American institutions (Friedman) with more than 642 institutions now offering degrees in environmental sustainability (“Princeton Review”). In 2007, Arizona State University founded the nation’s first School of Sustainability. Since then, other programs have sprung up such as the University of Montana’s Climate Change Studies Program, in which faculty are brought together from forestry, humanities, geography, economics, and energy technology to offer a minor degree focused on climate “science, society, and solutions” (Phear). Several small colleges such as Unity College in Maine and Green Mountain College in Vermont offer “environmental liberal arts” degrees and have constructed their entire undergraduate curricula around sustainability science.

Higher education has also responded to the fast-evolving spinoff from sustainability studies: food studies. As students become increasingly aware that the current global/industrial food system accounts for about one-third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions as is implicated in environmental justice and public health crises, students become energized to find better ways of growing and eating healthier, more equitable, and less fossil-fuel-dependent food. Pioneer food systems educator Molly Anderson of Middlebury College observes that societal interest in local and sustainable food is happening at the same time as students’ growing interest in sustainable agriculture on college campuses: “Students are demanding [food] courses,” she explains, “demanding that there be attention to food, and demanding that there be student farms set up at their colleges and universities” (qtd. in Holt). The University of California Berkeley and the University of Michigan have established university-wide, trans-disciplinary programs in food systems; Tufts University offers an online certificate program in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems; New York University offers an MA in Food Studies (Holt); and University of Colorado Boulder recently established a professional master’s program in Food Systems.

The field of Rhetoric and Composition mirrors these interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary national trends in sustainability and food studies.

The turn of the millennium marked a critical time for scholarship on the connections between writing and the environment: Christian Weisser and Sidney Dobrin published *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches* in 2001, the same year that Derek Owens published his generative book, *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation*. Owens argues that “a sustainable society cannot be created without sustainably-conscious curricula” (27). Now, at the fifteenth anniversary of the publishing of both books, we would like to take stock of how the field has responded to their calls and look ahead to future work. Given today’s increasingly urgent environmental threats of climate change, drought, overpopulation, and food insecurity, this special issue on “Sustainable Communities and Environmental Communication” offers a representation of innovative ways in which scholars in Rhetoric and Composition and related disciplines are responding to environmental crises, and it provides a call to action to scholars and teachers who have not yet connected their research and courses to environmental concerns.

Over the last two decades, environmental sustainability has been a popular subject for what Dobrin and Weisser call “activist intellectuals” in writing, rhetoric, and related fields: “intellectuals who take their work to the streets, as it were, in smaller, more localized public venues” (*Natural* 55, 87). One strand of what Dobrin and Weisser popularized as “ecocomposition,” studies the connections between writing and environment, nature writing, writing about nature and environmental concerns, place-based writing, and “the discursive construction of the natural world” (Dobrin and Weisser 4). This branch of ecocomposition theory and pedagogical practice can trace its influences to germinal works such as Killingsworth and Palmer’s 1992 classic, *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America*. As Dobrin and Weisser, Owens, and many writers since them have suggested, “environment” becomes a critical category alongside race, class, and gender, which are always situated and which so often intersect with environmental justice issues. But as Dobrin and Weisser have argued, “the prefix ‘eco’ must not be represented as merely ‘environmental’ as it often is, but instead must be understood specifically as a study of relationships. . . ecocomposition is the study of written discourse and its relationships to the places in which it is situated and situates” (*Natural* 10). It studies not only natural environments but made environments, including digital ones.

In another strand of ecocomposition or what Dobrin now calls “ecological writing studies,” scholars study connections between writing and ecology, a concept that can trace its roots back to the 1980s’ emphasis on the social and situated nature of writing, and particularly, to Marilyn Cooper’s 1986 *College English* article “The Ecology of Writing,” which argues that writing is not an individual process, but (as most post-process theory argues) that the writer exists in dynamic relation to a web of systems, is influenced by and influences them (*Postcomposition; Ecology*). This theoretical strand of ecocomposition studies the ecological nature of discourse, “the relationships between discourse and natural systems, between language and environment, and between writing and ecology” (*Natural* Dobrin and Weisser 2). Similarly, Jenny Edbauer introduced the influential concept of “rhetorical ecology,” which “reads rhetoric both as a process of distributed emergence and as an ongoing circulation process” (13). Both ecocomposition and rhetorical ecologies use ecological methodologies to study and theorize writing and rhetoric.

In light of these theoretical moves, this special issue examines higher education’s role in helping students and communities to understand how language, writing, and rhetoric intersect with changing natural systems and the need to protect human and environmental resources. It also examines how the environment is represented; how it is communicated; how it shapes discourse. In particular, this volume explores the ways in which faculty and students in subjects such as writing, communication, history, and environmental studies are well positioned to intervene in issues of sustainability and environmental justice in the classroom, in scholarship, and in their local, national, and global communities through many different genres, *techné*, and methodologies. These include environmental rhetorics, environmental communication, environmental writing, rhetorical ecologies, ecocomposition, service-learning, nature writing, eco-pedagogy, eco-literacy, and critical food literacy, to name a few. Although this special issue addresses a wide range of perspectives on many different themes and questions worth exploring, it is by no means exhaustive. We hope that readers will glean from the diversity of perspectives, the vast number of possibilities for teaching about sustainability through our classes.

This volume is devoted to articles emerging from presentations and conversations at the 2015 inaugural Conference on Community Writing, held in Boulder, Colorado. We called to attendees to submit either full-length articles or shorter pieces, which we call “snapshots,” that explore how sustainability and environmental writing and rhetoric intersect with Rhetoric and Composition and related disciplines and how they are communicated in theory and practice. We have organized the manuscripts into four categories: digital studies, environmental communication, environmental and food justice, and writing ecologies. To some degree, the categories are fairly arbitrary as many of the articles’ purposes and insights cross thematic and methodological boundaries. We hope that they provide an exciting illustration of the broad possibilities for sustainability studies as it intersects with rhetoric and writing.

Two of the essays offer innovative connections between digital studies, writing, and environmental rhetoric. John Tinnell’s snapshot, “Augmenting the Wildlife Exhibits: A Community Media Project with the Denver Museum of Nature and Science” details an undergraduate course in environmental rhetoric, in which students used augmented reality (AR) to augment the traditional museum panels often included as part of a museum exhibit. In partnership with museum staff, students researched and wrote curated materials about wildlife, using available mobile technologies to augment the panels’ scientific information about the animals. Tinnell’s purpose was to ask students to highlight the relationship between animals and humans in art, literature, film, religion, and other cultural subjects. The snapshot offers an entry point for teachers and community partners interested in partnering on a digital public writing project that can enhance citizen knowledge.

Jen England’s article, “Sustainable Worlds, Sustainable Words: Using Digital Games to Develop Environmental Awareness in Writing Classrooms,” provides a framework for using digital games to enhance student engagement with environmental concepts through simulated experiential learning. Through the use of the free mobile app *The Sims Freeplay* and simulated scenarios, England enhances students’ critical, rhetorical, and ethical understanding of environmental issues, such as the ethics of gardening with GMOs, so that students

can more effectively become advocates for solutions to the real world problems they encounter. England's article provides a model for how students can embed themselves within a virtual world to grapple with some of the most complex environmental problems we face.

Four of our essays study communication strategies used to talk about our changing environment. In "Community Resilience through Public Engagement: A Study of Outreach and Science Communication in a Coastal National Park Site," Jamie Remillard uses the open-ended approaches found in writing pedagogy to improve environmental communication in national park programs. Drawing from her studies of interpretative programs for coastal walks along Fire Island National Seashore in post-Hurricane Sandy, Remillard theorizes that moving toward collaborative, explorative activities can elicit unpredictable responses allowing participants to shape their own learning experiences. Remillard's engaged model of environmental communication has the potential to contribute to greater resilience in communities.

Doug Cloud's article, "Communicating Climate Change to Religious and Conservative Audiences: The Case of Katharine Hayhoe and Andrew Farley," examines the effective rhetorical moves used by a scientist/pastor, husband/wife team in reaching fellow conservative Evangelical climate skeptics. Convinced that climate change attitudes are more about "tribe" than logic, Cloud elucidates three rhetorical moves used by Hayhoe and Farley to combine faith-based rhetoric with science. They include shared values, "backyard" observations, and disparagement of liberal environmentalists. Cloud presents the effectiveness and ethical limitations of each.

In "The Skunkwork of Ecological Engagement," John Ackerman, Caroline Gotschalk Druschke, Bridie McGreavy, and Leah Sprain draw from Jenny Edbauer's concept of "rhetorical ecologies" to posit a "work" of rhetoric – "skunkwork" – describing "informal spaces of learning, creativity, self-coordination, and transformation" in relation to natural disasters. The authors delineate four attributes of skunkwork (proximity, movement, ecological narration, and weak theory), which they call for as a critical type of ecological engagement.

In “Environmental Justice and Precaution: Reimagining Public Risk Representation,” Barbara George studies the rhetorical challenge of opposing hydraulic fracturing, given the dominant discourse and practices, which favor energy policies. George uses New York’s successful anti-fracking ban as a model, one in which the precautionary principle and environmental justice were leveraged to assess risk. She provides interested advocates with *techne*: inventive and online networks, citizen knowledge making, and shared “community-based rhetorical scholarship” from which new “authorities” on the environment can emerge.

The next three essays offer ways to bring social justice and sustainability questions into college courses. Jane Haladay, Sarah Hart Micke, and Ruth Cary facilitate exploration outside the classroom, asking students to investigate their institutions and communities in ways that productively de-center authority while empowering students to work with community leaders and become agents of positive change.

In “More ‘Native’ To Place: Nurturing Sustainability Traditions through American Indian Studies Service Learning,” Jane Haladay asks her students to get down into the dirt, ploughing into legacies of Euroamerican domination, while literally digging into soil that is rich with history and possibility. While students do service-learning projects at an organic farm at Hawkeye Indian Cultural Center—planting, weeding, harvesting, and more—sustainability and healthful food practices become real to them while they act on their right to healthy communities—environmentally, collectively, and personally. Her project affirms and encourages rediscovery of traditional ways of knowing and living while fostering productive relationships between the university and community.

Sarah Hart Micke’s “Sustainability, Place, and Rhetoric: A Case Study of a Levinian Pedagogy of Responsibility,” details her students’ investigation of their university’s presentation of institutional history. Her students “rewrite” the authoritative version of an atrocity that involves the university’s founder, making the facts accessible to other students and the general public while widening their own understanding of local and national history. The assignment develops

students' conception of place, making clear that there are histories of any given locale and moment. Through such explorations, students help teach others while making people visible who have long been pushed to the margins of mainstream America.

Ruth Cary describes in "The Food Justice Portrait Project: First-Year Writing Curriculum to Support Community Agency and Social Justice," a project in which first-year writing students meet local activists who are working to improve their communities. After learning about the community organizers' commitment to their neighbors and neighborhoods, students work and write collaboratively to create poster-portraits of the activist projects that reject the charity model of social reform, highlighting instead, the achievements of leaders who are dedicated to encouraging personal agency.

The final essay uses metaphors of ecology to re-consider the arrangements by which we instantiate community writing programs. In "The Rhetorical Imagination of Writing Across Communities: *Nomos* and Community Writing as a Gift-Giving Economy," Michelle Hall Kells examines the metaphorical confluence between notions of ecology and economy to argue that there is a deep connection between taking care of our spheres of belonging (ecology) and organizing our resources for our spheres of belonging (economy). Invoking the principles of gift-giving economy, this article offers this story of Writing Across Communities as a representative anecdote toward re-considering the cultural and economic arrangements by which we instantiate community writing programs.

In addition to the articles, we offer five book reviews in this issue, all of which focus on our theme of sustainable communities, and the first three of which focus directly on environmental issues. In his review of the collection *Green Voices: Defending Nature and the Environment in American Civic Discourse* (2016), edited by Richard D. Besel and Bernard K. Duffy, Garrett Stack explains the power of the editors' choice to offer a sweeping chronological view of the great speeches of environmental orators, past and present. Next, Aleashia Walton Valentin reviews *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere, 4<sup>th</sup> edition* (2015), by Robert Cox and Phaedra Pezzullo, which offers a historical overview of the field of environmental communication.



In his review of *The Politics of Pain Medicine: A Rhetorical-Ontological Inquiry* (2015) by S. Scott Graham, Justin Mando urges rhetoricians who are interested in new materialism and health communication to read this rhetorical-ontological study for its systems-focused approach to analysis. The next two reviews focus on ecological perspectives for writing programs and for community research. In *Ecologies of Writing Programs: Program Profiles in Context*, Jennifer Herald assesses the authors, Mary Jo Reiff, Anis Bawarshi, Michelle Balllif, and Christian Weisser's argument that writing programs not only function like ecologies, but they are indeed ecologies in and of themselves. Finally, Sarah Stanley reviews *Participatory Critical Rhetoric* by Michael Middleton, Aaron Hess, Danielle Enders, and Samantha Senda-Cook, a book about what rhetorical scholarship looks like from the perspective of a rhetorical critic who is also a participant. We hope that these reviews inspire you to read deeply!

We hope that you find the articles and book reviews that follow to be powerful testaments to our colleagues' innovative work in environmental communication, rhetorics, and pedagogies. Thank you to all who submitted and contributed to this volume.

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