

## **Writing Instruction and Sustainable Development: Colorado State University Composition Program Curriculum and the Imperative of Local Context**

*Sarah Sloane<sup>1</sup>*

### **Abstract**

This article discusses how the Colorado State University Composition Program developed a rhetorically-based curriculum that teaches principles of sustainable development at the same time as it offers basic writing instruction. Two United Nations initiatives-the Decade of Literacy and the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development-overlapped in 2005-2012 and highlighted the need for writing curriculum and instruction to focus on sustainable development. A curriculum entitled "The Rhetoric of Green" is Colorado State University's response to the United Nations' initiatives, a response that likewise recognizes the importance of being sensitive to local contexts in curriculum design and teaching practices. Offering a thorough description of the Colorado State University curriculum, the article illustrates one way of heeding the admonitions of Jaya Graves (2002), Konai Helu Thaman (2010), Debby Cotton, Ian Baily, Martyn Warren and Susie Bissell (2009), to respect local contexts and use interdisciplinary teaching approaches to afford change in the area of sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development, writing instruction, Colorado State University Composition Program, literacy development, education

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<sup>1</sup> Professor of English at Colorado State University  
e-mail: Sarah.Sloane@ColoState.edu

**การสอนการเขียนและการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน:  
หลักสูตรโปรแกรมการเขียนเรียงความของมหาวิทยาลัยรัฐโคโลราโด  
และกฎเกณฑ์ของบริบทเฉพาะที่**

ซาร่าห์ สโลน<sup>2</sup>

**บทคัดย่อ**

บทความนี้อภิปรายถึงโปรแกรมการเขียนเรียงความของมหาวิทยาลัยรัฐโคโลราโด ว่าพัฒนาหลักสูตรเชิงวาทศิลป์ซึ่งสามารถสอนหลักของการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนได้อย่างไร และยังนำเสนอการให้ความรู้ในการเขียนขั้นพื้นฐาน แผนงานเริ่มต้นสองแผนงานขององค์การสหประชาชาติ ทศวรรษแห่งการรู้หนังสือ และ ทศวรรษแห่งการศึกษาเพื่อการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน ระหว่างปี ค.ศ.2005 – 2012 เน้นย้ำถึงความจำเป็นที่หลักสูตรการเขียนและการสอนจะต้องให้ความสนใจกับการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน หลักสูตรที่ได้ชื่อว่า "วาทศิลป์สีเขียว" เป็นการตอบสนองแผนงานเริ่มต้นขององค์การสหประชาชาติของมหาวิทยาลัยรัฐโคโลราโด ซึ่งคำนึงถึงการให้ความสำคัญต่อบริบทท้องถิ่นในการออกแบบหลักสูตรและการสอน โดยการอธิบายหลักสูตรของมหาวิทยาลัยรัฐโคโลราโดอย่างละเอียดครบถ้วน บทความนี้แสดงให้เห็นวิธีหนึ่งของการพิจารณาแนวคิดของ จาย่า เกรฟ (2002) ไคไนย เฮลู ธามาน (2010) เดบบี คอตตัน, เอียน เบลีย์, มาร์ติน วอร์เรน และซูชีปัสเชล (2009) ที่คำนึงถึงบริบทท้องถิ่นและใช้แนวทางการสอนแบบสหวิทยาการเพื่อรองรับการเปลี่ยนแปลงที่เกิดจากการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน

**คำสำคัญ:** การพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน การสอนการเขียน โปรแกรมการเขียนเรียงความของมหาวิทยาลัยรัฐโคโลราโด การพัฒนาการรู้หนังสือ การศึกษา

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<sup>2</sup> ศาสตราจารย์ทางภาษาอังกฤษ มหาวิทยาลัยรัฐโคโลราโด

## 1. Introduction

Two initiatives designated by the United Nations-The Decade of Literacy (2003-2012) and The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014)-converged in 2009-2011 in a rhetorically-based writing curriculum taught to over 5000 cross-disciplinary students at Colorado State University. The latter initiative (DESD) resolves "to improve the capacity of our education systems to prepare people to pursue sustainable development, through enhanced teacher training, the development of sustainability curricula, the development of training programmes that prepare students for careers in fields related to sustainability, and more effective use of information and communications technologies to enhance learning outcomes." (United National General Assembly, 2012) The former initiative, the Decade of Literacy, proposed a curricular design and pedagogy which acknowledges that "well-designed programmes provide the best opportunities for learning sustainable literacy skills and using them meaningfully." In the United Nations' outline of ways to develop effective literacy education, their primary documents note: "Literacy programmes must meet changing literacy needs and adapt to the learner's environment, circumstances, and prior learning with respect to gender, linguistic, and cultural diversity." ("Programme design & delivery," n.d.) These two initiatives' emphases on the importance of education in sustainable development and literacy, and the latter's imperative to "adapt" curriculum to a reader or writer's environment, inform the design of "The Rhetoric of Green," the recently developed Colorado curriculum intended to teach first-year students how to write about sustainable development in the context of larger studies in rhetoric, how to construct an academic argument, and how to analyze and synthesize diverse data from across disciplines.

## 2. Colorado State University Composition Program Description and Goals

When Colorado State University instructors and professors design writing curriculum for first-year students, they pay attention to the place of Colorado, and the United States, within a global economy. As Colorado State University ethicist Holmes Rolston writes:

"The surrounding world is the vital home for us all; if there are any duties at all they must come to focus when and where the on-going life-support system is placed in jeopardy. The broadest ethical principle underlying sustainability is that one ought to respect life." (Rolston, 2002, p. 103)

However, in considering broad-reaching environmental problems like global warming or multinational corporations' cooptation of indigenous lands and food supplies (such as seeds), or even wider problems such as poverty, hunger, and the absence of rights for many women and children, it seems to us that attending to local problems and conditions is the first step towards solving these larger, seemingly intractable problems. In doing such, we are in step with scholars such as Konai Helu Thaman of the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, who writes how important it is "for educators to respect and use local and indigenous ways of life and knowledge systems in order to make teaching and learning more relevant and meaningful . . ." (Thaman 2009 p353). Jaya Graves (2002), Konai Helu Thaman (2010), and Debby Cotton, Ian Baily, Martyn Warren, and Susie Bissell (2009), likewise urge instructors to respect local contexts and use interdisciplinary teaching approaches to afford change in the area of sustainable development. In addition to considering the issues' global dimensions and import, when choosing to focus on environmental issues such as sustainable development in their first-year writing courses, the Colorado State University Composition Program also recognized the necessity of keeping the focus narrow and the scope small in an effort to get students engaged in both the environmental issues and composition's rhetorical contexts.

When the Colorado State University Composition Program ultimately chose the theme of "The Rhetoric of Green" for its more than 240 first-year writing classes, they were heeding the call of *Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development* (UNCED, 1992) which states that curricula and classes inside and outside of the academy "should conflate environmental and development education and, so conflated, ensure their integration as 'cross-cutting issues' in all disciplines using an amalgam of innovative and traditional pedagogies." (qtd. in Selby, 2006, p352). We saw no conflict between focusing on a subject more traditionally associated with the sciences and social sciences-sustainable development-and our efforts to teach writing to students from across the whole university; rather, we saw an opportunity. Our first-year curriculum focusing on "the rhetoric of green" gave us a way of talking about language and literacy as well as a means to acknowledge the lack of sustainability in many of our real-world practices; the curriculum helped us contribute solutions to what the UN in summer 2012 referred to as "cross-cutting" and "persistent" crises. (United National General Assembly, 2012) In other words, we were doing our jobs as writing instructors but were also teaching as concerned citizens.

The main first-year writing course at Colorado State University, intermediate composition or CO150, is a required course for about 5000 freshmen students a year. When we

designed "The Rhetoric of Green" as a rhetorically-based writing curriculum, we stepped away from a business-as-usual curriculum that reinforced individual, monocultural, and nationalist perspectives, and instead stepped towards a course design that reminded undergraduate students that they are citizens in both local and global communities, with a shared responsibility for the greater environment, and an ethical obligation to explore sustainable development right here at home. Designing curriculum is ultimately a collaborative act, one that is guided or shaped by the expertise of the faculty writing the curriculum, and one that holds clearly in mind the goals of the course and its exigencies in terms of social, political, or economic contexts. The needs of multiple audiences inside and outside the classroom who encounter the curriculum, whether as evaluators, teachers, participants, supervisors, mentors, or coaches, must be met as well. In "The Rhetoric of Green," we developed curriculum relying on the university's larger program examining global warming, and the growing expertise of composition faculty in local problems related to consumption patterns, a tourist economy in the nearby mountains, and the help of the Environmental Learning Center on campus.

Our Composition Program is composed of ten faculty (seven tenured or tenure-line professors and three dedicated instructors), about 30 additional instructors, and 33 graduate teaching assistants, all of whom share the responsibility for writing curriculum, designing daily lesson plans, and teaching the wide range of students described above. The design of curriculum is an organic process in which composition curricular designers collaboratively consider contemporary issues and ethical dilemmas and connect those issues with writing assignments that challenge undergraduates to think and act. At Colorado State University, this means coming up with writing topics and questions that relate to all majors at the university, as well as fulfill the mandate of teaching at a land-grant institution with a central agricultural mission. Because of the breadth of interests among our 26,000 university students, the challenge is coming up with writing assignments that prepare students to write about a huge variety of topics and problems, e.g., the extraction, distribution, and emissions of natural gas drilling, questions of tourism in our Hospitality Management major, the role of water in hydraulic fracturing, or the implementation of sustainable development principles in the design of university buildings, among dozens of other majors, emphases, and interests. We are guided as well by larger objectives of the course imposed by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, which are encapsulated below. (This statement of general goals and objectives for the course is collaboratively written):

## **For Teachers: CO150 College Composition:**

### **Course Description**

CO150-College Composition-is a common experience for most CSU students. CO150 focuses on initiating students into academic discourse and developing composing practices that will prepare them for success as university students and as citizens. Therefore, the course focuses on critical reading and inquiry, writing for a variety of rhetorical situations, and enabling effective writing processes.

Its key objectives include the following:

- Developing critical reading practices to support research and writing
- Understanding writing as a rhetorical practice, i.e., choosing effective strategies for addressing purpose, audience and context
- Developing a repertoire of strategies for addressing a variety of specific rhetorical situations, i.e., different purposes, audiences, and contexts
- Learning important elements of academic discourse, such as forming and critically investigating questions, using sources effectively and ethically, and writing effective summaries, analyses, and arguments
- Increasing information literacy through practicing strategies for locating, selecting, and evaluating sources for inquiry
- Developing effective research and revision processes, including collaboration and response, and using feedback to guide revision

This curriculum is also designed to help instructors realize three broader educational goals:

- Engage students as active members of the CSU community.
- Engage students as active and interested learners.
- Develop student understanding of their positions as world citizens responding to significant global challenges

### **3. Focus on *The Rhetoric of Green***

To maintain the course's focus on both local and global issues, members of the composition faculty also compiled a reader, *The Rhetoric of Green*, a selection of contemporary articles about the challenges of environmental degradation (whether natural or human-made) and sustainable development. The articles ranged from New York Times editorialist Paul

Krugman's "Building a Green Economy" to local newspaper articles about the pros and cons of building a dam across the Cache la Poudre river. Articles also discussed the language used to "greenwash" corporate environmental records and included a discussion of "The Story of Stuff," a video designed to show students the impact of their own purchasing histories and participation in tourist economies. These articles helped students reflect on how local issues affected larger communities and concerns. The introduction states,

This reader, *The Rhetoric of Green*, provides an entry point into a conversation that is timely, sometimes heated, and genuinely important to today's students and citizens. By analyzing the articles in this reader (and online), you will begin to discern the lines of debate within the field as well as learn how all language is rhetorical. The word 'rhetoric' means not only the study of argument and persuasion, but is also an analysis of how people write and compose texts for specific audiences. While the word rhetoric is worthy of complex, book-length definitions, in its simplest form it means *doing things with words*. This course is designed to examine an ecological conversation and to untangle some of the rhetorical tactics that are used to persuade us all to act, feel, and think in particular ways about the environment. As we sift through ideas, evidence, claims, assumptions, values, and opinions, we will consider *how* something is said as much as *what* is said.

## 4. Challenges

Discussion of environmental issues such as sustainable development in the Western U.S. are conducted against a backdrop of centuries of complex arguments over competition for scarce resources such as water and arable land. The environment is harsh, with temperatures ranging from more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and sub-zero winters where feed must be flown in by helicopter and herds of cattle freeze to death in the fields. Further complicating reasoned discourse is the way in which conversations are often framed as battles between two dueling groups, mutually opposed: liberals versus conservatives; small business owners versus government; and ranchers and farmers versus environmental regulators.

Given the rural communities of much of Colorado, talking about issues of sustainable development-how to balance the needs of ranchers and environmentalists, particularly around the issues of water rights-can be a contentious business. Further, parts of Colorado depend on a tourist-driven economy, especially in the mountains where people ski or in picturesque

mountain towns on the western slope where people shop, relax, admire the autumn leaves, and participate in winter sports. There is a deep tension there, too, between local business owners and environmentalists trying to influence change for a sustainable future.

Students living in Colorado are often the children of ranchers or farmers and have lived knowledge of these environmental issues and direct experience with recent global weather changes. They also, like many students, come to CSU with definite ideas passed down from their parents. The ones from more rural areas are often the ones that have the hardest time adjusting to the diverse intellectual climate and varied social life of a large university like CSU. Often this discomfort with the unfamiliar reveals itself in the form of resistance to new ideas or curriculum that conflicts with received values. If their parents or other relatives work at the Montfort Meat Packaging Plant, for example, they may be resistant to learning about toxic run-off permanently affecting the water table. As Director of the Composition Program, I had many conversations with recalcitrant students who did not understand why we were studying environmentalism in a first-year writing class. A few thought we were propagating propaganda and trying to force a political agenda on them. I endeavored to show them that this was not the case; that understanding the effects of local tourism and consumption and working to make them more sustainable was an ethical responsibility, not a political position.

## **5. Case Study**

As Director of Composition, I was the final arbiter of conflicts, grades, charges, and complaints. I can offer a representative conversation from a resistant student in the following anecdote. There was one student who had a great deal of trouble with her CO150 class and was sent to me to for help. When she came to my office, she explained her deep resistance to the entire curriculum and the idea of debating ideas about sustainable development, climate change, or environmental degradation. The fact that these issues were local and pertinent made them more, rather than less, threatening. What we were studying in CO150 conflicted with the values she had learned on her family farm in rural western Colorado. The CO150 class she was taking asked her to consider the effects of methane gas on the environment and climate change, for example. She came to see me to say that the class was biased, that she didn't see why it was relevant, and that her farming family back home disagreed with everything that was being taught. Naturally, she was very resistant to these new ideas.



I listened as she reiterated her basic contention that 'we' (the composition faculty and all environmental scientists by extension) were wrong, that there is no such thing as human-made global warming or at least that it had not been 'proved' yet, and repeating her main complaint about the 'green' movement. She was of the belief that environmental regulators had no business telling her parents how to farm. Didn't her own parents know more about how to handle their land and their cows than anyone else, she argued. Who were they to worry about drainage into the local river?

"There's your paper," I said. "That's what you should write about."

The student did take that angle with her paper and in doing so was content that her side of the argument was heard. While she did not blindly agree with the principles of sustainability in *The Rhetoric of Green*, her understanding of the central conflict between land owners and environmental regulators, from the point of view of cattle ranchers exploded exponentially. She learned critical thinking skills and her writing consequently improved. Due to the structure of the class and its emphasis on the integration of literacy development and education on the issues of sustainable development, she was forced to engage with the material, confront the issues, and learn how to draw her own conclusions based on information from multiple sources.

We have learned through teaching these sections of CO150 that goals and outcomes of the course are not always best codified in grades or the simple quality of the prose. It is the lasting ideas, the teasing apart of the conflicts, the opening of students' minds to the complexity of issues that exist in their own home towns, that is the real legacy of these thematic first-year writing classes. When Coca-Cola wants to redirect the river in Salida, Colorado to make their beverages (and permanently affect the water table), e.g., students will be informed partners in these discussions. Our first-year writing courses are not in the business of enforcing a particular idea of sustainable development; instead, they are in the business of helping students understand and write about the complexity of the issues. It is vitally important that students learn to identify the multiple points of view, stakeholders, and rhetorical stances of the conflicts before they enter the conversation. "The Rhetoric of Green" curriculum has been successful because of its steadfast encouragement of such reflective practice and analytical thinking based on the issues of sustainable development.

## Conclusion

When we taught these multiple sections of CO150 to thousands of Colorado State University students, we were teaching key principles of sustainability and the effects of individual acts on the environment and the communities they are part of-whether the Fort Collins community, their home community in Colorado, or ultimately as global citizens. The course was effective in persuading students to think about how individual actions, such as purchases of cell phones, jeans, and other "stuff," affect the state of other people's health and the environment. Also by looking at local issues, such as whether a dam should be built over the nearby Cache la Poudre river, students developed a vocabulary and critical thinking skills to consider the impact of human-made structures on local land and water. The curriculum was successful in opening a conversation about "the basic values and behaviours that underpin [Education for Sustainable Development]" including a concern for "equity, justice, and responsible consumptions" (Pigozzi, 264). In these ways, Colorado State University's Composition Program has become one small part in helping higher education institutions build an awareness in their students that their daily, local actions have consequences on a larger scale. Courses such as *The Rhetoric of Green* help supply evidence for our university's recent designation as "a green university," or one that recycles, offers courses in sustainable development, retrofits buildings to be more environmentally friendly, and encourages walking and bicycle riding.

Through a curriculum that teaches students to look at their own immediate world and consider its sustainability, we do our part in identifying and analyzing local problems, if not yet solving all of them.

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