

*River of Words:*  
Poetry in Ecological Education

Colin Cheney

There is a way to live  
in the face of ignorance & greed.  
The way is the way of water,  
that patiently stays  
and fills the place it comes to, until  
a way is found.

- Wendell Berry

# Poetry in Ecological Education

Writing of poetry - creating a sense place

Ecology - interconnection of “natural” eco-systems & human systems

Poem - act of presence in the eco-system

Implication for environmental work - alongside scientific and policy approaches

Present, committed, & informed inhabitation of place

# “Beautiful Ohio”

by James Wright

Those old Winnebago men  
knew what they singing.  
All summer long and all alone,  
I had found a way  
to sit on a railway tie  
above the sewer main.  
It spilled a shining waterfall out of a pipe  
somebody had gouged through the slanted earth.  
Sixteen thousand five hundred more or less people  
in Martin’s Ferry, my home, my native country,  
quicken the river  
with the speed of light.  
And the light caught there  
the solid speed of their lives  
in the instant of that waterfall.  
I know what we call it  
most of the time.  
But I have my own song for it  
and sometimes, even today,  
I call it beauty.

# Beautiful Ohio

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- Ecological connection  
*beautiful*
- Ground for  
commitment to place  
and environment
- Poem - creation of a  
sense of place;  
commitment; human  
response to the  
pollution;

# Beautiful Ohio

## *a model for ecological education*

Wright's poem provides a model for environmental work not being solely a matter of approaching environmental problems from scientific or policy perspective.

Addressing how each of us understands our relationship to place - what it means to truly inhabit our environment.

# From *Ohio* to *Rhode Island*

- Challenge: how to move from the ethic of the poem into pragmatic environmental work
- Transfer this mode of ecological consciousness into an environmental education curriculum for Rhode Island schools focusing on:
  - sense of place
  - a human voiced response to that place : poetry

# Thesis Question

**What does “poetry” serve to bring to  
a place-based environmental education curriculum?**

# Terminology

**Ecological pedagogy** being a type of environmental education ideology used in the creation of curricula, & the practicum of classroom teaching.

**Constructivist** being a mode of teaching where-in students are actively creating and formulating their own views & knowledge; a mode of learning where-in the emphasis is internalization of knowledge and ideas through the articulation of these views in the writing of poetry.

# Hypothesis

Poetry is a good medium in a classroom for students to explore their sense of place and voice of place, that has the potential to serve as the groundwork for developing ecological consciousness and activism.

# Rationale for Poetic-Ecological Pedagogy

Ecology's "goal is not just comprehension of how the world works, but in the light of that knowledge, a life lived accordingly." David Orr, Ecological Literacy

- We are generally disconnected from our place - both cognitively and ecologically
- People do not think of themselves as *part of* the environment; rather it is either an "other," as with "Nature," or something that surrounds us;
- Ecological a more useful term
- Env. ed. occurs almost solely in science classrooms; core disconnect not dealt with adequately

# Rationale, cont.

- Everyone is connected to their place, part of a certain ecosystem; they just don't realize it - especially in the city
- Everyone has a relationship to place, not necessarily a sense of that place or concern for it
- How to elicit concern
- Getting kids to work through what they know about their place and then pointing out the problems in that place

# Objectives

- To create an ecological education curriculum that focuses on this disconnect, using poetry to explore these principles of ecology and “place” as in Wright’s poem
- To study such a framework would work in a non-science classroom in Providence

# Why Poetry?

or, Why poetry infused with ecological issues?

“Poetry...becomes a manifestation of landscape & climate, just as the ecosystem’s flora and fauna are. A human voice becomes the voice of a place.”  
John Elder, Imagining the Earth

- Understood as strong teaching tool in English classes
- Short and focused - necessitates focus, distillation and revision of ideas; fit for short time allotments
- Poetry mediates the outside world through the human self
- Relies on subjective; environmental attitudes and beliefs are contingent upon personal and cultural value systems

# Why Poetry, cont.

“The language of landscape is our native language... Words reflect observation & experience.... specific to landscape of place.” Spurr, The Language of Landscape

- Shanahan, Nature Stories - environmental narratives and stories
- Bowers, Culture of Denial: “education is systematic storytelling
- Poetry taps into this narrative understanding of human relationship with environment; telling the story of your place
- Rich tradition of ecologically minded poetry

# Map

- “Method”
- River of Words - background & current
- Curriculum
- “Results” - Student Poems
- Reactions -students and teachers
- Successes / Problems
- Implications

# “Method”

“In his madness is some method.” Hamlet

- Creation of an ecological education curriculum as part of the R.I. River of Words project - focusing on rivers and watersheds through poetry
- Coordinated ten ROW teachers in two Providence High Schools, English classes
- Demographic of entire program
  - Two classes at Hope High school; 9th & 10th grade classes
  - Six classes at Moses Brown school; entire 10th grade class
- Focus for presentation on two classes I taught at M.B.

# River of Words

- Started by Robert Hass when U.S. Poet Laureate - poetry and poster contest focusing on local river and watershed networks
- In Rhode Island, coordinated by Rick Benjamin, first through the RI Foundation and currently through the RI Service Alliance,
- I created the first env. ed. curriculum for the RI program
- “Learn and Serve” model: six weeks in fall in high schools then transfer of this curriculum into elem. Schools in the spring

# Curriculum

- Issues surrounding rivers and watersheds of Providence
- Goals: strengthen sense of place, awareness & knowledge; develop a voice of your place
- Curriculum broke down each week into a theme that connected poetic approach with environmental issue; collection of river/ water poems + additional env. materials : fact sheet on Dioxin, history of river industrialization in Prov., flora and fauna of the Woonasquatucket, role playing game
- Each week included giving of poem(s), discussion of poem and issues raised, local issue or focus, writing exercises
- HW: journal writing at their own “waterplace”

# Curriculum

## Six weeks: central themes

1. Self (& expansion of definitions of self and community)
2. Maps - what do we see in the landscape, our community; what don't we see - mapping with words and images
3. Ecology - what are the various cycles (water being a powerful one) that we are a part of; how do we understand our relationship to these systems
4. Perception - different ways of seeing/knowing things?
5. History - the history of our place; stories of our elders
6. What next - where do we take this knowledge?

# “Preliminary Results”

- Preliminary analysis and evaluation of student’s work; my two classes
  - Poems
  - Journal entries
  - Class comments
  - Written evaluations
- Still compiling student work, evaluations and comments from ROW & class teachers

# Student Poems

Only the leaves move  
in the cold air while the machines  
hum working busily.

- Ben

- Examples of student poems representing themes: close awareness, local & historical knowledge, cycles & connection, and “voice of place”

# Awareness

## *Map poem by Sarah*

Old sign chicken coop weeds rooster red cedar vines wood chips stone  
walk old gardens summertime mint cold clear sky sheep pen old sign

Tall grass by the trail spruce trees dark and cool memories of summer  
leaves rabbits smells of snow quarry path tall grass

Rotting leaves bare trees cedar trees weeds darkness pudding stone  
History Falls small rocks rotting leaves

snapping turtles bridge dam frogs summer camp geese eddy rock pond  
snapping turtles

shady glade buckweed

birds harvest cold paradise nature sheet of water

clouds mulch wind one spruce

# Local and Historical Knowledge

**“He told me it was pretty” by Adam**

He told me it was pretty,  
He told me it was clean,  
I asked him “how bout those houses?”  
For sure the ones he’d seen.

He said “How could I forget?”  
“Those houses bother me,”  
“They’re coming in our small town,  
and killing every tree.”

I asked about his days,  
of when he’d hunt swordfish,  
“Ah yes, that was fun!”  
“And they made a delicious dish.”

“Yes those times were good,  
sadly they are done...”  
Illegal traps against swordfish,  
Those stupid traps won.”

# Cycles and connection

**“ Snow flake falls...” by Jonathan**

A snow flake falls in northern Maine

And joins

The river.

Gathered by the bottling company

It moves south to

Rhode Island.

A thirsty man stops to get a drink

And takes the bottle home with him.

Splash!

The bottle hits the ground

When the man exits his car

At his house and the

Remainder of the water

P o u r s o u t .

Flowing through the ground

It joins a small stream

Where I collect it in a

Small bottle.

# Voice of place: haiku

## **Providence River Haiku by Stephanie**

River so tranquil.  
The city, it's opposite  
together in one place.

Cars and buses screech  
as two ducks are swimming by  
a truck honks its horn.

The flowing river  
the trucks and buses honking,  
all call this place home.

## **Adam**

I love our nature  
I hate the pollution and smoke  
Oh look here's my car

## **Haiku from the river by Jackie**

the tide pushes leaves out to the sea  
but they sink before they get there  
joining a bottomless pit of their kind  
despite the current.

oxymoron:

glistening Woonasquatucket

dream:

beautiful Providence

# Reactions: students

## *Kaitlyn*

My awareness of the beach has definitely changed as we discussed the ideas and ways of knowing in the class. Each time I went there I felt more connected....I was able to interview my dad and learned a lot through him... I realized that we grew up on the same river we live [on] now and that is why he chose to raise his family there, because he loved it so much. Learning this helped me to see the importance of ROW. I realized that water really does connect people & directly affect their lives. Each time I went to the river (beach), I saw a piece of history, my own as well as my dad's.

## *Deepa*

My awareness and thinking about my waterplace has gradually changed from week to week....At first I did not view the environment with as much appreciation as I do now. Also, I knew very little about the environment and water because I never had a course like this....My thinking of the people's effect on the environment has vastly changed. Before, I did not know that the river in Providence was moved or that it was that polluted....In addition, "waterfire" truly means something different to me, before I thought it was something that people could come and enjoy, though it still is that it also is a way to cover up an extremely polluted river

# Reactions, cont.

*Lindsey*

I believe that instead of focusing on just the rivers, this project should focus on nature as a whole and how each individual effects the environment....I also think that many times the group over analyzed and became too *philosophic* for our current grade level.

*Jackie*

“what’s the point?”

*David*

The project made me more aware of my surroundings and the environment that I live in. I now know about the history and present day condition of the Providence River, and I learned about the geographical explanation of watersheds. I have learned much and am grateful.

# ROW teacher reactions

# Successes/ Problems

Some concluding thoughts

# Implications

- For ROW
- For Environmental Studies @ Brown

# Acknowledgements