

Going green is something that everyone can do. It is something as simple as turning off the lights, recycling, or using new technology. As a teacher, it is not only my responsibility to influence my students, but it is my responsibility to leave them the best planet I possibly can.

Step up. Take charge. You can make a difference.

### STUDENT COMMENTS

As a freshman at South Putnam High School, I have the opportunity to help my environment on a daily basis. Every classroom provides me with a recycling bin that I use when I want to throw away old assignments. Also, in Ms. Perrin's class we use our computers on a regular basis. When I am given time in class to proofread my assignments, I do it on the computer. By doing this, I am not using as much paper as I would have in the past.

~ Haley Bain (Freshman)

When I go off to college, I am going to make an effort to become a greener student. I have to prepare the world for my future generations, and I could start as soon as I go off to college. I plan to walk or ride my bike to class instead of driving to class. I am planning to attend a smaller college that will make this more feasible. This plan is not only eco friendly, but it will help me save some of my precious, hard-earned money.

~ Derek Dean (Senior)

At home, I can do many small things to help my family stay green. Recently, my parents and I replaced our old light bulbs with new energy efficient ones. This change is magnified by the fact that we turn out the lights when we leave rooms. My family also recycles all our paper, metals cans, and plastic products. We also try to take shorter showers in order to conserve water. We do many little things to try to change our environment.

~ Jade Asher (Sophomore)

## Connecting Memory and Research Through Eco-Composition

*Ashley Nicole Ellison  
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We are in the middle of snowy woods at 10:15am. Though it is morning, the cloudcover blocks the sun and snowdrifts appear gray, as they would before sunset. The woods are thick enough to conceal a small house made of glass, home to dozens of rare, tropical orchids. Twenty-five students enrolled in a core curriculum writing class walk slowly between pitcher plants shaped like a graphing calculator's answer, holding their notebook up to their noses, furrowing their brow in concentration. They've been tasked with writing about the connection between humans and nature in a man-made tropical paradise, as snow falls silently, incessantly, outside. A student sees her professor and points to a spectacular orange blossom shaped like a vulva. It is so heavy the stem bends to the table, unable to support the flaming blossom's weight. The curator of the greenhouse mists the blooms with water, smiling.

This was the first assignment for my English 104 students. The trip to the Orchid Greenhouse was intended to gently prod the students to a realization that the connection between humans and nature is complex and, at times, absurd—as when we venture to an environment as laboriously fabricated as an artificial rainforest in the midst of a Muncie winter. On that dark winter morning, most of my students wrote about the importance of conservation. Some thought of each plant as an allegory of the individual, with soil being one's hometown and the curator as God. The irony of the stark contrast between the snow drifts outside and the exotic blossoms inside was not mentioned in their journals; I hoped it wasn't lost on them.

For four weeks, my students pondered this connection between nature and humans. The required English courses at the university where I teach are focused on composing research. For their first paper, my class was to write a combination of personal memoir and research paper describing a landscape that shaped them as individuals. As Heilker, Allen, and Sewall (49-50) note, the research paper is one of the most dreaded assignments for college students, but combining the personal essay with research can alleviate students' apprehension of writing research. This assignment can bridge the gap between their fond memories, the natural world, and the university writing situation.

During the "invention" stage, before we plunged into library research, I asked them to take walks in other natural areas and continue journaling about what they saw. We worked on vividly describing details of the natural world around them; I hoped attention to detail and description would make the jump from the pages of their nature journals to their research papers. Descriptive writing and research writing are not often taught together,

or expected to be in the same essay. Indeed, the number of components of the research process that are absolutely essential and *must be* taught often means that aspects of writing not immediately related to research are often tossed out the window. However, the purpose of this essay, to use one of Hillocks' terms, was affective: to express the importance of the landscape that had personal relevance for them, and to produce empathy in the reader (Hillocks 116). I stressed to my students that the successful expression of the landscape's importance necessitated more detail than "Harmonie State Park is full of trees." I asked them for plant names, specific names for colors, and similes in their descriptions. Often, my requests for more detail necessitated more research, and after some brief eye rolling, students queried their favorite search engine with the question: "What trees grow in Harmonie State Park?"

As part of the scaffolding activities leading up to the writing of the actual research paper, I asked my students to read Annie Dillard's "The Giant Water Bug," Aldo Leopold's "Thinking Like a Mountain," and Thoreau's "Sounds," a chapter in *Walden*. In our discussions of these texts, I asked my class to identify a landscape that shaped them as individuals. Most students chose to write about national or state parks they had visited with their families. I showed the class how to conduct internet research using Ball State's article database on these places and integrate this research into their memoirs. This was the crucial step from their cherished childhood memories to the library's online article database: they wrote about camping trips with their families, but also situated these family vacations in a broader historical and ecological context. As Sheehan-Johnson and Stewart note, writing about nature offers writers the opportunity "to recognize that our emotional landscapes are shaped by our physical landscapes, and to see that the environment and the natural world are at the core of who and what we are."

In writing about the connection between humans and nature, students often reflected on how the place had shaped them; in their research, they often learned that humans had sometimes literally shaped that place: some of their favorite "natural" places turned out to be reservoirs or artificially constructed hills. The inter-connectedness of human activity and the natural world was a theme in many of their essays, as well as the feeling of being dwarfed by the powerful hugeness of the outdoors. By asking the students to write about a landscape that shaped them as individuals, the Eco-Composition assignment helped my students to realize how they as individuals are part of a larger network of connections. Writing about nature provided the students with a way to conceptualize their place, both literal and figurative, in their world.

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## On the Water's Edge: Musing on Greening the Classroom

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It is Saturday afternoon, and I am sitting along the National Lakeshore in Indiana grading a stack of papers for *English Composition*. Although my focus centers on the papers and not the world around me, it is my favorite place to evaluate student work because each comment I write is infused with an appreciation of our robust world.

Admittedly, every now and again, I glance up at the blue sky, and, to my left, I can make out the glimmer of the Chicago skyline in the distance – a shimmering Atlantis poised on the water nudging me to appreciate the marvels of a world class city. Looking to my right, inoffensively nestled amongst the dunes, a sand colored twenty-first century steel mill, complete with birds and critters, tickles my thoughts to think of a future where manufacturing, industry and the environment seamlessly cohabitate. Directly ahead, speedboats and parasailors dot the landscape prompting me to return to my work lest I get lost in their playfulness. Despite the wind periodically rustling my papers, the energy of grading while immersed in this environment enables me to appreciate the task at hand because this glimpse of the world is why I teach, for I see a future with lakefronts and cities, steel mills and sand dunes, work and play.

Often I get the impression that some people feel that these things are at odds with each other, but at this spot – they all make sense to me. I work to enable my students to see such possibilities. Incidentally, it was grading along the lakeshore that, years ago, I finally listened to my colleges and agreed that comments in red ink on student papers can be off-putting; I switched to green ink. It was at this very spot that I read a student paper about the future of manufacturing and the environment and was, at once, able to visualize the solutions put forth. It is also here that I often run into students, bringing the classroom to the water's edge and, inevitably, bringing that environment back to the classroom.

Indeed, beyond feel good vibrations of the lakefront, greening the classroom seems to be a formidable challenge; everything from more efficient light bulbs to recycled carpeting fibers has been and will continue to be attempted. Yet, we might consider that it is not only our task to construct with materials that are kind to our environment, we should create classrooms that are inclusive of the current understanding of our environment. For example, living plant walls that insulate and hydrate have been popping up in commercial spaces for years now. Certainly, more of our campuses, if not the classroom itself, would benefit from such a step. Furthermore, as teachers, we might consider how our use of resources models behavior for our students. As educators, our use of paper, electricity, technology and time sends powerful messages to students about what is acceptable and, certainly, about what is possible.