

The Ecology of Diversity

Jill Swiencicki

Environmental activist and entrepreneur Paul Hawken addressed the graduating class of 2009 at the University of Portland in May with this challenge:

You are going to have to figure out what it means to be a human being on earth at a time when every living system is declining, and the rate of decline is accelerating. Kind of a mind-boggling situation . . . but not one peer-reviewed paper published in the last thirty years can refute that statement. Basically, civilization needs a new operating system, you are the programmers, and we need it within a few decades.

Hawken asks these graduates to shift their consciousness through a kind of epistemological boot camp in which they first admit and reconcile themselves to global ecological collapse (!), and then step into the hard place of addressing this moment that Richard Leakey and others have described as the sixth extinction.

But the consciousness shift that Hawken (as well as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), leaders of indigenous communities around the world, and thousands of other citizens, activists, and scientists) argues is needed is rarely that speedy, and needs to happen earlier and more systematically than on graduation day. Our campus learning environments can play a key role in providing methods for interconnective thinking—less a boot camp than a conscious immersion in a diverse ecological niche. In our efforts to imagine what a statement on diversity looks like at this historical moment, for this organization of educators, I pose the following question: How is a conversation about diversity among educators enhanced by placing it within the discourse of sustainability?

Methods for promoting interconnective thinking and action comprise the bulk of the work of sustainability activists who are confronting climate change at the community and political levels. Theirs is the fight against *specialization*, the assigned, delegated roles of production and consumption made possible by cheap, dirty energy, which Michael Pollan argues “allowed us to leapfrog community by making it possible to sell our specialty over great distances as well as summon into our lives the specialties of countless, distant others” (“Why Bother?”). Fighting specialization’s assumptions about difference, power, and community is about finding methods that reveal and help us exploit our connectedness. Interconnective thinking resembles what Frankie Condon refers to in her blog post as a “way of becoming”:

I have to be persistent in my search for the plentiful coordinating conjunction between us: the *me-and*, *us-and*, *white-and*, *straight-and*, *middle class-and*—and so on. I’m searching for the *-ands* not as an act of artifice and denial but as an active, ongoing acknowledgement of simultaneous materiality and fallaciousness of scripted or socially constructed identities and their associated performances. The *-and* in teaching, learning, writing, and serving is concomitantly an act of identification and dis-identification, an acknowledgment of the complex ways in which privilege and disenfranchisement, freedom and oppression are distributed, limited, enforced, conditionally offered and liberally withdrawn. The *-and* is not an attribute nor can it be possessed. The *-and* is about remembering without denying the memory of others, knowing and coming to know without foreclosing what others know or how others come to know. The *-and* is

about seeing oneself reflected in the gaze of the other, listening to the ways one might be named by the other without believing or insisting that the other is or ought to be you and without pretending to be them. It's a way of becoming I keep reaching for, missing, and reaching for again. The *-and*, for me, is an ongoing effort to acknowledge the transitive conditions of identity and to stretch toward transgression of what is given and received in and through identity formation.

The awareness Condon is calling for is an antidote to specialization that I have seen practiced in the sustainability groups I have been a part of. Having taught for a decade in northern California at a university internationally recognized for its path-breaking approach to sustainability, and in a state suffering through a devastating long-term drought, I am steeped in the rhetoric and reality of climate change. It is through this experience that I offer ideas to shape our thinking about the difficult concept of "diversity," mindful of the first law of ecology: everything is interconnected. In what follows, I share three stories about sponsoring interconnective thinking, first by seeking out and making sense of the dissonant realities in student's lives; inviting students to be co-inquirers in maintaining a diverse, robust historical record; and creating pedagogies focused on systems thinking—how things interrelate and change—rather than isolated, fixed experiences.

Diversity is Acknowledging and Reconciling Dissonance

The coming decades will require all of us to step up our ability to reconcile competing versions of the realities we are living. I have experienced such dissonance recently, facing critical environmental problems while participating in robust and creative communities that function despite and on behalf of those problems. For example, the summer of 2008 was the summer of wildfires in Northern California. Over 1,700 wild land fires burned last summer, with over 600,000 acres lost. The Humboldt Rd. and Paradise Complex fires (pictured below) started a mile from my home and burned 2250 acres; the Butte Lightning Complex Fire started five miles from my home burned 59,440 acres. When it started raining ash in earnest, our car was coated with tiny grey flakes. At one point, my hand, extended in front of my face, almost disappeared in a disturbing, weighty haze. These were the worst wildfires in modern California history.



Amidst fear and despair, during the summer of 2008 I also had the most enriching experience of my family life: our weekly visit to GRUB (Growing Resourcefully Uniting Bellies), a community supported farming collective. With no sense of modesty (who has time for modesty in the sixth extinction?) farmers on grubchico.org proclaim, “the world is ours to create . . . we are the people we’ve been waiting for!” Each week my husband, children and I would pick up our share of vegetables from Lee and Francine (pictured below), who would greet us warmly and tell us about the work of the week. Francine would lead the children to the pen to meet the new goats. Lee would show us the list of new fruit trees he would purchase and plant in the coming weeks. We’d give Francine, Lee, and Sherry some bread we’d baked the night before, and they’d tear pieces from the loaf and pass them around to all as we talked amidst bins of chard, pluots, rocket. The talk ranged from the persuasive skills needed to address the town council about the encroachment upon the city’s green line, to the difficult discussions with neighboring farmers about different ways to use and share water.

Other members would make other contributions that summer; one couple created a computer program that marked out all the fruit trees in the city of Chico so that anyone so inclined could glean the ripened, unpicked fruit. Sherry would pass out her weekly newsletter, which updated us on GRUB’s work in the public schools and city programs that reconnect people with knowledge of sustainable food practices. In the background we’d hear the children playing hide and seek amongst the massive oaks. In July and August, we did this while choking back the heavy smoke in the air. We’d leave with our bag bulging with flowers, rice, vegetables,

fruits, and herbs for the week; we'd leave with torn pieces of paper with book titles to get, websites to visit, community programs to check out and lend a hand in.

The dramatic ecological dissonance of burning land, cultivated land, and a community of possibility was important, and reminded me of my own place in the local ecology, trying to participate in the healthy aspects of our community while other aspects were stressed beyond measure.



Writing classes serve as such generative reminders of the productive, dissonant realities of our contexts. As Marilyn Cooper argues in "The Ecology of Writing," "writing is one of the activities by which we locate ourselves in the enmeshed systems that make up the social world. It is not simply a way of thinking but more fundamentally a way of acting . . . it is an activity through which we become most truly human." Cooper closes her essay with the acknowledgement that the ecological model does project an ideal image of a learning community, adding the following realist comment: "Whenever ideas are seen as commodities they are not shared; whenever individual and group purposes cannot be negotiated someone is shut out; differences in status, or power, or intimacy curtail interpersonal interactions; cultural institutions and attitudes discourage writing as often as they encourage it; textual forms are just as easily used as barriers to discourse as they are used as means of discourse."

For Cooper, "The ecological model . . . encourages us to direct our corrective energies away from the characteristics of the individual writer and toward imbalances in social systems that prevent good writing." We face dissonance and reconcile versions of competing realities by inquiring into the social systems we take for granted. Some of the most interesting work in our field strives to help students to make visible the structures and power relations embedded

in their social system, to negotiate and experiment with what kinds of roles they want to more consciously play in the system, to use as many modes of communication as possible to do so. Such practice participates in eliminating composition work's complicity with specialization logic.

Diversity is Practicing Habitat Restoration

A diverse ecology needs a sense of deep time—of how the past lives on in the present, and has adapted to fit the changing aspects of the environment. Since the inauguration of President Obama, I have been asking students, “What do you remember about the decisions of the U.S. government after 9/11? What have you heard from family, friends, and the media about the war on terror? How are you making sense of political events for yourself?” By-and-large, when faced with my questions, students don't remember or know specifics. Chico State is a liberal college campus in California, so there is a prevailing critical appraisal of the last administration, but when I pushed them to elaborate on their distaste or appreciation, we couldn't offer many details. This situation is an easy reminder of the importance of replenishing our historical and intellectual habitat in times of transition, especially in times of political, economic, and environmental upheaval.

Karl Rove, former Senior Advisor and Deputy Chief of Staff to President Bush, is fully aware of the exigency of the situation. According to the news media and his own promotional website, Rove is busy on college campuses these days, creating the history of that period that many of my current students were too young to have engaged with critically. Pollsters, conducting exit interviews of the students who attend Rove's lectures, have found that students leave the lecture hall, largely arguing that former President Bush protected our civil liberties in wartime, detained suspected terrorists appropriately, etc. In the battle for the signifier, history is written and rewritten. At this historical moment, which features the degradation of public education, infrastructure, the environment, social programs, and the arts, there exists what Annette Harris Powell's terms the “noticeable gap between [diversity] discourse and students' commitment, ability, and readiness to fully participate in this discourse.” The “gap” Powell sees is the problem and the possibility of the “and” that Condon registers in her blog.

The moment is ripe to restore to the record the rhetorical depth and breadth of recent political history. Asking students to become critical historians of the recent past, as Nancy Welch does in her compelling book *Living Room*, is less a battle for the signifier than what Gordon Wells calls “dialogic inquiry.” An interconnective approach hails writing students as inquirers that form questions they have a real stake in answering, researching and write that history with invested collaborators, each bringing a different set of experiences to the endeavor. Helping students become questioners is the fundamental restorative act for the learning system. This semester, while researching the phrase “corporate globalization,” Kelly, a student in my capstone course, argued in her end-of-the-semester reflection that it was important to form questions that “prod,” that are not “concrete,” and that engage her “conscience.” A great paradigm for structuring inquiry.

Because student inquiry requires an authentic purpose and audience, some of us in the field are sponsoring forums where students convene campus and community members to weigh in on the inquiries into power and difference that they are writing about. From 2004 until last semester, the writing program at Chico State collaborated with our First Year Experience program on a Town Hall Meeting, a place where first year writers—especially first-generation college students in EOP—lead conversations about their research on climate change, the Iraq war, and other issues of the day, with other writers from other composition classes, as well as campus and community members. We asked a simple question: what if we recommitted to restoring our campus habitat by starting with practices of respect for the youngest members of our campus community, those who are considered the least valuable to our ecological niche? This Town Hall Meeting contained significant elements of complete chaos every semester—dialogue turned pat, students spoke from their prejudices instead of their research, and adult experts sometimes forgot themselves and took over. But more often than those moments were ones that illustrated what civic interconnection feels like—moments where first year students say, “this helps me see what college is for,” “this makes me see how my writing matters,” “this makes me see what place I could have in the bigger picture.”

Diversity is Refusing Claims of Exemption

Last April I was asked to lead a workshop on white privilege for our campus’s on-going brown-bag lunch series, “Conversations on Diversity.” The room contained well over a hundred undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Knowing how differences in status, age, and racial identification can influence such settings, I was excited at the prospect of engaged dialogue among these registers. An interesting trend emerged in our conversation that revealed who felt compelled to enter the dialogue and who felt exempt from the shared endeavor—a dynamic that was an unanticipated outcome of the way I designed the workshop. A premise of interconnective thinking is that our realities are prisms of meaning; no one exists in isolation, and even our experiences, while different, have connections that make it impossible for us to exempt ourselves from the facets of reality that make up the whole.

I opened the workshop by defining white privilege, discussed the history of the term, and then moved to two rhetorics of revealing white privilege: the indexing or listing of privileges and the “awareness narrative.” I presented a short excerpt from Tim Wise’s viral essay “This is Your Nation on White Privilege” (<http://www.redroom.com/blog/tim-wise/this-your-nation-white-privilege-updated>), his controversial list of instances that help make visible the invisible, unearned social privileges that whiteness affords. Although index/lists are useful for discussions of diversity and identity because they keep things depersonalized, away from examinations of personal choices and experiences, the discussion we had also showed that they are limited in just that way: one can stand at a distance, remarking on these unfair privileges, while creating exemption/distancing narratives for themselves and others.

It was when we talked about another rhetoric of white privilege, the “awareness narrative,” that a split in participants emerged along racial lines. I asked participants to describe a time when they became aware of having a racial identity. A fascinating discussion emerged, as mostly undergraduates who were able to pass as white or Latino talked about being able to

negotiate multiple communities, returning to their home community for safety, or questioning where that home community is anymore, especially on the campus. Students and faculty members talked in deeply specific, engaged ways about this kind of identity shifting. After a while, the director of Multicultural and Gender Studies observed aloud that no white people had spoken up in relation to the question. White privilege is often an exemption from the hard conversations about racial interconnection and power relations. These exemptions—"I didn't cause climate change," "My family are working-class whites, not privileged whites," "I didn't vote for him,"—are the very ones we need to construct pedagogies of interconnection around, ones that make a space (make a better space than I did in this workshop) for the emotional work/vulnerability such endeavors require. In this blog Morris Young argues that "there is a risk in reducing an understanding of diversity to fixed categories that mask more complex experiences." His blog post, and the majority of posts, calls for us to "destabilize discourse" about identity, literacy, and diversity; starting with our multiple calls to examine our shifting, related identities—just as those students did in the workshop—rather than the supposedly fixed ones, has potential to capture the dynamic context of the ecosystem.