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A Vitalist Perspective on Nature Journals

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A Vitalist Perspective on Nature Journals

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Abstract

This paper argues that journals do more than simply record individual observations. Using a vitalist conception of writing – one that explicitly acknowledges writing as an ecological act – journals are formed from what literacy theorists call the “scene” of writing. This paper forwards an expanded conception of journal writing, the pedagogical uses of journals, and ways we see all writing, not just journals, as participations with the natural world.

Introduction: Writing and the Problem of Representation

Journal writing has been a staple of nature-based curricula for some time. It appears to go almost without saying that since journals constitute several of our most treasured texts on nature and ecological science and often constitute the very tool used to formulate scientific knowledge about the ecology, students can learn a great deal about nature by keeping a journal of their first-hand observations. As educators Clare Walker Leslie and Charles Edmund Roth put it, “Nature journaling, by helping learners become observant or immersed in, and reflective on, the world around them, sets the stage for life-long self-learning from primary sources” (196). For them, writing serves dual purposes of focusing perception and offering a place for reflection about those perceptions. In both cases, writing’s value comes from its ability to represent the external world and its events. Thus, any gain in learning, change in student thinking, or transformation of consciousness occurs not in the activity of writing, but more properly within the act of reading, in recognizing the disparity between the “world” and the “word.”

I argue here for a different theoretical approach to understanding writing’s role in experiential learning, place-based pedagogies, and in fostering sustainability. I do so not to critique journal writing as practiced by skilled educators like Walker and Roth, but to outline how the research from composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies, paints a slightly different picture. Through such an alternative theoretical perspective, educators may find ways to enrich the ways they use journals and writing within experiential and place-based courses without necessarily changing their entire pedagogy.

Context of Reading and Writing the Earth

To risk oversimplifying a lengthy and ongoing debate, researchers in the fields of rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies often argue against relying on the transformative value of reading alone. If learning occurred solely as a result of reading, that is by reflecting on representations of the world, then teaching would be a simple matter of providing quality literature for students to reflect on. Writing would only be a means to fix experience or reality in order to dissect its truths through yet another act of reading. It would be what

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Randall Roorda has called “life in a chair” (73) and focused solely on representations as things distinct from the world itself. But as geographer Bruce Braun has pointed out, those representations are enmeshed in highly differential power relations between cultural groups.

However, the urge to analyze texts for their ideological content and read them as suspicious distortions, while valuable, is not always pragmatically conducive to changing attitudes. If it were, we should see some measurable effect from the concentration of environmental messages in our society. From Earth Day to Avatar to the BP spill and worldwide flooding, we are inundated with messages about the fragility of our environment and our place in it. Yet, despite the increased availability of environmental messages and curricula, a longitudinal study released in 2005 by the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation found that “the public fails to understand the basic principles underlying many of the major environmental subjects discussed in the media” (Coyle 3). Further, the report found little difference between students graduating in 1970, the first year of Earth Day, or after 1990.

Nature may be socially constructed and its representations ideologically loaded, but recognizing this and subjecting it to critique does little to advance any cause for sustainability. Such recognition is important as one form of activism, but it may keep us from what Leslie and Roth call “immersion” or what Roorda calls “participation.” Rather than argue for certain distortions over others, then, projects of sustainability involving immersion and participation suggest a more robust account of how we make meaning without negating the complexity of our environments.

We can understand this better by looking at a particular form of writing common to learning about our environment, the nature journal. With respect to journal writing, Janice Lauer described journals and the process of journaling as records of “things to which writers ‘happen,’ not things that happen to them” (79). In Lauer’s view, journal writing, if not all writing, cannot be reduced to methodical observation and representation. For Lauer, the student or observer is not always in control of the writing that gets produced, perhaps not even in control of the act of perception itself. What is usually considered external to the writer, be that wilderness, nature, or experience cannot be dispelled as mere “context,” but is formative, if not generative, of the writing itself.

Attention to this perspective may counter many “common sense” ideas about language and writing, especially a sense that a journal can be a more or less accurate representation of the world outside an individual’s subjective experience. Even if the journal is admitted as a complex social construction of nature, there is the lurking danger of inducing student apathy or cynicism in the face of relative uncertainty between the received social perspective and the newer “critical” perspective gleaned through ideological analysis. If we are to educate for sustainability, we can neither abstract writing from the world nor the world from writing. Both writing and what is written about must be taken as real and important enough to sustain.

Vitalism

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Given that Western conceptions of language’s relation to the world have undergone massive critique and revision over the past hundred years or so, the problem for sustainability is especially acute. Sustainability is itself a discursive affair and hotly contested. Timothy Luke argues that discourses of sustainability are “neither ‘sustainable’ nor ‘developmental,’” but constitute an ongoing extension of commodification and corporate capitalism (228). As Luke explains, taken together or apart, the terms rhetorically mask the normalizations and disciplinary measures taken by corporate and political structures. So, while we might truly save energy by switching to compact fluorescent lightbulbs, we also create a new sector of industry and a commodity which perpetuates mass consumption. Similar critiques have come from feminist and third world scholars who often see patriarchal and first world structures as the primary beneficiaries of sustainability programs.

What many of these scholars critique are abstracted programs such as huge hydro-electric dams or agricultural models based on Western technologies and their attendant practices. However, Leslie and Roth and Roorda point us toward are much more local practices such as immersion or participation. Following Lauer’s wording somewhat, I am arguing that immersion in the local ecosystem such that something happens to the writer is a crucial starting point for learning to be an ecologically responsible person. But what does this mean in terms of writing and using language? In what way might we see immersion or participation as something more than a simple acts of a subject upon an object? What happens to writing and the writer when we acknowledge they are in and of the world and not removed from it?

Byron Hawk has argued for a vitalist conception of writing as opposed to a social constructionist or expressivist one. By drawing from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and other vitalist thinkers and philosophers, Hawk attempts to account for complex interrelationships between writer and world. Rather than understanding writing as something under conscious control of an independent subject who might be separated from the world or even mediated by language from what is really real, Hawk uses the vitalist principle of a continuous flow of life to expose how thinking, writing, being, and the full range of human existence are all part of the forces in play. In making this move, he abandons mechanical models of human thought and expression that so infuse much of Western thinking.

Hawk also distinguishes between the often linked the philosophical tradition of vitalism and the more literary and historical tradition of Romanticism. He argues that “reducing all vitalisms to this one period [Romanticism], this one particular answer in that period, ignores its larger philosophical and scientific history and keeps vitalism from entering our disciplinary conversations” (5). Where vitalism looks toward “trying to come to grips with what drives self-organization and development in the world (4 – 5), Romanticism is a more mystical articulation of those processes.

Pedagogically, Hawk notes how such theories, as distinct from certainties, rely on some “hope” that they can work in application. For him, the Romantic expressive hope is that students’ desire will be enough for learning. The social constructionist hope is that students

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will adopt the critical subjectivity of the teacher. But a “complex-vitalist hope would take an active role in designing pedagogical contexts and hope the students come to understand their situatedness and learn to develop ethical connections that will lead to productive acts and texts” (258). While he does not develop this theory and pedagogy to address strictly environmental concerns, Hawk is nonetheless thinking about writing in an ecological way, leaving space for writing that does. For Hawk, a writer and the thinking required for it are very much real and present in the world, part of its ecological web. A writer is always immersed and participating in the dance of life.

Immersion as Invention in the Scene of Writing

We can take a vitalist conception of writing to better understand journal writing. Deborah Brandt looked at the “scenes” of literacy learning through interviews with a wide range of people and we might take a similar course by asking what happens at the scene of journal writing out “in the field.” For Brandt, a scene is an interplay of powerful forces, sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating, but never ideologically neutral. There is always an agenda, sometimes visible, sometimes not. For example, Brandt found certain figures present at the scenes of literacy learning and developed the concept of the literacy sponsor. Sponsors of literacy underwrite or bankroll the learning of others in terms of social, not always economic capital. They “enter a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite. They lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success” (167). There is always some kind of exchange involved in gaining access to the powerful social tool of literacy.

Brandt’s scenes might allow us to better manage the complexity of Hawk’s vitalism. We can take Brandt’s scenes of literacy learning to focus our attention on local exchanges instead of trying to understand the whole of the continuous flow of life. In Brandt’s words, a scene describes “the local conditions and embodied moments” (166) rather than abstract and determinative relations. Thus, a particular scene is located in both time and space and is a specific materialization of how forces come together and interact. For example, Brandt notes how economic forces contribute to some forms of literacy learning and hinder others, depending upon the particular scenes one looks to and how that learning was sponsored. Similar economic contexts can give rise to disparate forms of literacy sponsorship. Kristi Fleckenstein elaborates the implication of how meaning is made within scenes of literacy learning, arguing that “meaning is not a product of the perceiver.... Meaning is the name that we assign to the tangle of objects, differences, and perceiver. Shift any element of that equation, and the boundaries constituting meaning shift” (36). In other words, within a vitalist ecology of writing, the interaction between scene and writer is a fundamental unit of analysis, neither one separable from the other.

While a discursive artifact like a journal can never escape the partiality or horizons of culture, time, and identity, seeing its emergence in this way acknowledges what Sid Dobrin and M. Jimmie Killingsworth have separately argued: that “writing takes place.” They argue that this is true of all writing, not just journals. Yet, as Killingsworth notes, typical writing environments often become “identified not with particular regions, cities, schools, and neighborhoods but with the global computer network” (365). A vitalist ecology of writing can certainly work against such identifications, but perhaps this is most dramatic when the

learning comes from the act of journaling and such identifications are not possible. This is why I focus on this here, although I do not deny that it can be extended to other situations for writing.

Example

I want to conclude by providing a brief example of journal writing looked at from a vitalist perspective. I studied the journal of Lewis, a college junior participating in a thirteen-day, field-based course in and around the Black Hills studying Lakota culture. Lewis’ journal was part notebook, part doodle pad, part introspection, and part extended transcriptions of song lyrics. Deeply Christian, Lewis brought his own spiritual sense to the places he wrote.

He began a passage about a page in length at an overlook in Badlands National Park “barely able to write” due to his physical excitement to enter the view. The subsequent paragraph begins at his “next spot” and, like his attention to his body, provides a concrete description of the view. He notices not just the components of the vista itself, “the valley,” and “smaller hills,” but he also notices the “many footprints of the animals who call this place ‘home.’” With this he is “reminded of what [the course instructor] said in that these footprints are the spirit of the animal who made them – I remember this and honor their sacredness.” In this scene of writing, then, physical detail, his spiritual curiosity, and instruction allows him to recognize that while he is just visiting, there are non-human others, “not just cultures, not just people” who inhabit this area and depend upon it.

But Lewis does not simply recognize this. He actually uses this in a dynamic way to write about and understand his own relationship and responsibility to this place. After honoring the sacredness of the animal who made the footprints, he notices “two small rodents” that may be prairie dogs. He follows these creatures “down into the valley” and describes how from down there he “can no longer see any of the roadways or fellow classmates, only the faint hum of passing vehicles reminds me that I am not completely isolated from modern familiarity.” It is within this space that Lewis’ “urge to pass on” abates and he is “filled again with the contentedness that seems to be finding me in all of my life.” From this particular, he generalizes, “I get that feeling again that I am exactly where I am suppose [sic] to be at this current moment. It’s almost like this short journey is a microcosm or a metaphor for my life.” Whether or not the new location in the valley directly diminished his urge to move physically, it still precipitates a changed feeling in him. He is no longer agitated, but content. In this new location and concomitant emotional state, he weaves the local place into his more general life history and allows that to shape his personal philosophy and identity.

This is, of course, a very compact example, but what seems clear is that in this example, Lewis drew upon a complex ecology that led him to a deep sense of interconnectedness with the world. This ecology included the emotional, affective, non-rational, and geographic in ways that allowed Lewis to connect a small moment in time with a much larger life ethic and, concomitantly, his own *ethos* as a fellow being on this earth. Yes, there are ideological distortions, a reliance on mystical thinking, and a problematic search for transcendence. However, to judge those things sustainable or not misses the point. Rather, we can look at

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how this was composed with the environment and fosters an ongoing commitment to that environment as a place to grow.

Conclusion

Nature journaling draws upon the place or scene in which the journaling occurs. Rather than treat this as an exposure of ideological value, allowing for critique as a means to educate for sustainability, teachers might look toward providing rich places and prompts for students to write, followed by examining all the tangles that produced that writing, no matter their ideological bend. This realization might lead us to design better writing situations that allow students and writers to see themselves as part of the ecology and to understand how writing takes place.

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