



EVERGREEN

TEACHING WRITING THROUGH THOREAU With: Rebecca Chamberlain

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**For: The American Literature Association:
19th Annual Conference on American Literature
“Teaching Thoreau in the Twenty-First Century”
Saturday, May 24, 2008, 2:00 – 3:20 p.m.**

Reading Thoreau is like taking in a million thoughts in one breath.

Kristine Kaneshiro
SMU English 101 (2007), Midterm Examination

At this point, Henry noticed a spider web in the grape vines and turned to contemplate it. I waited to resume conversation, but he proceeded to retreat to the shed and shut the door. I could see having Henry for a companion wasn't going to be an exactly peaceful alliance.

Taylor Pitman,
TESC, Transcendental Visions (2005), Personal Essay

I have been using Thoreau's works and transcendental philosophy to develop a variety of readings, workshops, and curriculum activities related to bioregional literacy and sustainability for use in composition and writing courses, as well as classes in literature, humanities, and environmental education at four-year liberal arts colleges. My focus is to use Thoreau's ideas to prepare students to become critical writers and thinkers, as they begin to live “deliberately” as productive citizens in a world where “the complex issues of environmental quality, justice, and sustainability are paramount.”¹ Thoreau's works, combined with contemporary writers and issues, illuminate our times as well as his, and inspire students to develop their own writings and sense of identity, as they put the concept of “the American dream” into perspective with issues of sustainability and the common good.

Within this context, I've been bringing Thoreau and his transcendental philosophy into full-time and part-time, interdisciplinary, undergraduate and graduate classes at the Evergreen State College (1996-present), as well as beginning, intermediated, and advanced composition courses at St. Martin's University (2001-present). Students range from freshman, taking their first composition or literature classes, to mixed groups that represent diverse ages, ethnic, social, economic, cultural, and political groups, to advanced or graduate students working on special topics in Literature or Environmental Studies. Some classes run for fifty-minutes and meet daily, others meet for four to eight-hour blocks, once or twice a week. This variety gives me the opportunity to test activities, assignments, and approaches with diverse audiences of learners.

In 2007, I was asked to join twenty-two English professors in Puget Sound, to contribute curriculum activities to the Washington Center's “Curriculum for the Bioregion. Our work focuses on “integrating two curricular pathways: 1) engaging students as they develop their skills as critical writers and thinkers; 2) engaging students with local environmental knowledge as the basis for understanding the larger issues of global change, and within this framework of global change, developing a sense of how experiential learning in local places has lasting meaning.”²

The following pages list resources and web-sites for those interested in finding sample course syllabi, assignments, workshops, bibliographies, curriculum activities, program readers, articles, and other materials. They include resources that I am developing and posting on my academic web-page at Evergreen, as well as links to the works of my colleagues through the Curriculum for the Bioregion. I envision these resources as a collection of teaching approaches that can be adapted for a variety of existing writing courses to engage students with the issues facing their particular bioregion as well as concepts of sustainability.

In wilderness in the preservation of the world.

¹ See: Jean MacGregor's work with the Washington Center, “Curriculum for the Bioregion.”

² MacGregor.

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Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*

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Resources

I. Rebecca Chamberlain, Academic Web Page at Evergreen (TESC)

< <http://academic.evergreen.edu/c/chambreb/> >

A. Writing and Sustainability

Note: additional resources and materials from various syllabi are available upon request.

1. Teaching Writing Through “Walking:” Pilgrimage and Process in the Essays of Linda Hogan and Henry David Thoreau.”

This curriculum explores the essays of Hogan the Thoreau, through a series of “student-centered” conceptual workshops that: outline the elements of implicit and explicit arguments; discuss the stylistic elements of the personal reflective essay and the thesis-driven essay; identify and interpret the use of symbolism, rhetorical devices such as irony, and other literary techniques; and engage students in discussions about social and environmental justice within a rich historic and cultural context. Then students engage in a rich understanding of their own sense of identity and place, through a series of experiential workshops that explore an ongoing sense of narrative as the foundation for thought, experience, and sense of place. They develop an understanding, both of the narrative relationship between inner and outer stories in text, as well the shifting “inner and outer” awareness of their own “voice,” through developing a personal practice of “writing and walking.” Finally, students are guided through a series of writing activities that evolve into a personal essay about place. *Draft-final text will be posted June 29th, 2008.*

a. Workshop 1: Walking With Linda Hogan; *draft-final text will be posted June 29th, 2008.*

This document details an in-class conceptual workshop that draws upon the long tradition of the pilgrimage or quest as a way of creating identity and a connection to place in the Hogan and Thoreau essays "Walking." The focus is on a close analysis and reading of Hogan's writing.

b. Workshop 2: Walking With Henry David Thoreau; *draft-final text will be posted June 29th, 2008.*

This document details another in-class conceptual workshop. By comparing and contrasting the two writings of Hogan and Thoreau, students develop a complex understanding of their own identity and sense of place, the historical and cultural context around issues of sustainability and environmental ethics, and a sense of writing (and walking) as a process, not simply a destination. The focus of this workshop is Thoreau.

c. Workshop 3: Peer Editing Template; *final text will be posted June 29th, 2008*

A step-by-step peer-editing workshop based on the Hogan/Thoreau workshops.

d. Mid-term essay questions for English 101 and 102, on Hogan and Thoreau, (available on request.)

2. Syllabus for ENG 102/ College Writing II: St. Martins University--Special Themes in Argumentation, Research, & Writing: Sustainability and the Common Good—Local and Global Perspectives.

(Note: Syllabi for English 101: Beginning Composition, and English 306: Advanced Composition, are also available.)

a. Project 1: Writing from a Sense of Place

1. Student Anthology: Sense of Place essays.

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- B. Evergreen Syllabi:** Courses that reference readings, writings, and workshops on Thoreau see:
Transcendental Visions: Re-imagining the American Dream, Spring 2005 and 2007
Heroes of the Heart: Winter 2001, Fall 2007
Nature, Writing, and Education: Natural History Education & a Poetics of Place, Summer 2006
The Earth is Our First Teacher: Natural History Education & a Poetics of Place, Summer 2005
Finding the Voice in all Things: Summer 2004
Finding the Voice in all Things: Eco-Psychology & Natural History Writing, Summer 2001

C. Articles, Resources, and Other Syllabi:

Chamberlain, Rebecca. "The Power of Story: Words on the Wing," *Liberating Voices! A Pattern Language For Communication Revolution*. Ed. Doug Schuler. Boston: MIT Press, 2008.

<http://www.publicsphereproject.org/patterns/pattern.pl/public?pattern_id=493>

Explores various views on pattern, landscape, and language, and suggests some ideas about Thoreau's concept of "tawny grammar."

_____. *The Earth Is our First Teacher: A Poetics of Language and Place*.

Explores a poetics and ecology of language and place within various philosophical and literary perspectives, including Thoreau and the Transcendentalists. Olympia, WA, 2006.

- D. Selected Readings:** See various course syllabi, program "readers," & curriculum activities for additional texts and resources.

Elbow, Peter. *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Finch, Robert, and John Elder (Eds). *Norton Book of Nature Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990.

Finkel, Don. *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000.

Hallowell, Christopher, and Walter Levy. *Listening to Earth*. New York: Pearson/ Longman, 2005.

Johnson, June. *Global Issues, Local Arguments: Readings for Writing*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007.

Lunsford, Andrea, and Robert Connors. *The New St. Martin's Handbook*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, Press 1999.

Ross, Carolyn. *Writing Nature: An Ecological Reader for Writers*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Marr, David. *Extravagant Interest: Writing from Social Space*. Olympia WA: The Evergreen State College. 1982.

Atkinson, Brooks (ed.). *Henry David Thoreau: Walden and Other Writings*, Modern Library: 2000.

Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. North Point Press, 1990.

II. Washington Center's "Curriculum for the Bioregion," The Evergreen State College

< <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/bioregion> > or search for "curriculum for the bioregion"

Director, Jean MacGregor (macGJean@evergreen.edu)

Jean MacGregor says, "'Curriculum for the Bioregion'" is an initiative of the Washington Center that aims to better prepare undergraduates, as well as ourselves, to live in a world where the complex issues of environmental quality, environmental justice, and sustainability are paramount. This faculty and curriculum development project is based on two ideas: local environmental knowledge is the basis for understanding the larger issues of global change, and within this framework of global change, experiential learning in local places has lasting meaning."

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In the fall of 2007, a group of twenty English professors from the Puget Sound Region formed a learning community, and are completing curriculum projects and submitting course syllabi and resources that integrate writing and issues of bioregional awareness and sustainability. This project integrates both the Higher Education Board's definitions for college writing, as well as the learning outcomes for the "Curriculum for the Bioregion" initiative. These works and resources are currently in progress. Final drafts will be completed by June 29th, and will be posted on the web-site during August/September, 2008. Contact Jean MacGregor for more information.

The following resources are available on both my web-site, and the curriculum for the bio-region website, though they will be updated.

1. Resources suggested at the Curriculum for the Bioregion Retreat for Teachers of Writing
2. Annotated Bibliography of Books on Sustainability in Higher Ed

Curriculum for the Bioregion Initiative: English Working Group Activities and Project List:

Sense of Place Collage: Essay Guidelines

**Teaching Writing Through "Walking:"
Pilgrimage & Process in the Essays of Linda
Hogan and Henry David Thoreau**

Civic Stewardship and Interdependency Outline

Critical Thinking on Sustainable Food Production

A Sense of Place Essay

**Writing in Place: Social and Ecological
Sustainability Project**

Chemical Hygiene: How Safe is your Bathroom?

**What's Up with Stuff: Eco Encore Service
Learning Project**

Urban Design and Identity

Meet Your Washington Farmers T&L

Maps and Legends: (Re)placing Composition

**Transportation: Waterways to Interstate
Highways**

Bioregional Wiki

20 Miles from Tomorrow

Story as a Place Happening Many Times

Where & How Do We Live- The Power of Ads

**Reading Cultural Landscapes: An Essay in Four
Steps**

Welcome to My Home

Arguing about Sustainability

Our World, Our Selves

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