Writing for Ecological Understanding

by

John Ross Currie

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Adult Education and Community Development

Department of Leadership, Higher & Adult Education (LHAE)

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)

University of Toronto

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Abstract

Thomas Berry (1999) and John Vaillant (2015) agree that the central question of our times involves considering the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it. Ecological understanding can be defined as this awareness. This work examines ecological understanding in terms of writing pedagogy for adult learners, considering how narrative ways of teaching and learning supports ecological understanding in adult learners; and how writing can serve as a learning response to environmental and ecological issues. The methodology approaches these questions by paying attention to students’ voices about their learning and by examining student-authored work through Buell’s (1995) ecocritical lens. Interviews with educators also contribute. Robert Yagelski’s (2011) ontological approach to writing views the act as one that “both shapes and reflects our sense of who we are in relation to the world around us” (p.3). This work furthers this theory, which views the primary benefits to the self occurring solely during the act of composition, by moving towards an ontological theory of writing for ecological understanding that considers the entire writing process as shaping the self, including the editing process and a pedagogy that encourages publication of student-authored peer models. This new ontology culminates in Seven Principles for Teaching Writing for Ecological Understanding, two of which
are: First-person creative nonfiction and other genres serve as solid entry points for students into the topic of the environment.; Cultivation of the naïve narrator well serves environmental writing.

One methodological refinement is to focus on students’ work and then ask them to consider their own work from their point of view. Further questions include: Does a predisposition towards writing for ecological understanding develop in childhood and, if so, can it be offset by experiential writing pedagogy?; How do peer model texts affect the learning of adult students who employ them?
Acknowledgments

I first wish to thank my supervisor, J. Gary Knowles; my committee members, Guy Allen and Jean-Paul Restoule; my external examiner, Mitchell Thomashow; and my internal examiner, Mary Kooy.

I am indebted to the tireless support of my family in completing this work: my love Sandra Carmona-Castillo, Ross Currie, Judith Lawrence, and Joanne Lawrence. I wish to thank my sons, Tomas Currie and Mateo Currie, for their inspiration.

Thank you to Rick Van Noy and Sonnet L’Abbé for your insights. Thank you to Sarah King for your professional support and to Heather Read, Robert Price, Duncan Koerber, Laurent Leduc, and Ramsey Affifi for your collegial support.

This work would not have been possible without the generous time given by my former students. You continue to inspire.
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Introduction

This study is a journey. I look at writing, wondering aloud on the page through writing, about the power of the medium to transform. I have invested years into learning how to write, how writing works with other people, and how they learn to write. When William Zinsser (2011) writes the line—

Now I was also a teacher, stretched by every new student who came along.

—I see a flicker of myself. In teaching writing there is so much at stake. My teaching philosophy encourages students to see writing as a potent tool that belongs to them, not as a bewildering, punitive set of rules disengaged from their own interests and motivations. Underlying my specific questions with regard to environmental writing, I am interested in this basic question: Can writing produce in people a sense of self? I go about answering this question by reflecting upon my own experiences. A good deal of these experiences over the past decade have involved inviting undergraduates into a practice of writing, reflecting upon the way I do that, listening to what they have to say about it, and reading the outstanding work they produce. Zinsser knows what I have come to know in my years: that to teach well is to pay attention well in this way—to students. It is a viewpoint he is talking about here, a positioning of oneself toward the largeness of the task of teaching in the hopes of achieving potentially transformative results—for student and teacher.

Being an ecologically-focused educator, I consider the question of a sense of self through writing alongside the words of writer John Vaillant (2015), and cultural historian Thomas Berry (1999), and many other contemporary minds, that the question of our times, the most important inquiry with regard to our species’ present and future involves considering the role of the human in relation to the natural world. In this work I look at what this relationship might mean in terms of developing writing pedagogy related to environmentally-focused written expression. My experiences and reflection have led me to these questions, and to this project, and the project has manifested itself as something that needed to be done. The end of this journey culminates in the form of a list of key principles with regard to environmental writing pedagogy. The journey from
question formation to outcome has been one of patience, reflection, and writing and editing, revising and re-visioning. Along the path keeping me company have been my students. Too many academics I have seen talk the talk of maintaining a practice of “student-focused” and “student-centred” learning, but in reality many of these types view teaching as an afterthought to maintaining their program of research. This is not always their fault. But I will not go into that here. What I will say is that for me, teaching and research are symbiotic activities. Any outcomes or perspectives I gain through studying teaching and learning have the advantage of being able to directly benefit my teaching practice and to potentially be of some value to others involved in similar tasks.

I have come to this inquiry not initially as a result of identifying a gap in knowledge, but as a writer-canoeist. The questions came and the lake told me to paddle. In his book, Living the Narrative Life, Gian Pagnucci (2004) speaks of his experiences supervising graduate students. He comments on what he terms “the unreal gap in the literature” (p. 22). For Pagnucci, the “gap” in knowledge as what drives research to be undertaken in the first place is no more than a potent metaphor. Writes Pagnucci:

Thinking about research literature as filled with gaps causes one to imagine knowledge as if it were a brick wall that is being built by a vast complement of colleagues. The wall is high and wide and has been built up for hundreds of years. But there are holes in the wall, gaps that need to be filled. Perhaps the base of the wall has even crumbled in spots, corroded by new, aggressive theoretical paints. When a doctoral student conducts a study and fills a gap, the student is acting as if that work places one more brick into the wall of knowledge. (p. 22)

The gap often is the researcher’s contribution to knowledge, the carrot, the invisible item worthy, eventually, hopefully, of honours and awards. The gap is the Holy Grail. The reification of this metaphor occurs when a graduate student’s energy pours into pursuit of the gap. However, as Pagnucci points out, trying to read all the literature on a topic is an impossible endeavour—one, he says, that can conveniently sidetrack a student so much that they can avoid actually working on their thesis. What will happen in this instance, Pagnucci says, is that the graduate student will then read enough to locate a gap so that he or she can stop reading.
What if, instead of telling doctoral students, “Look for a gap in the research,” we said, “Look for a story that needs to be told?” If we said, “Look for stories,” that’s what people would find. How we construct the research task heavily shapes the research outcome. Instead of trying to build a wall of knowledge, we could be asking people to add to the world’s collection of stories. (Pagnucci, 2004, p. 23)

I have undertaken this work with Pagnucci’s words forefront in my mind. I have done my share of reading, and my literature review is embedded in this work throughout it. I have let writing drive this thesis. The story that needed telling and deepening has wellied in me for years, and in the telling it has deepened me. The way it has come about and the way I have chosen to tell it are interwoven. In that sense, this journey is exploratory. It is a narrative thesis in the sense not that it reads like a novel but in the sense that the writing of it has shaped its unfolding. Its structure follows a path of inquiry.

While Pagnucci’s words set the course of my journey, this journey has resulted in my joining the academic discourse on the topic in offering something fresh. This work contributes to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) discourse community. In 1990, Boyer wrote a report that suggested the definition of scholarship be expanded so as to include teaching. The professoriate, he argued, needs to be rewarded professionally for publishing scholarly articles about teaching and learning. Such thinking fueled the creation of SoTL and, according to Brown (2015 as cited in Jaarsma, 2015), SoTL came about due to the devaluation of undergraduate teaching.

In the first chapter, “Who am I as Researcher?” I introduce myself. I want the reader to know something about me before we embark. I tell a little of how I began teaching writing, mention concerns I have around researching writing, speak on the development of my Writing about Environment and Ecology course, and let the reader in on my philosophy with regard to knowledge, truth, and experience. I then outline my teaching philosophy. This is a natural path. The first thing a reader of this work needs to do is meet the researcher. I end the chapter by stating my research questions:

1. How do narrative ways of teaching and learning support ecological understanding in adult learners?
2. How can writing serve as a learning response to environmental and ecological issues?

In Chapter 2, I lay out my methodology, which includes looking at focus group interviews with professional writing students and interviews with other educators, as well as examining student-authored work and other teaching-related materials such as my teaching journals. I outline my recruitment and selection approach, which is purposive. A purposive selection strategy allows me to choose students whom I know as articulate and reflexive. The students I have invited into the study comprise a good mix in terms of gender and courses taken with me as instructor. Similarly, I outline my reasons for selecting the two educators I interviewed because of their positive impression on me. Finally, I end by laying out notes on confidentiality and ethics for human participants.

In Chapter 3, “Theoretical Framework” I explore concepts that underlie my writing pedagogy, namely: interconnection, the self writing the self into being, and the relationship of form to content. I also look at the concepts of freedom and transformation in writing pedagogy with reference to how theories by Jack Mezirow, Peter Elbow, and Robert Yagelski inform this work. Throughout, I incorporate the voices of my students, gathered via interview. In the section, “Education and the Crisis of Sustainability” I introduce Yagelski’s (2011) critique of mainstream writing, which he sees as founded upon the Cartesian duality of mind and body, and a cognitive approach to understanding how meaning gets made. He makes the case that this mainstream approach ultimately reinforces a split between earth and human, therefore holding back progress toward solving the environmental crisis. Yagelski serves as my main theorist and this work attempts to present and critique his take on writing pedagogy in light of my findings based on the voices of my students, their work, and my review of relevant literature.

In Chapter 4, “Understandings” I unpack the term ‘understanding’ in the context of reading and writing and adult education. Since the germ of the thesis began with my experience, it makes sense to unpack understanding in terms of my own experience. Next, I look at understanding in terms of adult education theory. I begin with the premise that one key purpose of adult education can be understood as individual change, and that writing, particularly autobiographical creative nonfiction writing, well serves this end. The discussion moves to a look at the self and its attributes, including views that we cannot consciously know and inspect the self as consciousness happens. As such, the self exists within dynamic interplay between self and
language, with each shaping the other. A goal of transformative adult learning in the context of reflective writing is what Randall (1996) calls “restorying” our lives. I note Robert Yagelski’s (2011) point that language cannot ever entirely capture experience due to the extra-linguistic component of experience, and that knowing this we still often proceed to teach writing so as to bend language as best we can to help make meaning, even though it is not perfect.

In Chapter 5, “Ecological Understanding” I define ecological understanding, taking the reader along on my process of arriving at a definition. Broadly, I define ecological understanding as awareness of the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it. I also examine who I am as an ecological person by recounting life experiences that imbued in me ecological understanding, and provide a richness from which I draw as I write myself into the world. It is the self in the world that concerns me as both environmental educator and teacher of environmental writing.

In this chapter I introduce the methodological approach I have arrived at during this moment in the thesis. I first situate my rationale for analyzing student texts, then discuss the purposive selection technique that led me to choose the writing of one male and one female student. I discuss my choice of employing Lawrence Buell’s (1995) four criteria for what makes an environmental text. Textual analysis done alone, raises the question of where I am looking for that ecological understanding: in the text or in the person, or in both.

I conclude that both students’ texts display ecological understanding, and then unpack an aspect of their writing that contributes to this: the naïve narrator. I then tie this to how the cultivation of a naïve narrator can enhance adult learning, and can assist in developing what Buell (1995) calls a mature environmental aesthetic.

Chapter 6, “Towards an Ontological Theory of Writing for Ecological Understanding” includes the voices of my students alongside a theoretical discussion, as I build from Yagelski’s framework towards developing my own. I also discuss what I call the research challenge and the environmental challenge of teaching research-based environmental writing. This section contains a discussion of my main findings, which are: (1) Writing occurs in a context, and a selfhood arises in that context. Writing instruction results in the writer conceiving of a certain kind of self while writing. A non-mainstream approach to this might include teaching meaning-making first, not the rules of language; and to not assume that thought precedes language or that language is capable of capturing all of life’s experiences. (2) When we write we engage three selves: (i) the
whole person, which includes the personality, culture and life experience of the writer; (ii) the person as emerging writer, and; (iii) the person engaged with the topic, which in this case happens to be ecological in nature. (3) Encouraging a pedagogy that enables adult learners to put their self into the work is crucial because the self is shaped by the context in which it is allowed to shape.

I work toward developing an ecological pedagogy of writing, where I discuss aspects of my pedagogy, which include the roles of creative nonfiction and student-authored texts. Here I outline pedagogical work by two educators. One discusses poetry as a response to environmental issues and another outlines the importance of writing about place.

I end with a process reflection in which I discuss the difficulty of measuring awareness of ecological understanding. I talk about my perspective as teacher-researcher, potential biases, and how this can stem from my pedagogy. The last section represents the culmination of this research effort: a list of Seven Principles for Teaching Writing for Ecological Understanding. This list is meant to be informative, not prescriptive. It is based upon teaching experience and the research herein with regard to adult learning.
Chapter 1
Who I am as Researcher

1 Who I am as Researcher

1.1 Teaching Writing

In 1997, as a third-year undergraduate at the University of Toronto Mississauga, I stumbled upon a course called Expressive Writing. I discovered, to my surprise, that I could write. I loved the change from academic essays I’d done well at but usually with great pain. My professor asked the class to write short stories in first-person based on our life experiences and observations. He gave us a new topic every week: Present a short, detailed account of an experience you had as a child...in school...in family...about a job...about a person...

The course has other unique features: a text comprised of student-authored work, a portfolio system of assignments that encourages ongoing revision, the opportunity for regular writing conferences with the instructor, self-directed small group editing meetings which occur outside of class time and, in nearly every class, a workshop during which one student reads. That text stood out from all others in my university studies. It contained short stories written by students. Some were really short and powerful. I recall holding that book and just being marveled by it, reading the entire thing and enjoying it, sustaining a somehow incredulous feeling, based on my prior years of study, that the text in my hands embodied the fact that this type of reading and writing mattered at my university.

My professor chose me to read a personal story before the class. I had written on a topic I thought taboo—my friends’ drug use—it was a secret I needed to tell. My professor made me feel safe and more than that, more than even making me feel that I was better than I’d known at stringing words together—he made me feel like I had something valuable to say, a contribution that could be made in this particular class in this particular moment.

The positive experience of the course stayed with me long after it ended. My professor contacted me, telling me he’d selected a few pieces I’d written to be broadcast on a story show
on a campus radio station. People across Toronto listened. A buddy of mine heard my voice on air, not expecting me to be on. My family listened. My short stories, my voice, for a brief time touched people. My professor then invited me to read a story at the Totally Unknown Writers Festival, and he published my work in the festival collection. Publishing—I would later hear him say—changes you.

My writing took me to three countries in East Africa when I wrote a successful grant application to the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (formerly CIDA). For five months I documented a Canadian non-governmental organization’s rural project sites in Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda. I interviewed and photographed beneficiaries and wrote articles on a range of international development projects and issues, from health and agroforestry to sustainability and peace-building.

I went on to complete a Master of Journalism at the University of British Columbia. I liked how journalism aimed to tell several sides of a story, whereas the kind of writing I did in Africa positioned itself towards potential donors. During my time at UBC, David Beers, Founding Editor of the Tyee, introduced me to literary (also called “narrative”) journalism. That love took me to a writing conference in Boston several times to learn the craft.

In 2006, my professor invited me to teach university on his team. Since then, along with several other professional writing courses, I have now taught Expressive Writing more than thirty times at three universities.

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When I grade finished portfolios, I always find surprises. The student I had expected much less of surprises me with breakthroughs. The student I had expected a series of astonishing pieces from ends up with just one or two good pieces. How much someone knows at any time—how much they’ve learned and applied—is unpredictable and probably impossible to measure.

As a researcher, I want to remain cognizant of any pull towards making sweeping claims about a group as a whole. There is much to sort out with individual students: the events going on in the student’s life that makes them immerse themselves in or resist learning; the group dynamics that make the class a respite from or burden among other classes, and many more. To
research the practice of teaching writing is often to enter an arena steeped in mystery. Some of my highest quality writing comes from English Language Learners (ELLs). It isn’t always grammatically correct, and I am forgiving of this when deeper attributes show up in the writing, specifically the writer’s use of economy, detail, directness, precision, clarity and voice. These students often know something about what makes a good story. Many grasp intuitively that good stories often contain characters and incidents that reveal human nature. Frequently, my ELL students innately have understood long before they came to my classroom that good writing appeals to an audience. Central to my pedagogy is the belief that if students care about what they’re writing, they grow close to their writing and the writing process. I frequently see ELL students working hard on grammar and story issues in their editing groups. On the other hand, I regularly encounter students that produce grammatically perfect portfolios, yet which lack soul. This is writing that wears the right clothes, and when we peek inside the cloak, we see little else than shadows. It is writing that has not risked anything, done by students who equate success in school with obedience. Language itself is neither knowledge nor meaning but a tool to express knowledge and make meaning. I strive to teach this.

I recently told a student, Andrew, how much I admired his writing and suggested that he pursue publication. This is something he had not considered. Andrew had taken just two courses and had done well. He emailed me for my advice on his writing journey. I responded:

*Hi Andrew,*

*I too consider myself a new writer. So first I’d like to say welcome to the company of those also figuring out what living a writing life means to them. In fact, I’d kind of put it that way: that writing is somewhat of a lifestyle or a way of being in the world. I surround myself with writing and writers, talking about writing, figuring it out, trying things, getting good feedback, getting rejected, walking on. Writers do all sorts of work besides book writing. Some pursue it full time and others live their passion alongside other careers. So in a certain sense writing is a path, a passion, your pursuit with others. Where it takes you has yet to be determined. The thing that comes up with writers of any stripe though, seems to be time.*

*So my advice is to enjoy the program, thoroughly. Take your time with it. Aim to publish. Aim to learn. Aim to grow as an editor. Do an internship. My path has taken me towards*
a love for narrative journalism, a long-form type of nonfiction that finds itself in books and magazines. And my other passion, the environment, has crossed with my writing passion, and that crisscross has formed the basis of my PhD. Writing has brought me work in communications for nonprofits and a paid position traveling and writing in Africa. As well, in a broader sense I consider storytelling my passion, and that fire has brought me to other storytelling mediums, the most recent being photography.

I’m glad to have helped you. Know that you’ve taught me things too. Let’s keep talking.

John Currie

1.2 On Researching Teaching Writing

I recently co-wrote my first academic article with a colleague about our observations of three years of student editing groups in our classes. The fact that we co-wrote an article solely based on observation caused problems for one reviewer. The editor, in an email, asked us to write something about how we would “formalize the study—that is, going through ethics and collecting data to support your informal observations.” We did not intend the submission to be informal. We intended it to be considered real, and for our observations to count. At one point, I asked my co-writer to remove his name from the project. I had been doing most of the work and the little section he’d written paled with the amount I’d written and edited. He agreed and said no, this won’t affect our friendship. Yet I chose to leave his name as a co-author. I did so because taking him out would have meant changing every “we” to “I” and this, I feared, meant I would have to take sole responsibility for doing all the observing. I felt that having two observers strengthened any claims we made. An educational researcher published us, yet didn’t quite seem to accept our stance, a stance that stemmed from the pedagogy upon which the course is based. In the last section in the paper, I write: “future research might involve looking into...ways to isolate the influence of peer editing on final work” (Currie & Price, 2010, p. 77).

I now cringe at this line. I wrote it, but it doesn’t much sound like me now—even though I did not write it long ago. I honestly don’t believe I can isolate the influence of peer editing on a students’ piece of writing. I see that peer editing improves writing. Those that participate in
functional peer editing groups produce higher quality work (and tend to enjoy the course more). But to even consider that I can isolate its effects seems a little arrogant. I would have to include a test and a control group to maintain rigor, but I would never run a writing class where I didn’t ask students to edit each other’s work in small groups. I would be doing them a disservice and would be going against what I intuit to be true. As for how they work, my co-author and I speculate on the presence of certain variables: the frequent social contact the groups encourage, the atmosphere of positive, yet critical “strengths-based” feedback, and the special type of learning that occurs because students are on their own time and away from the teacher. Common sense tells us that if the editing groups do not meet regularly and do not focus on actually giving feedback, then these editing groups will not function well. The research on teaching writing that I engage in throughout my career must make common sense, must seem natural to my pedagogy and sometimes may even live within the gray areas of life.

How do I glean the nuances of the little things that happen during a course? In terms of researching my teaching, I see a qualitative approach as ideal for me based on who I am. I see storying my teaching experiences as the best way to remain humble to the mysteries that shroud the processes I’m immersed in with my students. It feels natural to write a thesis that includes a portrait of my teaching practice. Here I am, the composition teacher inviting students to bring their lives into the classroom, onto the page, and into their voice—and here I am discovering that my own story of teaching might just be the research I need to do right now.

1.3 The Writing about Environment and Ecology Course

Since 2008, I have taught five sections of Writing about Environment and Ecology. The writing that takes place in the course is research-driven narrative. Examples include detailed profiles of place, interview-based profiles of people involved in environmentally-related activities and reflexive writing in the form of environmental autobiography. Articles in students’ portfolios include, often together in a single piece, research from academic sources, transcribed material from face-to-face interviews with people from the local community involved in voluntary or paid environmental projects, and reflexive autobiography. The course requires some writing experience but assumes no research experience. Students must have completed the prerequisite
course, *Expressive Writing*, to participate. Students in *Writing about Environment and Ecology* build a portfolio of seven original articles on an environmental topic/issue/question they design and frame. Students deepen their knowledge and their inquiry as they write articles for the portfolio. They attempt to become experts in their areas.

The course attracts students with both science and non-science backgrounds. The standard for the quality of the writing in the courses is high, higher than the standard applied in many university courses. The course employs peer model course texts made up of exemplary work produced by previous students in the same course. I published a book I use of student writing called *Environment and ecology: Stories* (2011). The back text reads:

> From the fragrances of the greenhouse to the lineups at the drive thru, nine new writers show us people and places most of us rarely take time to ponder. From a creative assistant at an ad agency who “moves” toilet paper, to a 14-year-old boy who perfects his vegetable garden, the people these writers encounter let us into their lives and their thoughts on environmental and ecological issues.

> Before long, in hearing these stories, in seeing these lives, we catch glimpses of ourselves (Currie, 2011).

The book includes stories in which the presence of the interviewer remains quite veiled. It also includes stories in which we witness the researcher at work and share moments of the co-created experience along the way. The questions of when to include the presence of the researcher, what and how much to include comprises one of the learning outcomes. Students struggle with this. There are no set rules and they struggle. If the writer’s self includes very little ecological knowledge and experience, witnessing them learn about the topic might add to the writing. If the writer speaks of their struggle to find someone to interview, we might hear these struggles and relate to them. An important part of my pedagogy resides in the importance of teaching writing that honours the life of the writer. I agree with Guy Allen (2000) that “all writing roots somehow in experience and observation” (p. 69). Abram (1996) furthers this point when he writes of the life of the scientist: “The scientist does not randomly choose a specific discipline or specialty, but is drawn to a particular field by a complex of subjective experiences and encounters, many of which unfold far from the laboratory and its rarefied atmosphere” (p. 33). I write in the introduction:
While the stories here speak to environmental and ecological issues, they also speak to the lives of people involved with the issues and the lives of the writers....The writers’ journeys, though not usually positioned front and centre, count. I relate to them because in them I catch glimpses of myself. Humans understand “environment” and “ecology” through human experience and observation. (Currie, 2011, p. 1)

In my thesis work I could not imagine not placing myself into view within the narrative. This allows any observer of my work to observe the observer at work. Showing yourself is part of what it means to a humanist. I hope readers will relate to me more when I reveal my processes, insecurities and mistakes. Mistakes make for good reading. I see my readers as intelligent, as able to see through any trickery I might slip past them to place myself into the inherent falseness of a truly objective stance.

1.4 Knowledge, Truth and Experience

I feel it important to say a few words here about knowledge, truth, and experience. Knowledge comes from being in the world, from observing and feeling and searching and seeing. From reading, writing and reacting, knowledge comes from making sense of experience, making meaning out of mountains of daily stimuli. Who makes this meaning? I make it. You make it. We make it. There is no absolute knowledge out there that we can all possess. Yet we can hold a conversation about things due to our intersubjectivity. “Today the sun shines,” I say. “Yes,” you reply, “how beautiful the sun is.”

Knowledge crucial to our lives stems from experience and observation, from being in the world and checking what you know against yourself and others and remaining open to the counter-intuitive. Drops of learning form successive layers of context. The context includes, among other things, the length of our lives, the places we inhabit, our patience for paying attention and our capacity for what Peter Elbow (1973) calls playing “The Believing Game”: “In the believing game we return to Tertullian’s original formulation: credo ut intelligam: I believe in order to understand. We are trying to find not errors but truths, and for this it helps to believe” (p. 149). Elbow writes of the importance of trying to fully insert yourself into views contrary to yours—a “serious, powerful, and...genuine giving of the self” to help you see all views more clearly (p.
If you put energy into believing what appears to be counterintuitive to your own experience and observations, the possibility exists that you and your worldview might alter in the process.

I encountered this lesson earlier this year when, during the winter, I attended an award ceremony at Victoria University. Pioneering activist Monte Hummel received an honorary doctorate. He’d spent years fighting corporate greed that had caused serious environmental damage, particularly during the 1970s in the case of Inco. A famous photo of him on the cover of a national magazine shows him giving the finger to the company’s billowing stacks. Since those times, Inco’s air pollution has plummeted and Hummel has matured. Hummel invited two mining executives, one at mid-career and one nearing retirement, up to the stage for a conversation—a conversation that would not have happened thirty years ago. They spoke of mistakes they’d made working with communities. The elder executive said he realized his industry’s expertise consisted of digging holes in the ground and this meant that his companies had learned to seek help in all the other things that go into starting up a mine. Hummel spoke of environmental victories that had been painful economic losses, losses that meant some communities would prosper less. The losses were real. Watching the talk unfold, I wrote in my journal:

*It’s all about understanding perspectives, deep perspectives. The businessman has businessman style. He sees himself as not being all about money, yet being good at making money...at being the heart of the economy. And there is great truth to this: private sector activity funds all public sector activity, the sector in which I am employed and in which I intend to make a difference.*

The process of knowledge-making is constructivist. To know something is to have considered that it might be wrong, to consider that you or it might be in process, that you might be the process. This is why I love writing. Writing is an excellent way to observe yourself thinking. Truth in any absolute sense does not exist. I have no use for “capital T truth” in a philosophical sense. I agree with Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001), that “Philosophical discussions of whether ‘truth’ really exists founder over semantics” and in their relevance to the real world (p. 41). In my work, I strive for what these writers call “a practical truth” (p. 44). In their words, “The practical truth is a protean thing which, like learning, grows as a stalagmite in a cave, drop by drop over time” (p. 44). This is an apt image for this thesis.
1.5 My Teaching Philosophy

My pedagogy sees good writing as anchored in the personality, the culture and the life experience of the writer. Good writing becomes an expression of the self. This pedagogy requires engagement with the student as a whole person. I accomplish this with several pedagogical strategies, including using creative nonfiction, peer models, in-class workshopping, peer editing groups, a portfolio system of assessment, and being a reflexive practitioner.

From my experience, students arrive at the university expected to quickly learn writing in new genres they perceive as detached from themselves. Often, the initial writing they produce shows presence of a false self. The false self on the page strives to be seen as knowledgeable and objective, but comes across as the writer trying too hard, filling space with such things as jargon, passive voice, hifalutin words, and too-long sentences. As such, I work hard helping students unlearn habits that have held them back.

Too often students have learned through their educational upbringing that when it comes to writing they must check who they are at the classroom door. While writing with objectivity is central to some types of writing they will do at university, too often students graduate having experienced little else. A surprising thing happens when I incorporate a piece of creative nonfiction writing into a course. Several students, including some in academic bridging that have been removed from school for stretches, tell me later not only that it was their favourite piece, but that that for the first time they truly cared about writing well. This is important because I cannot teach students all the grammar they will need, but if a drive cultivates itself in them to do their best they can easily find most answers to problems online. This is how real writers operate. This approach prepares students to learn to learn, in the hopes that they leave the course self-directed and self-motivated. In Writing about Environment and Ecology, an upper-level research-based course I designed, I begin with an assignment that asks students to write a story about an environmental experience. Everyone finds a topic, some with my guidance. This assignment situates students’ experience in the course right away, giving students the opportunity to have something meaningful to say even before they have decided on a research area. This strategy invites students into the learning setting as whole people by valuing the life experiences they bring to a topic area. It also gets writers writing right away, something I believe a writing course should do, and in this case builds upon their prior learning, since by taking the environment
course they will have completed the *Expressive Writing* prerequisite, and will have experience writing narratives.

My nine years of teaching experience has shown me that a lot of fear and lack of confidence occurs around learning to write. A good many of my best writers have internalized the message that writing is not something they are capable of and therefore cannot enjoy. This can have a lasting, damaging effect. I believe that building a writing community is not only essential to a pedagogy that engages the whole person, but central to the task of helping writers overcome the fear around the task of writing.

Many writing classrooms rely upon masterpiece models. Extraordinary works can intimidate new writers by conveying unattainable goals. Their use emphasizes the vast distance between esteemed published author and new writer. One strategy I do to invite students into the task of writing is to publish student-authored work in book form and employ it as a class text. Writers learn from other new writers at the same experience level. Peer models serve to open up possibilities to new writers. The text was “Written for us, by us,” as one student put it.

The texts also conveys the course standards, by example, of work by people who sat in their seats and faced the same writing challenges. This is crucial because my standards tend to be higher than those in many university courses. The standards are conveyed, yet are seen as attainable. The implicit message is positive, worth striving for, as opposed to being intimidating. This is important because the foundation course I teach, *Expressive Writing*, assumes no prior writing experience and attract students of all disciplines. Students know the real possibility of publication exists. Typically after every class, with their permission, I pass on the work of several writers towards publication opportunities. In 2011, I published a book of narratives and research-based writing that later served as the class text. As I prepare to teach a new upper-level course this fall that I designed, I am compiling a list of student work that will become one of that course’s central texts. While I do include readings by professional writers in upper-year courses, I mix them with peer models. The peer model text connects the experiences of previous students with the learning of present students, broadening the community of the past with the community of the present. Students engage these works through in-class discussions and by composing weekly rhetorical analyses. One of the basic needs of new writers is to find their voice and to use
language that belongs to them. Peer model texts help make this happen. Again, this goal speaks to educating the whole person.

Related to my practice of peer models is the in-class workshopping I begin, usually in the third class. The class acts as a board of editors, giving strengths-based feedback followed by critical yet supportive commentary. Doing this brings the class together. At first I mostly model good, detailed feedback, but soon on in the quality and participation rise. From class three students onward students form self-led peer editing groups. These groups meet outside of class time with no grades directly tied to them. Since more than 65% of my program’s students speak a first language other than English, one technique I have learned to do is to encourage that the groups comprise of native and non-native speakers and students of various levels of writing experience. Students report to me that these communities of practice provide positive reinforcement, routine, enjoyment, and the kind of learning that can only come from others in the moment facing similar academic tasks. With my support, and through participation in self-led peer-editing groups, I regularly witness non-native English speakers and other first-time writers succeeding at producing the high quality work my courses demand. Again, the communities built by these activities not only help students tackle the demanding activity of writing and revising together, it often gives them a memorable, collaborative experience often missing from a good part of their university education.

My assessment strategy mirrors the focus on revision I practice within my writing courses. Over our time together, students hand in multiple drafts of assignments. Just as I do not typically request set word lengths, I also do not state a set quantity for the number of revisions required. Some pieces will write themselves, I tell my students. Others will require more effort. I say this because I teach writing as writing is produced in professional settings. By gauging the types of revisions you make, I say, you learn your strengths and areas of needed improvement as a writer.

I practice portfolio assessment. This means that I evaluate students mainly on the basis of the final portfolio of assignments and exercises that they present at the end of a writing course. Portfolio assessment means not having to get it right the first time, the second time, the third, and so on. This system rewards students for creating multiple drafts through a dynamic editing process. The system emphasizes feedback, emulating professional writing practice, where writers revise work in consultation with editors. Portfolio assessment means that graded work benefits
from both instructor feedback and input from peer editors. As the course progresses, students will have learned several writing tools and strategies, will have talked a great deal about what makes for strong writing, will have met regularly with their peer editing group and the instructor, and will have forged a habit of generating weekly revisions. Portfolio assessment maximizes students’ opportunities to present the best possible work for evaluation at the end of the course.

Finally, a good pedagogy is a reflective pedagogy. I have amended all of these practices based on feedback students and colleagues gave me. I have focused my doctorate on teaching and learning, in the view toward being a better and more reflexive practitioner. In my thesis I examine aspects of the Writing about Environment and Ecology course by analyzing student-authored work produced in it. I also interviewed sixteen students about their experiences in the course and the program in which I teach, and for a broadened perspective, two writing educators. My main research question is how do narrative ways of teaching and learning support ecological understanding in adult learners. The research not only looks at modifications I’ve made to the course, but aims to contribute to a greater understanding of writing as a learning response to environmental and ecological issues. While researching teaching is the reason I undertook the PhD, the doctorate is just one piece of an ongoing strategy I have to learn from my students. For every section I teach, I dedicate six hours per week to meeting with students. Within these fifteen-minute writing conferences I provide students guidance with their writing while listening carefully to what they say about their learning. This helps me tailor my teaching to each student’s individual needs. I also pay close attention to course evaluations, keep a teaching journal, regularly discuss teaching and learning issues with my colleagues, and write pedagogical journal articles.

My teaching and learning goals speak to how I conceive of my role. My teaching goals are to teach classes that (1) stand out for students within their entire educational experience; (2) are well-attended because students enjoy coming, participating, and working hard; (3) through the strategies listed above and others, forge a community of writers that teach and learn from one another, and bolster one another’s confidence in the difficult task of writing well; (4) the instructor creates a positive atmosphere conducive to students feeling secure enough to take risks and try fresh, original approaches in their writing; (5) result in a good deal of high quality writing, produced wherein the goal of publication exists; and (6) engages students as whole
people, in which my pedagogy sees good writing as anchored in the personality, the culture and the life experience of the writer.

My learning goals are to learn from and with my students, to document and publish this learning, modify and improve my teaching based on it, and to engage a reflexive and research-based lifelong practice of care and responsiveness towards helping students of all backgrounds, learning styles, motivations, and abilities succeed.

1.6 Research Questions

My research questions grew out of teaching adult students to write narratively about environmental issues. I have always been learning to teach by teaching, and the thesis presented an opportunity to record and more deeply examine this process—while maintaining a focus on students’ voices about their learning and student-authored work. This particular focus makes this inquiry unique.

The purpose of my research is simple: I wish to know more about teaching writing about environment and ecology in an adult learning setting. My primary research questions are:

1. How do narrative ways of teaching and learning support ecological understanding in adult learners?

2. How can writing serve as a learning response to environmental and ecological issues?

With these central questions I employ a mixed methodology. The other purpose of this work is to examine the effectiveness of the mixed methodology itself as a tool of inquiry for this particular subject matter. The project viewed as a process engages Richardson’s (2000) view of the act of writing itself as a method of inquiry (p. 923).
1.7 Representation

This thesis takes the form of a book. The book form represents the material and purposes for several key reasons. Educators in higher and adult education constitute my institutional audience. In this I include education administration, as well as curriculum and policy makers. More broadly, I write for those who teach or wish to teach writing. I write for those who wish to teach writing about environmental and ecological issues to adult learners through nonfiction, including journalism and expressive writing. In each case, the main vehicle this audience consumes this type of work tends to be in book form, whether print or electronic. Parts of this thesis have been presented at adult education conferences with audio and visual aspects. More of this, along with findings published in academic journals, helps ensure my audience receives the work in media it uses.

The work itself suits book form because it contains and locates inquiry by chapter. Chapters allow for a progression to occur, a story to be told: from researcher background to research question formation, to methodological and theoretical foundations, to analysis and making sense of it all. The writing itself reflects central virtues of the writing pedagogy in which I engage. As such, it makes sense that the form reflect the pedagogy at every step. When I am reflecting on my own experience, I am often engaging expressively. When I am speaking about literature or theory, discussing ideas and making sense of findings, my writing takes on a scholarly tone. Throughout, I also strive to adhere to the tenets of good communication I teach, which includes economy, directness, detail, voice, clarity and originality. My goal with language is to remain accessible and scholarly. My goal with form is the same. I purposely resist a more traditional structuring and titling of thesis components in order to invite readers in, as opposed to alienating anyone.

The publication of my adult students’ work in book form is central to my teaching pedagogy. I then use these texts for study with future classes. When I view myself as the former adult student who was published by my teacher, now that I am the teacher, my decision to focus on students’ voices and writings for analysis and to bring them here in this venue as a scholarly book, I observe now in my own practice my own pedagogical goal. In other words, the book-form publication of this work successfully closes the pedagogical loop that in a certain sense began with me completing my first course as an undergraduate.
Chapter 2
Informing my Focus

2 Informing my Focus

2.1 Student Voices

Primarily, student voices, student work, my own reflections on teaching writing, and the voices of two writing educators inform this work. The particular focus on student voices and student work makes this research unique. Since I teach writing within a student-focused program, it seems to make sense to focus to what students say about their learning experiences in order to understand their learning and my teaching. Students have taught me a great deal about teaching and learning, not to mention writing well. And they will continue to do so. In the program where I teach I spend most of my days meeting students one-on-one. The time I spend in class is brief compared to the block of hours I set aside each day to help students improve their work and model professional editing practices for them. I get to know my students and have the opportunity to hear what they have to say. It is common for students to tell instructors in my program that over the four plus years they spent at the institution, we are the only ones that know their name. A student recently came to me asking me to write a letter of reference for medical school application. I asked her, why me? She said no faculty knows me like you know me. To not focus on student writing and voices based on how I have come to know the practice of teaching writing would ring false not only to my pedagogy, but to my intuitive sense of what makes for sound methodology in the reflective work I am engaged in here. Methodologically, focusing on student work and voices adds breadth to the research so that it is not just me reflecting upon my observations or me speaking to colleagues or abstractly grappling with theory.

At times, I also draw upon my teaching journals, teaching evaluations and feedback, lesson plans, syllabi and other related course material. By so doing I am covering Wolcott’s (1992) three major modes of data collection: participant observation (experiencing), interviewing (enquiring), and studying materials prepared by others (examining). I have only sought student
participation with permission, and in the case that intended participants are my former students, I have sought their participation only after they have received their grades.

2.2 Focus Group Interviews with Professional Writing Students

Having been a participant in focus groups for literary-based educational research while a student at Lakehead University, I have seen firsthand the benefits of the method. A small group provides comfort and safety. Participants tend to build upon what others say, at times saying more perhaps than they may have had they been interviewed one-on-one. I employed a questioning approach that remained flexible. I drafted some guiding questions, but I remained open to directions the students took these conversations and open to formulating new questions on the spot that arose from these conversations. Such an approach serves important goals such as understanding participants’ thinking, keeping participants’ interests dominant and having participants talk to one another (Morgan, 2001, p. 147).

In total, I have interviewed 19 University of Toronto Mississauga Professional Writing and Communications students. All were enrolled in the program, completing undergraduate majors or minors. This quantity of participants proved ideal to provide enough qualitative data to inform the research questions. Rather than have a set number in mind, my plan was always to set out to conduct enough interviews to obtain a richness and sufficiency of data that would assist me in answering the research questions. I stopped collecting data when I realized I had achieved this goal. The table below shows the configurations of the groups, along with the quantities of research conducted with each configuration.
The variation in configurations came about largely due to participants’ availability. Some students took one course with me, some took two, some took both, and some took none. The table below breaks down these quantities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Configuration</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-participant focus group</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-participant focus group</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single participant interview</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 Focus Group Configuration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses Taken with the Researcher as Instructor</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressive Writing only</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing about Environment and Ecology only</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both courses</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither course</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2 Courses Taken with the Researcher as Instructor

This mix is fairly evenly distributed. It supports the breadth of my questioning. To discuss narrative understanding it is not necessary that students have taken my course. Their participation in and familiarity with the PWC program itself proved valuable. Each type of participant, because they are not all alike, offered unique insights. During sessions in which I
focused on ecological understanding, I specifically sought out students who had completed the *Writing about Environment and Ecology* course with me. When I looked at writing pedagogy in terms of a broader, nonspecialized application, it made sense that the participants could potentially include any student with some experience in the program. Those who had taken neither course with me had this experience, by at least completing the foundational course, *Expressive Writing*.

The students I spoke with came from a range of disciplines and levels of study at the university. They also varied in terms of their cultural background and gender. The table below shows participant breakdown by gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Gender</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.3 Participant Gender

The higher number of female participants more or less mirrors the gender breakdown I have observed for nine years within the program’s classrooms. I am fortunate to achieve this breakdown. The composition of every course I have ever taught at PWC has been similarly rich in cultural and gender diversity.

### 2.3 Interviews with Other Educators

Interviews with other educators adds breadth to the inquiry. By stepping outside of my own practice, I broaden the inquiry. By speaking with others who share a common aim of teaching writing as a response to environmental and ecological issues, I point out a variety of pedagogical approaches. To consider what is possible given certain constraints—for example, time,
remaining indoors, coming under the discipline of Professional Writing versus English, as well at being at a particular locale, campus, or department—is to add context to this one researcher’s journey and to increase the likelihood that the conversations will be of interest to a broader audience of educators.

I employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with two other educators. One took place in a face-to-face setting, the other over the phone. The two teacher-writers I chose because they have touched me with their thinking and writing are Sonnet L’Abbé and Rick Van Noy. I met them both at conferences of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE).

Sonnet L’Abbé taught creative writing and poetry at The University of British Columbia’s Okanagan campus. From the institution’s website:

L’Abbé situates her work in the emerging field of Critical Plant Studies, a branch of environmental philosophy that focuses on understanding the way humankind relates to plants. Her PhD focused on the writings of the late American poet Ronald Johnson that explores metaphors for plants and people. (Marck, 2013)

Rick Van Noy teaches at Radford University in Virginia. He interests me because of his development as a teacher-writer. When I saw him in June in Bloomington, Indiana at a conference, he spoke of his first book of ecocriticism reaching a limited academic readership. His second, A natural sense of wonder: Connecting kids with nature through the seasons (2008), is a work of non-fiction stories about himself, his wife and children connecting with the natural world. He said he wrote the book because he wanted to reach a wider audience. He is now working on a book of young adult fiction and is concerned about ways to make the story’s events plausible. I find his evolution as a writer fascinating. I related to him when he said he is concerned that when writing during the school year, his “teacher voice” slips into his prose.

2.4 Student-Authored Work

In terms of student-authored work, I include in their entirety two creative nonfiction stories. I also excerpt from students’ assignment and exercise work completed in my classes. I obtained
students’ permission to use their written work and did not approach them as potential participants until any course in which I was their instructor had formally finished and a grade was assigned. I selected work based on its ability to shed light upon the research questions. Students who agreed to include their work in this research were given the option to remain anonymous and to change identifying details such as names of people and places within their pieces.

2.5 Teaching Journals

“Journal writing,” write Cole and Knowles (2008), “like all other forms of self-directed professional inquiry, is a vehicle for understanding oneself as a teacher” (p. 49). Rarely a day passes when I’m in the midst of a term that I do not make an entry into my teaching journal. I find that I have become better at detailing things that happen that become seeds for further academic writing. Journals begin as a reflexive practice for my own teaching purposes but have the potential to be harvested for themes and issues I will bring forth to a wider teaching audience. Cole and Knowles point out the importance of reflexive practice:

The autobiographical nature of teaching means it is impossible to understand teaching without understanding the teacher; that it is impossible to understand the practice apart from the practitioner; that it is impossible to understand the knowledge apart from the knower. (p. 9)

This quote fits perfectly with the flavour of this thesis, of its reflective nature, and of the choices I have made with regard to the types of data I examine.

2.6 Approach to Recruitment and Selection

I employ purposive selection, with the view of such “as a series of strategic choices about with whom, where and how to do...research” (Palys, 2008, p. 697). Having taught many of those whom spoke with about their learning experiences, I set out my selection process already with a good sense of students’ progress and breakthroughs through spending time talking with them in class and during writing conferences. The strategy of purposive selection has allowed me to
choose students I know as articulate and reflexive. I have chosen a mix of students in terms of
gender and number of courses taken with me as their instructor. Sometimes, upon
recommendation by my colleagues, I interviewed students I have not taught. Student work I
examined is work that I know well as having potential for relevant in-depth analysis. The
educators I speak with have already made an impression on me. Finding people with similar
teaching interests aligns the selection method with the objectives of the research. These methods
provide the organic, serendipitous and responsive approach I seek, one that speaks to the nature
of qualitative inquiry as I understand it.

2.7 Notes on Confidentiality and Ethics for Human Participants

2.7.1 Student Authors

I granted students who agreed to inclusion of their written work anonymity if they desired. I did
this because these participants might feel uneasy not knowing what I may write about their work.
I offered them the options of using their full name, first name only or to remain anonymous. In
the latter case I will use a pseudonym. The letter of consent mentions that before I include their
work student authors are welcome to change names of people or places or other identifying
details in their pieces.

2.7.2 Focus Group and Interview Participants

This study looks at teaching and learning experiences. Data sought is not of a private nature and
should pose no risk to participants. As such, no reasonably foreseeable risks, harms or
inconveniences exist. Thus no reason for offering anonymity to focus group and interview
participants exists. As well, using participants’ first names during recorded focus group sessions
will potentially lessen chances for confusion. My interview participants are well-published
professionals whose names might be seen to lend credibility to the work; I plan the work to be of
the quality that they would celebrate their names being used. Overall, keeping participants’
names humanizes the participants, the researcher and the research endeavour.

2.7.3 Conditions for Participation

Participation was voluntary and there was no compensation. Participants could withdraw at any
time and decline to answer any questions. These and other conditions for participation were
made clear in recruitment material and in letters informed consent participants signed. Ethical
approval for this project was granted by the Office of the Vice-President, Research and
Innovation, University of Toronto.
Chapter 3
Theoretical Framework

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Connection and Disconnection at University

I discovered Robert Yagelski’s (2011) work, *Writing as a Way of Being*, and the more I read it, the more it made sense. I had never encountered a writer with the thoroughness to argue theoretically that the way writing is generally taught contributes to setting up and maintaining Cartesian dualism of the self as separate and autonomous from the earth. Yagelski writes: “We teach students that writing is a procedure rather than a way of experiencing themselves as beings in an inherently interconnected world” (p. xv). Much for me resonated with that line. Rereading it led me to think that one of the central reasons to read literature is to reveal interconnectedness among characters. This interconnectedness is something we know, yet in our daily routines suppress. So one role of literature is to remind us about causality, and about our choices. What we do to others affects others, and us. Likewise, one of the central teachings of environmental education is the interconnectedness of all beings, living and non-living. Evolution. Habitat loss. Biodiversity. All of these environmental issues can be understood in terms of interconnectedness. Reading and writing literature reminds us of the important things we may already know, while being reminded of them in a new voice, in ways that pleasantly surprise us. Thomas Berry (1999) writes of the importance culture plays in the human endeavour with regard to the environmental crisis. “Radical new cultural forms are needed,” he writes. “These new cultural forms would place the human within the dynamics of the planet rather than place the planet within the dynamics of the human” (p. 160). One need not look further than the organization Cape Farewell, which states on its website (2015):

What does Culture have to do with Climate Change?

Everything.
A self-described “think/do tank”, Cape Farewell began “in 2001 by artist David Buckland to gather artists, designers, filmmakers, writers and other creatives to address society’s biggest challenge: climate change” (2015). Its roots lie in sending creative professionals on seagoing vessels to the north and south poles to witness climate change firsthand and, upon their return, complete an artistic project inspired by their tour.

Environmental writing can be viewed as one of Berry’s radical new forms. The work that follows is built upon the premise that this cultural form is one of the treasures that can, in some small way, make a difference to the health of the planet. Berry (1999) says that it is through story, though the human imagination, that our way forward lies. The importance of this cannot be underscored. For Ronald Wright (2006), culture’s influence has reached a point of no return: “humankind has reached the point at which culture becomes the main driver of an evolutionary surge, outrunning environmental and physical constraints” (p. 21). These are words worth paying attention to. It can be argued that significant aspects of the private and private sectors have reconfigured accordingly in the past decade with cultural change with regard to climate change in mind. As part of the public sector, a subgroup of academics in the humanities have revamped their discipline in ways to address the plight of the planet. Since the early 1990s, English departments around the world have taken on the study of nature and culture and labelled it “ecocriticism.” In Glotfelty and Fromm’s (1996, p. xix) words:

“Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.”

Ecocriticism has exploded. Many international journals and conferences now specialize in it. Solid critical work is being produced by many talented people. However, little of this academic pursuit has filtered down into the writing classroom. Yagelski’s points—that the teaching of writing has an important role to play in educating students in environmental sustainability; and that the mainstream way it gets taught is not working—are worth investigating.

My perspective comes from being around writing taught in the academy as an expressive process. Many, if not most students I have worked with tell me their experience writing at university has been completely different than their experience working with creative nonfiction.
Cassandra comes to mind. In a reflection, she writes about her journey in my *Expressive Writing* course:

> Overall, through all the stress and struggle I faced during this course, I think I’ve come out of it with a better understanding of writing than ever before. I’ve learned to let go of the “hamburger essay” and beginning to use “I” in writing again. Using “I” was a big one for me in the first few weeks. I didn’t even know you could use “I” in writing at the university level!

Hers is a sentiment I hear all too frequently. For Cassandra, from years of viewing writing in a school setting a particular way, Yagelski would say that a procedural nature of writing had set in. Cassandra escaped the procedural mindset for a moment in my class. She found herself confronted with the struggle of carrying herself on the page as a person, not as a person feigning objectivity. There was a point when she began to learn to leave the “I” in the pursuit of higher education. Coming to my class was, in some sense, a return to writing in a way Cassandra wrote before encountering this transition. The writing self she developed over her time writing intensely in this institutionally dictated mode may have affected her ability to write in ways that embrace the totality of her subjective self. I certainly found myself working hard with Cassandra to first help her unlearn a mindset of what she had thought writing in the academy should be. She had to first remind herself she had wings, never mind soaring.

Implied messages in mastering form over voice occur subtly, cumulatively over years. In mainstream North American schooling, creative writing tends to leave the curriculum somewhere just before the start of high school. The academic essay gets sold by teachers to students as the currency they need to know well in order to succeed in high school. Writes Neilsen (2008, p. 97): “[W]e associate the expressive and poetic with the early years; in high school and college, the emphasis has remained on transactional and argumentative writing.”

High school teachers repeat the refrain that academic dialect is central to one’s educational career in a tone of dire warning, one that cautions students that they will quite likely flunk university without mastering the form. Some teachers deliver this message in the worst possible way. I once found myself visiting a high school library. Behind a partition, a silent class endured the teacher, who spoke in a bitter tone:
This is what a thesis statement is. There. On the handouts before you. I’ve shown you. I’ve shown you three times this week. None of you have used your time well. If you do not come to me with a thesis statement at the end of this period, I will give you a zero. I’m tired of you guys coming to class with nothing done. I give you time. Use it. Do you understand? Igor, don’t let me see your smart phone out again. People, listen up. You must have a thesis statement. You cannot write an essay without a thesis statement. Now let’s look at this example. The formation, in 1956, of the Canadian Labour Congress took place in order to bring about an alliance between organized labour and the political left in Canada....

I could only imagine the silent faces of the students as the ‘teacher’ ranted. I never want to be that teacher. If I teach argument, I’d first head into the difficult task trying to gain my students’ appreciation of seeing a good argument alive before them. I’d take them through, sentence by sentence, and try to let them see and appreciate the effectiveness, the hard work, the genius. And I’d make sure my example showed exceptional tangible results, results with impact, and impact that could have been only achieved with precise argumentation. I’d then summon my best teacherly powers to convince them, one by one, that they have within them that same genius. And when it would come time to ask them to compose an argument, I’d make sure to have them find a topic they cared about and could put themselves into: like why they should get their fair use of bathroom time at home alongside their older sister; or why their residence roommate should clean the toilet and not leave them to be the one to always do it (my own experience gives rise to this last example). I would teach with heightened awareness of students’ massive task of having to learn that second, foreign language known as academic dialect. I’d do my best in difficult conditions to let students see writing as a means to representing interconnection by reminding them that who they are as people matters—and what they choose to write about inevitably says something about them. This thesis, this topic, and my approach here speaks much about me, and these words have come into being as an extension of who I am on the page at this moment in my life. Like Cassandra, I too had to unlearn ingrained ways before I could allow myself to revel in the new.

Much has been written about the prominence of the academic essay in the university, and the way it is understood by students new to the academy. Standard academic essays tend to promote a certain kind of knowledge and meaning-making—and that alone is not the problem—nor is
having a good deal of energy and resources dedicated to teaching the form. The problem is that the near monopolistic prominence the essay holds in the academy tends to get seen by students and faculty alike as the sole viable, credible lens to viewing the wider world and our place in it. Approaching writing and meaning-making more broadly, we know it is but one genre. Yet, in its abundance in the academy, the essay carries certain underlying epistemological values about knowledge residence and the means of knowledge production. In Patricia Bizzell’s (1994, p. 139) words: “Academic discourse conventions derive their authority more from their status as conventions than from any inherent superiority.” She points out that Bruce Herzberg, a proponent of focusing university teaching efforts solely on mastering academic form believes that academic discourse “provides not simply access to knowledge but knowledge itself, which is to say academic ways of thinking” (p. 230). Promoting this makes sense, argues Bizzell, because academic discourse has proven to be what brings academics success, success not only in terms of status: “Members of the academic community win their intellectual freedom by submitting to discourse conventions” (p. 140). Ken Robinson (2006), commenting on the unanimous focus of public education around the world on prioritizing math and science over the arts, says that an alien watching would “have to conclude...the whole purpose of public education throughout the world is to produce university professors.” Peter Elbow (1991, p. 136) reminds us:

Life is long and college is short. Very few of our students will ever write academic discourse after college. The writing that most students will need to do for most of their lives will be for their jobs—and that writing is usually very different from academic discourse. When employers complain that students can’t write, they often mean that students have to unlearn the academic writing they were rewarded for in college.

It is precisely this unlearning that students later thank me for. Connection is key to my pedagogy. In the foundational writing course I teach, Expressive Writing, I spend a great deal of time teaching the disposing of bad habits such as wordiness, excessive use of passive voice and monster paragraphs, and try to promote writing for an audience of the people we sit beside and live life with. Readers, I tell my students, potentially paying readers, might exist for them beyond the walls of the classroom. I want students to leave with a sense of connection not just to their writing, but to the folks on the same page learning to do it all around them. I want them to leave knowing that essayists in Harper’s, Granta or The New Yorker never feel the need to ask anyone if it is okay that they should choose to construct a first-person version of themselves into the text.
with that pinpointing, self-signifier—“I”. I attempt to show students that good first-person writing means building, detail by painstaking detail, the narrator into a character (Lopate, 2007). My promise to students is that in writing expressively, by using creative narrative nonfiction as a tool, by rendering moments in their own lives in a way that is engaging to other people, we not only work to overcome the self/other/world disconnect, but because of our focus on audience the writing tools we learn transfers into the other types of writing we face in our lives. Writes my former student, Ryan:

Thank you so much for the help this semester. I have been recommending this class to everyone because of the different style of writing it has provided and the benefits of losing the restraints of university writing.

Ryan knows he faces several courses of university writing. He knows that he can succeed at times with a procedural approach: get the standard form right and land a B. Another former student, Claudio Carosi commented on his university experience:

I’m using the Poly Sci major as a representation of what I think is most courses: large classes, really impersonal classes like that. But I don’t see them as really education. I don’t see them as self-growth in any way, really. I feel it’s more of like you’re paying dues. I feel that this [professional writing] program has let me get through the other stuff, really. It’s where you can really meditate on the stuff you’re doing.

I asked Carosi if narrative writing improved his academic essay writing:

It definitely comes in. My other major’s Poly Sci, which I’m just kinda doing...I prefer this major. But I mean when it comes to writing essays, I think the whole spirit of writing a Poly Sci essay is just so opposite than Expressive Writing. Like an analysis of Canadian policy....Choose a major policy issue and talk about how it’s changed over the past five years. So it’s like talking about gun control and why it is the way it is. It’s just a lot of research and you’re not in the essay. You’re just typing it. Your voice...it can be there....Actually, I’ve been told by Poly Sci TAs to actually tone down voice before. I’ve written something...this was a short critique/essay....She basically told me I was too “there,” I was too present in the writing, like I was getting too worked up about [my topic] or something. And I didn’t think I was.
The academic essay can serve as a viable form of education on topics. I am not arguing against the form as being valuable to learn and practice while students attend university. There are times in life and in writing where we strive for objectivity and removal of the self to avoid bias, to see and assess others’ findings clearly, and sometimes to simply get things done and move along. And it is difficult for all of us at times to navigate the expectations of the two worlds: one that encourages the self as unabashedly present; the other that, for the most part, eschews it. My point is that based on what students tell me, year after year, it is refreshing for them to stumble upon a different experience, a fresh take on writing during their brief time at the academy. If first-person creative writing rejuvenates students towards completing their other responsibilities at university, that is a bonus.

3.2 Yagelski, Elbow, Mezirow: Freedom and Transformation

It is worth mentioning Freire’s famous (1973) work at this point. At a recent conference a presenter spoke of his experience of being hired to assess and make recommendations on adult literacy programs in Ethiopia. He discovered that no overarching plan for adult education existed in the country and that few stakeholders shared knowledge (neither with him, nor one another), and so most adult education schools tended to aspire to different goals. An international development academic present commented after that Freire’s work holds true to this day, as seen in the patchwork education policy arrangement and lack of government foresight, implying that the longtime ruling party may have considered what it might gain and lose politically by having a literate peasantry. The concern or lack of concern occurs amidst the country’s scramble to become the first country in Africa to meet its Millennial Development Goals by 2015, and in doing so to potentially earn high regard within the international community. My point here is that Freire’s observations, theory and concerns still hold currency today.

It is not difficult to consider students in institutions of higher learning as oppressed. Take the recent strike by my union, for instance. Three weeks in, the university still had made next to no contact with my students, who continued to email me for direction. The department told students to check the university web page, which told them nothing as to what might be done about their assignments or grading. Too many academic institutions tend to place students low by almost
never consulting them on major decisions, or if so, in token. At worst, institutions view students as income units. The very look of our schools, with new buildings replete with large lecture halls for large classes resulting in greater profit per seat, with few rooms available for intimate learning, and regularly none where the seats aren’t bolted toward the teacher, make any small is beautiful pedagogy challenging. Many of my students endure in a system that too often sends messages implicit in its architecture. For these reasons it is sometimes a revolutionary act for my students to come to feel freedom in the act of learning to write, to grow to care about their writing, and to value the problem-solving involved in the act of writing to grow to be valuable to them their entire lives.

I’ll never forget meeting the narrative journalist Thomas French at a conference at Harvard University, where I asked him for a pointer on teaching writing. “Clear the runway for them,” French said. In other words: Get out of the way. Believe in them. Remind students they know more than they think they know. With this sentiment on my mind I taught a course section in which I made a point to repeatedly compliment the class as much as possible. I meant what I said—I did not have to fake anything—and the group would again and again floor me with another superb, insightful, participative discussion. When I later asked Matthew, a student from that section, if in the course he felt his writing audience consisted of more than me, the teacher, he replied:

Yes.

It came across that way. You did present yourself like yeah, I’m just a guy; you guys read stuff. You know more than you think you do. So, yeah. Very much so.

I couldn’t have wished for anything better to happen. In some sense, my approach to teaching writing is Freirean, and for this reason I will draw from his theory in this work. I share his view on the purpose of education. Freire (1973, p. 34) writes in Pedagogy of the Oppressed:

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”
In order to achieve a pedagogy with this sentiment, I aim to position myself to my students as a co-struggler in the act of writing. Matthew’s observation of my attempt at this reassures my insecurities around executing the myriad subtle difficulties in genuinely positioning myself as a co-struggler/co-learner along with my students. It takes time, patience, trust, and often humour. Much of the written feedback I receive from students thanks me for a transformative experience. Receiving this, I feel good that I have allowed new writers a brief time away from what Freire (p. 58) calls “the banking model of education”, where learners are seen as vessels to be filled with disposable knowledge and teachers as the disseminators. But I remain wary of making claims that my teaching, or even taking a major’s worth of courses in the program will move any student closer to seeing their place within the social, economic and political power structures of the world.

Yagelski’s (2011) self/other/world disconnect inherent in mainstream writing instruction serves as my starting point, and it is Yagelski’s theoretical work I primarily employ in this thesis. One of his arguments is that this disconnect “lies at the root of the crisis of sustainability” (2011, p. 4). Mary Mary Rose O’Reilley’s work in The Peaceable Classroom considers the teaching of writing and literature within the academy. O’Reilley attempts to reconcile how teaching English might foster and/or prevent people from killing one another, a question that arose for her during the height of the Vietnam War. She and Freire both looked at new ways teachers and students can see themselves in order to grow as people. What all of these theorists are saying is that writing does have the ability to change the self and repair self/other disconnects. My thesis is an attempt at navigating the complex question of how this works. Up against this will always be my own insecurity around making grand unsubstantiated claims on this, and this insecurity will exist next to my own observations and intuition and the words and writings of the students I teach. This reconciliatory journey is the heart of this work.

3.3 Education and the Crisis of Sustainability

Together with Yagelski, I do not believe that the teaching of writing or English alone contributes to the crisis of sustainability. While my limited scope allows me to focus specifically on writing pedagogy, I agree with David Orr, who considers the design and execution of mainstream
education as a whole as failing to awaken our young to the environmental crisis in a meaningful way. For Orr (1992, p. 90), “formal education happens mostly as a monologue of human interest, desires and accomplishments that drowns out all other sounds. It is the logical outcome of the belief that we are alone in a dead world of inanimate matter, energy flows, and biogeochemical cycles.” Similarly, Mark Edmundson (2013, p. 6) writes on the difficulty of teaching against a dominant consumption paradigm.

University culture, like American culture writ large, is, to put it crudely, ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using and using up of goods and images. For someone growing up in America now, there are few available alternatives to the cool consumer worldview. My students didn’t ask for that view, much less create it, but they bring a consumer weltanschauung to school, where it exerts a powerful, and largely unacknowledged, influence.

To step things back and gaze at how the design of our education system emerged, we must acknowledge its roots in rationalism, “a doctrine that knowledge is derived from an ‘evidence-based,’ ‘rigorous’ and ‘scientific’ understanding of the world” (Lambkin, 1998, as cited in Sipos, Battisti, & Grimm, 2007, p. 70). The Scientific Revolution, with the influence of Bacon, Descartes and Newton, who viewed nature and the universe as a machine, gave us reason. “Reason,” writes Garrard (2012a, p. 62), “became the means to achieving total mastery over nature, now conceived as an enormous, soulless mechanism that worked according to knowable natural laws.” For Plumwood (1993, p. 111), “It is no coincidence that this view of nature took hold most strongly with the rise of capitalism, which needed to turn nature into a market commodity and resource without significant moral or social constraint on availability.” For John Ralston Saul (1996, as cited in Sipos, Battisti, & Grimm, 2007, p. 70), “The dominance of rationalism over other humanist qualities, such as intuition, common sense, creativity, ethics, memory and spirituality, serves to divide knowledge into smaller and smaller elements, ultimately leading society from a focus on reason to the realm of unreason.” Interviewed by Derrick Jensen (2004a, p. 36), Thomas Berry notes the impact of what gets lost in a limiting mindset:

...
of the human mind goes dead. Humans couldn’t kill the forest unless there was something already dead in the human intelligence, the human sensitivity, the human emotions. It’s like needlessly burning the great artistic productions of the world.

Berry’s words elucidate what might constitute one goal of ecological understanding: a reawakening of human sensitivities, which in my context here means a way of seeing not seen before the act of writing taking place. Some of the difficulties in achieving this rest in the rationalistic context within which we find ourselves. And that rationalism underlies dominant paradigms of anthropocentrism, consumerism and in the case of education, Freire’s power dynamics related to a banking model of schooling.

Since I draw primarily from Yagelski’s work, it is important to lay out his (2011, p. 45) argument with specific reference to writing:

One of the great powers of writing is its capacity to abstract—to separate speech from the speaker, writer from writing, and both writer and writing from place. As Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock, and Walter Ong famously theorized, writing is a technology that transforms the spoken word into visual form and makes it possible for that word to be transported across time and space. In this way, writing enacts the Cartesian mind-body split by making the body irrelevant to the words the body produces. In this formulation, those words are the product of the mind, which is understood to be separate from the body and the physical world. Writing is thus an expression of Cartesian ontology. It is a physical artifact of the Cartesian self declaring itself to be and defining itself as metaphysical entity. Writing is a visual, tangible record of the abstract, metaphysical being that we become as writers. It is a concrete reminder of what Descartes believed: that thinking is what makes us who we are.

Another goal of writing for ecological understanding might then be to attempt in some way to overcome, the mind/body split. For instance, abstraction can be so well done we believe it to be real. In a sense then it does not matter that writing is writing or a sculpture is a sculpture. If the artifact points us toward something missing or hidden within ourselves and our relationship with the world, then it achieves something of high magnitude and by illusion, breaks down the mindset looking at it we arrived at with. My point is that the form—writing itself—done well, contains its own potential to overcome its own characteristic confines. This is how I teach
writing, as potentially limitless and powerful. And when I observe transformations in students
and their writing, I find evidence that they have reached plateaus in writing previously
unimagined.

Humans created language and writing and because of its power, and with that power that has
come tremendous change. Yet, too often we tie our image of ourselves to the product of writing
in such a way that we forget who and what we were before the invention of the technology of
writing. In a 2009 colloquium talk, I listened to cosmologist Brian Swimme say that our species’
way out of a harmful environmental mindset is via the non-rational. “Our challenge is to feel
what it’s like for a species to go extinct,” he said. “Then we can begin to generate the energy
that’s needed for our creative response. If our engagement with the world is superficial, then our
response to the world will be superficial.”

Perhaps then part of the challenge for writing educators is to encourage and enable learners to
step outside of the rational, an act that often exists at odds with mainstream ways of thinking.
Ken Robinson’s observation of the universality of mainstream education in placing maths and
sciences—rationalism—at the top, and embodied knowing (say, through performance inquiry) at
the bottom, suggests that we can expect our thinking and acting to be a certain way, globally,
simply by the universal hierarchical emphasis of what gets taught and learned. The rational runs
deep. The energy put into teaching rationally runs deep. The hierarchy of the rational self-
replicates. Universities face more pressure to prepare students for the world beyond, yet much is
lost in the current setup, including the disciplinary fragmentation of knowledge, corporatization
of our campuses, and the loss of imaginative, fruitful discussion of what education might actually
be for. When I meet students in their first or second year of university, few have thought
critically about the way they have been taught to write. Or, they had long ago thought about it
but not considered that alternatives exist. In Edmundson’s words (2013, p. xii), “We are educated
to fill roles, not to expand our minds and deepen our hearts” and in David Orr’s (2004, p. 8):
“More of the same kind of education will only compound our problems....It is not education, but
education of a certain kind, that will save us.”

Since teaching writing is what I know, enjoy and practice, it is within that pedagogical domain
for I see potential, however small, for healing the earth. In the foundational course I teach,
Expressive Writing, I approach the teaching of writing somewhat counterintuitively. I give
students the chance to express something of their life observations and experiences. The pedagogical aim is for students to grow as new writers over our time together, and grow to care about their writing and unearth its power. My hope is for new writers to come to care about their writing in community and that students will transfer that caring to other forms of writing in their lives they need to do. Many have told me that they have done this. This expressivist approach may be viewed by some as radical, especially when placed alongside other approaches to teaching writing in mainstream university culture.

3.4 An Ontological Approach

Yagelski’s (2011) stance is ontological. Central to his articulation is the fact that writing is an important way of being in the world. Writer A.L. Kennedy (2013, p. 280) operates writing workshops with this view at the fore: “I currently believe that writing is a way of life, that it is a massively demanding discipline, that it is an almost irresistible source of enrichment, expression and change.” She doesn’t state it directly, but I infer that she means more than merely all writing activities, but all life activities. In other words, placing writing as a way of being in a primary position in our lives informs our other activities. From years of teaching I have observed that the ability to express oneself in writing ties at a deep level somehow to one’s confidence. Conversely, the fear surrounding the act of writing, just as fear of grasping basic financial, numerical or scientific literacy, can paralyze a person for life in terms of risks taken, decisions made, careers landed. One of my intended unspoken messages in teaching writing is of its benefits to mental and emotional health. I see writing not solely as a tool called for by institutions, but as something more personal, and something that is personally available to us. In Yagelski’s words (2011, p. 3):

Whatever else it may be (and it is many other things, too), writing is an ontological act. When we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world. In this regard, writing both shapes and reflects our sense of who we are in relation to the world around us. Therein lies the true transformative power of writing.

The program I teach in publishes an annual journal of student writing called Mindwaves. A moment in Kyle Weber’s (2013, p. 20) piece, “Drink the Kool-Aid”, strikes me as an example of
a new writer coming alive with writing as a way of being in the world. The narrator, a tattoo artist, has just turned down his boss’s attempt to bully him into receiving an impromptu tattoo in a kind of hazing ritual. Other staff members watch. We catch the narrator here just as he’s decided to pack his things and leave.

“It’s all of you,” I say. “I don’t like you. You’re all losers.”

Michelle scrunches her face. “Excuse me? Do you know who you’re talking to?” she says, moving her head from side to side like some ghetto bitch.

“I know exactly who I’m talking to! I’m not afraid of you! I write stories about how pathetic you all are and people love them!” I shout. “You’re like cartoon characters! I’m disappointed in myself for even knowing you!”

Apparently, in the high emotion of the moment the narrator reveals what he normally wouldn’t. He’s really saying I’ve got a life outside here. I practice another art. The world—including all of you—weave onto my canvas. Others admire my writing. They love the way I bring you alive. And perhaps most importantly, what I hear in the outburst is Writing is my way of being in the world. You don’t understand it and you might not ever get it and that doesn’t matter because it’s mine: my way of being in the world belongs to me, and that sets me apart from you. Calling them cartoon characters implies more than the tattoo staff’s one dimensionality, the statement as a reflection of the writer’s talent suggests he’s bored with writing about them. It’s time to move on. He’s practiced a secret art that has helped him survive the daily rigors of working in a particular place. Doing so has helped him cultivate new friends, ones who appreciate his writing talent. His way of dealing with it has given him confidence, enough confidence to break an employment tie and carry his way of being off into the world with him, off to another place and to another group of people—presumably a more well-rounded, more positive and nicer group—and toward other situations that will trickle into the storytelling person he has become. Weber says a great deal in this short passage. He means it when he says I’m not afraid of you!

An ontological approach in this work simply makes sense for me. I am interested in how the understanding of self comes into being with writing. Part of the journey of this thesis is to attempt to find ways to reconcile the complexity of this undertaking. Yet as a writer I am confident in my ability to write my way through it, towards some new understanding, and that
this approach echoes Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Richardson’s (2000) takes on writing as a methodology (both of which I mention below). I view writing as a healthy way of being in the world. I keep a journal and often jot emotional moments. In a moment at the gym when a muscled guy commanded me to do something and I resisted, writing about it helped me deal with anger. I’ve also taken to detailing weather. Whenever I have a waiting moment, I take out my pen and add to my collection of weather prose.

Puffy clouds with dark underbellies flow across the sky, filling the horizon. Yet in a single southern part shines a wash of yellow-white through a hazy opening, rays that give the winter streets a blue midday sheen.

Snowflakes. In the chasm of the street fourteen floors below flutters a great mass of white flecks. Then the wind changes, shooting them up and across, lifting the fury and lowering it, up and across once more, before dying down and letting the expanse of white flakes slowly sink.

Making these moments writing moments makes me who I am. In the telling, in the trying, I succeed. I gave the moment over to language, over to the telling of that moment to myself. Normally these moments are lost, disposable, waiting moments—flashes in between appointments and making money, reading and eating and traveling: finite bits of my life that normally dissipate. I could have read, checked my messages, Googled something, or stared out the window. The passages above mark stolen time forging connection: of words and world, living self and writing self, pen and paper. In the following examples I move from weather and landscape to life around me as setting detail. I teach that much of a good story often either resonates from or resides in its setting detail.

Two lone seagulls work the wind with their wings, up and across the skyline, lifting, descending, up and across.

Tiny pellets of freezing rain barrage my cheeks as I head to my downtown apartment. “Like Pop Rocks,” says a guy in a group of three guys trailing me. I haven’t thought of those candies since I was young. Laughter follows. We lower our heads to the sidewalk to help us through the bombardment.
I do not necessarily use what I write. I may. Or, I may not. Thus, the production of a text is not always my reason for writing. That purpose is not forefront in my mind. If it is, I know that I must write a great deal to get the best from myself, so producing writing that will never be used remains an essential part of the discovery process. Still, all that I write remains somehow of me, somehow bonded to the totality of my person, even if my writing experiences fade into my unconscious. Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 746) note:

I must ask, “What are the consequences my story produces? What kind of a person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?” The crucial issues are what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put. These consequences often precede rather than follow the story because they are enmeshed in the act of telling.

Much has been written on how the act of telling itself shapes the experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gordon, McKibbin, Vasudevan, & Vinz, 2007). Laurel Richardson (2000, p. 923) considers writing a method of inquiry: “a way of finding out about yourself and your topic.” Her point about reconciling the act of writing as an ongoing, integral, formative part of observation is an important one, for far too often we slip into seeing writing as “a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project” (p. 923). But where Richardson sees writing as a way of knowing, as essentially a cognitive act, Yagelski’s ontological approach argues that to move beyond Cartesian duality, we must see and teach writing as a way of being in the world. He writes (2011, p. 107):

But what if we shift our theoretical gaze from the written text to the self writing—from the writer’s writing to the writer writing? What if we conceptualize the act of writing not as the self thinking (as in a cognitive view) or communicating (as in a social view) or constructing itself (as in a poststructuralist view), but as the self being? What if we focus attention on the experience of writing rather than on the text as a product of that experience?

I have returned again and again to this passage to try to make sense of my teaching—of how I view it theoretically. When I consider Ellis and Bochner’s focus on the self and the text, I may understand their take as a poststructuralist conceptualization of writing. What they say, based on my experience, makes sense to me. Their focus on the consequences of the act of writing to the
life of the writer supports viewing their approach as poststructuralist. But their notion of
enmeshment complicates things, and placing them into a specific theoretical camp may be more
difficult than it appears. I ran into trouble trying to decide where the expressivists/process people
fit. It might be possible to place process pioneer Donald Murray (1982, p. 4) into the
poststructuralist camp when he writes: “For the writer, writing is a process, a way of seeing, of
hearing what he has to say to himself, a means of discovering meaning.” The self constructs the
self through writing. Yet Murray’s oft-cited line from the preface of *Learning by Teaching* is “I
discover what I’m beginning to know as it appears on the page” could be seen as a cognitive
stance. His focus on teaching writing for an audience beyond the teacher, as well as publication
invoking the last step in the writing process may be seen as a social view of writing. His
pronouncements do not easily lend themselves to categorization. Finally, this line of Murray’s
(1982, p. 13) appears to align him with Yagelski’s ontological approach, an approach that
deeemphasisizes writing solely for textual production: “Instead of teaching finished writing, we
should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness.” It is important to mention
Murray’s thinking, as it both emerged from and helped define expressive writing pedagogy. It is
important too, to see that categorization comes with its own pitfalls. I will use the language of
delineation when necessary—considering poststructuralist, cognitive, and social lenses of seeing
writing—but will do so with the awareness of the difficulty and limitations of trying to pin
something down that can remain elusive.

For me, process *is product*; yet also *product is process*. Both are important. *Process as product* is
what Yagelski refers to with his position that writing is an ontological act. It is a way of being in
the world. By *product as process*, I mean that writing and editing towards a final draft also
encompass this same ontological act. Both are equally important. Both shape the self. Writing
alongside others is too a powerful way of being in the world. Murray contradicts himself when
he invokes publication as the last step of the writing process while espousing that writing
teachers should glory in their student’s writing’s unfinishedness. Yagelski, who was influenced
by Murray’s work, champions the idea of not teaching writing for publication. The work here
contributes to this discussion in an original way by paying specific attention to what students say
and by closely examining their finished writing with these theoretical bearings in mind. It is
important work because of its pedagogical implications. Though I am certain Murray’s and
Yagelski’s theoretical stances are influenced by their work with many students, they tend not to
incorporate specific student experiences the way I do to make their points—and doing so, in my belief, is integral to being a reflective researcher. While Yagelski puts forward an ontological theory of writing that I admire and support, I further it here by considering the entire writing process as shaping the self, not placing as Yagelski does, the actual act of writing above all else in primarily shaping the self.

In this chapter I have explored concepts that underlie my writing pedagogy, namely: interconnection, the self writing the self into being, and the relationship of form to content. I also looked at the concepts of freedom and transformation in writing pedagogy with reference to how theories by Jack Mezirow, Peter Elbow, and Robert Yagelski inform this work. Throughout, I incorporated the voices of my students. I introduced the topic of education and the crisis of sustainability through Yagelski’s (2011) critique of mainstream writing, which he sees as founded upon the Cartesian duality of mind and body, and a cognitive approach to understanding how meaning gets made. He makes the case that this mainstream approach ultimately reinforces a split between earth and human, therefore holding back progress toward solving the environmental crisis. Yagelski serves as my main theorist and this work attempts to present and critique his take on writing pedagogy in light of my findings based on the voices of my students, their work, and my review of relevant literature.

Having introduced my main theorist, it is now time to look at adult education theory within this framework. What follows is an unpacking of the term “understanding”, the first word of this study’s title, in the context of reading and writing and adult education. Since the germ of the thesis began with my experience, it makes sense to begin unpacking “understanding” in terms of my own experience with reading and writing.
Chapter 4

Understandings

4 Understandings

4.1 Reading for Understanding

I’d heard of Lynn Coady’s latest story collection from somewhere in the media, so I thought I’d check it out. I enjoyed her language. She put things in fresh ways, with fresh words, calling familiar things by unfamiliar names. But my enjoyment and learning stopped at the level of language. Character-wise and story-wise, I felt she was trying too hard to pander to the audience, to get laughs for her cheekiness. Relying on lyricism for the sake of lyricism, I teach my students, is to be caught showing off. Often by giving the narrator too central a place, too much of the spotlight, what we often see is an insecure writer who builds a façade because the cheeky narrator is the only tool they know.

Reading Coady’s work, believability slipped away. It felt as though I could almost see the writer writing as I read. This shook me out of what John Gardner (1984, p. 31) calls the fictional dream, the essential landscape you enter while being enraptured by reading that is continually and vividly painted so as to hold you to the writing, hold you to the point that you don’t want to put the book down even as your kids or your spouse are calling to you. For me, this happens more than just because of good characters, good stories or good language. For me, with an amazing piece of writing, the writer has made things such that I’m following the mind of the good writer I’m in awe of, looking for holes and being happily satisfied, again and again, page after page, finding no problems, just satisfaction and reassurance. The skilled writer has thought through the audience experience, the questions that potentially come to a skilled reader’s mind during the sequencing of events. The satisfaction at this level is a satisfaction of being placed in the hands of a master. I become the writing student, watching, greedily rereading, buying the book, and even photocopying it to mark up the places that teach me techniques. The writing left by the writer becomes my silent teacher. Coady’s work did not satisfy me at this fuller level, and so I put the book down.
But this is what happened when I discovered Miranda July’s writing. The book: *No one belongs here more than you*. The story: *Something That Needs Nothing*. She writes in a way I’d never seen before. Upon first read, the writing jarred me. Things jumped from odd moment to odd moment, yet never once did I feel lost. It might be no coincidence that July is also a film director, writer and auteur. What she chose to leave out made the piece. And those cuts left ample psychic space. Psychic space can be thought of as space created that viewers, readers and listeners fill, trying to figure things out. July sets up the space early in the piece. There are two characters, lovers, and this setup made me want to know more:

> We were anxious to begin our life as people who had no people. And it was easy to find an apartment because we had no standards; we were just amazed that it was our door, our rotting carpet, our cockroach infestation. We decorated with paper streamers and Chinese lanterns and we shared the ancient bed that came with the studio. This was tremendously thrilling for one of us. One of us had always been in love with the other. One of us lived in a perpetual state of longing. (July, 2007, p. 64)

I love how July conveys the characters’ youth by the repetition of *our* this and *our* that. With her repeated pronouns “we” and “our”, she holds things back but at the same time, I trust her. I trust that reading this story will be worth my while and I somewhat consciously make the decision to keep reading, fully pulled into Gardner’s (1984) fictional dream. As I read more, I will deduce which one of the two enjoyed sharing “the ancient bed”, and which lived in a perpetual state of longing. In one moment, I get the sense that I’m sure I know which character she’s talking about—the narrator, I feel at first—*and I relax*, because the quality of the elements in the writing reassures me that I’m in the hands of a good writer. I even trust in light of the fact that I may never know for sure about which character is suffering the truest longing, because even at the end I could turn things around. On the surface, the narrator could be the one longing to be loved, but the overconfident one could also, on a deeper, more complex and even more pitiful level be seen as the one with the never-ending existential hunger. These questions keep me both satisfied and hungry at the same time. What happened here is that I participated in the prose. I understood something about life through the art, and reading as a writer I understood something about how that art taught me something about life. I participated in July’s work in a way that I did not in Coady’s because the persona of the narrator July created spoke to me in a truer way. I could see the stitches in Coady’s narrator’s costume, whereas July made me forget I was even watching
actors. I appreciated some of Coady’s moves, but July helped me dream about getting to her level. Her quirkiness added that magic ingredient of originality, and that originality hugely attracted me to the entire experience of reading and wanting to read more original, talented prose. My purpose here has been to expose my enjoyment as a reader, and to explore how my participation with written language shapes me and allows me to make meaning. I call this shaping a process of understanding. It is participatory; my act of making my own meaning is my understanding the work by connecting with it. I understand, in my own way, the author’s intent. It feels as though she is writing for me, and I relate that experience to my life: living my life and, as a writer, writing my life.

I love my work because my students’ writing often gives me that same sense I get from reading professional work:

Once, Logan called me to tell me that he found five dollars on the street, and another time he called me to tell me that he found a dead body. I later found out on his eleventh birthday that he made up the story about the five dollars. (Andrew Ihamaki, 2014).

Working with Andrew on this piece turned out to be a highlight of the term. I tried to push him so that the story delivered on the promise made in these two lines. With these two lines, he shows his mastery of playing with readers’ expectations. The challenge is for the story to deliver, believably, that Logan did in fact find a dead body. These lines set a reader up for participation in meaning-making. Good stories are tight. No yarn gets wasted. Things said in dialogue and cinematic close-ups of objects play back later, serving the story.

Psychic space can be understood as pictures being half-made by writers, of certain facts left out or others dimly pointing to two or more places at once, or writing around the edges of something big—the white elephant never directly named. When done well, psychic space leaves readers with questions they enjoy reveling in. As Koerber and Allen (2015, p. 16) put it:

As readers, we move into that space, we look around, we listen, and we react to what we see and hear there. Good writing gets readers to move into this created space and become co-creators of the meaning in the story. We have to make assessments and conclusions about what’s happening and the intentions of the characters because [the writer] doesn’t make them for us. This involves the reader.
As I have pointed out here through my experiences as a reader, psychic space invites me to connect with the text in my making sense of it. Good writers anticipate readers’ participation. As Max van Manen (1998) puts it:

Instead of committing the sin of “overwriting” it is sometimes more important to leave things unsaid. The text as a whole aims at a certain effect, and thus the silence of spaces is as important (speaks as loudly) as the words that we use to speak. (p. 113)

At a certain level the writer controls the reader’s experience, and the happy reader gives in, willy-nilly, and enjoys the experience of being manipulated. I love good writing so much I often make notes to myself about it. Here, after reading some of Alice Munro’s work, I journal:

There’s this feeling I get reading this prose that she’ll take me in some arbitrary direction, get me inside the house of a character we almost left, to a meeting that almost never happened. She’ll work the camera in close-up and that’ll be it. That’s the story. The close-up, the person, the life in full view. That’s the choices the writer made, just like my life: there are the choices I’ve made and there is the story they add up to and that story is all, is enough, and there’s a fullness in it.

Good writers get you into the thought processes of characters. We see people’s mannerisms, the way they act, and in seeing behaviour replayed, we see the behavior of ourselves and others around us, letting us glimpse upon the stage of possibilities for our own lives. For Louise Rosenblatt (1978), the participation of the reader with the text can run deeply through one’s life:

The poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text. The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem. This becomes part of the ongoing stream of his life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him as human being. (p. 12)

The reading of the poem is the coming-together. The text is not an object. The reader and writer are not objects. The coming-together is a highly subjective experience, an experience beyond the
“objectness” of the words on the page and the reader. The coming-together experience then becomes part of the reader’s life experience, to which further “poems,” further poignant moments in time might further nourish the life of the reader. The self grows in the experience of drawing upon the self in the presence of a text. Our experience base grows by attempting to understand through reading and, as writers, by anticipating readers’ experiences. We craft and cut with readers’ anticipated experiences in our minds. Joseph Gold (2002) writes that “Reading stories is the best training for making stories, especially the one central story which is the reader’s life” (p. xiv).

4.2 Writing for Understanding

I consider the process of writing as creating understanding. This understanding happens because of reflexivity. Reflexivity is integral to the process of working with language on the page. Let me take this further by way of example.

I recently proposed an Earth Day themed program to a community-based internet radio program. The managing editor accepted several of my students’ work I sent her, as well as a piece I wrote, and I was glad to see two podcasts emerge, and I guest hosted both. I had originally sent a story that got rejected. The managing editor told me my short piece did not fit with the mandate of the type of writing the program focused on. Receiving this feedback made me see my work in a new way. In place of seeing it as something to throw away, I felt that I should instead spend my energy on finding the best venue for the piece, perhaps an environmentally-themed flash fiction contest, I thought. And so the piece remains with me, its potential fresh, and I will re-edit it when I spot another potential home for it. The understanding I learned here relates to the way I teach writing to students—to aim to produce work that might have currency beyond the teacher—value beyond the academy. The marketplace may not necessarily pay new writers, but in accepting work for publication the writer receives credit on his or her curriculum vitae and thus builds their credibility, both to the world and to themselves, toward writing professionally, where time and energy spent writing can eventually yield payment, confirming the writer’s acceptance in the marketplace.
The managing editor accepted the second piece I chose to submit, “Stars and Dad” (Currie, 2014), based on a philosophical conversation my father and I had beneath the stars one night at a cottage. I’d written the story nine years earlier and had edited it three times. I’d been working on some writing about my memories of the cottage I visited in my childhood and cut and paste it into the older dialogue-heavy piece. The managing editor gave me the advice to split up the memories and intersperse them. I enjoyed the process of this, of reading the piece aloud so as to locate appropriate moments to transition in and out of my recollection of the past—and to consider the piece as a whole with these modifications. I spent hours marking up a hardcopy with editing shorthand, arrows and symbols. I had just spent a term teaching four courses and it felt good to be using my editing skills on a piece of my own for a change. Those same skills that had been honed by daily practice with my students now put me in kinship with my students, as I edited my work to the same high standard I edit theirs. I felt a closeness to my students’ struggles in getting a piece into its best shape possible before letting it go. From the editing process emerged a new ending, a satisfying one, and with it a revitalizing in me in believing in power of the process of editing: the simple suggestion from someone else that helped turn out unexpected things in my own editing process. Living the process—enacting the steps—took the editing steps beyond merely intellectualizing them. Something new came from the presence of another’s eyes. This kind of understanding spoke to me as a writer, editor and teacher.

Soon after I’d written it and edited it a few times, I sent “Stars and Dad” to my father as a token of appreciation for our time together. But also, the writing process involved taking a private moment and making it available to anyone around the world with basic internet access. People could hear not just my writing, but my voice. Through my voice people can glimpse a rare exchange between a father and an adult son. The first and most basic understanding I took from the realization of the process I engaged is simply that my experience in written form might be of interest to others. There is an implicit interconnectedness in the understanding of the personal having the potential to represent the universal. But still, I wondered what people who knew me and my father would think. I thought of my cousins, to whom I sent the link to the radio program, whose relationship with their father is nothing like mine. Every professional writer begins the writing process with small steps, and in taking those small steps as opposed to taking none—hiding expression away, burying good work due to poor confidence or whatever the reason—the acts of polishing, submitting and seeing the work on the page and hearing it
recorded speak in stark defiance to the silence and the silencing we do to ourselves by not writing. Putting work out there completes the circle that underlies the precursor to the writing journey in the first place, what my former writing professor David Beers calls “the lack”. The understanding as writers that we have a voice, an understanding that comes from using your ability to make that voice known to other people you will likely never meet—the timbre of that kind of understanding relates to identity. You make your mark and ever so slightly mark the larger cultural map, and in so doing, ever so slightly change how you see yourself. As can reading, engaging in the writing process has the potential to shape the writer. I call this writing for understanding.

4.3 Adults Writing for Understanding

When adults write up their lives as stories, the purpose can be understood as being one important way to create potentially transformative learning experiences. Rebecca Ruppert Johnson writes “I thought I knew myself until I began writing about myself” (2003, p. 227). This comment suggests the latent transformative power of picking up the pen in adulthood. The late pioneering writing teacher Donald Murray writes:

Your world is the universe you can describe using your own eyes, listening to your own voice—finding your own style. We write to explore the constellations and galaxies which lie unseen within us waiting to be mapped with our own words. (1969, p. 911)

In his piece, “The Explorers of Inner Space”, Murray makes the case that “the best way to know yourself and your own world may be to try and write it down” (p. 911). Johnson’s (2003) article explores her use of autobiography with adults as a transformative learning practice. Impressed by the results of the practice with her students and in her own personal, reflective writing, Johnson speaks of autobiography’s mysterious quality. She goes so far as to question whether at times we even need to know much more about how the writing process works, so long as we keep on seeing it bear fruit. This approach—honouring the mysteriousness of what happens when we write—reflects my own belief that a process not easily explained speaks to its power. A good deal of adult learning theory supports the activity of writing for understanding through autobiography. Judith Brown (2000) notes the wealth of lived experience adults bring to a
learning situation as good reason adult educators over decades have called for the recognition and valuing of this experience (p. 229). Dewey (1934) notably wrote about the importance of experience in education, calling it “the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things” (p. 19). Dewey wrote of experience as “art in germ” (p. 19). If we see adult experience as the material of adult learning, theorists use the term experiential learning. If we consider adult learning as the process of making meaning from experience, we are practicing constructivist learning. As such, experiential and constructivist theory inform what Clark and Rossiter (2008) call “narrative learning in adulthood”: when narrative writing serves as the representation of experience and the product of learning (p. 63). Thus the need for representing that experience is tied to the valuation of that experience—and is itself a new experience. David A. Kolb (1984) explains the need for representation:

> The central idea here is that learning, and therefore knowing, requires both a grasp or figurative representation of experience and some transformation of that representation. The simple perception of experience is not sufficient for learning; something must be done with it. Similarly, transformation alone cannot represent learning, for there must be something to be transformed, some state or experience that is being acted upon. (p. 42)

Kolb seems to be suggesting a before and after state of being when we consider learning. Learning goes beyond intellectualization. Representation must take place. But further to that, for transformation to be considered learning, Kolb argues that action must take place upon that state of being. The transformation is not just in the transformation event alone, then—real transformative learning occurs through the awareness of that transformation.

In much of my teaching practice, the figurative representation of adult experience is the nonfiction expressive narrative. The transformation of that representation encompasses the editing and rewriting processes, which carry the potential to transform both the written and, in some sense, the writer. Considering the transformation of the writer-learner when students enact this process of representation is what I have undertaken with this thesis. When I teach autobiography to adults, I never explicitly set out learning goals as “the transformation of our lives,” for doing so is not necessary and might well intrude upon learning. What I do is point out the power of writing, and I present writing activities in terms of students’ immediate self-interests, based on the reason many of them they signed up for the course in the first place:
simply to improve their writing. Neil Postman (1995) writes that we may speak of learning mechanical skills, “But to become a different person because of something you have learned—to appropriate an insight, a concept, a vision, so that your world is altered—that is a different matter. For that to happen, you need a reason” (p. 4). The reason upon which my students can agree on for being in a class unlike anything they have ever experienced, with adults of different ages, stages and disciplines together in a small seminar-style room, is to learn how to write and communicate better. Anything else comes as a bonus. I love the setup of teaching writers to a class of non-writing majors. The way the course is set up, breakthroughs can happen, transformative learning can happen if the experience of it speaks to the student. I lead them to the pool and they can decide how much of it they want to drink. While I do lecture on the void Allen (2000, p. 91) speaks of—the lack of something precious in most students’ postsecondary educational experiences that they need and want in yet do not recognize it until they see it—I do not dwell on it. I do not need to. Beginning the third or fourth class, I ask someone to read their work aloud and the class becomes what in Wenger (1998) terms “a community of practice.” The teacher and the learners together provide workshop-style feedback. The pieces read represent the realm of the possible. Fresh writing conveys the standard of quality in the course—higher than many university courses—without me saying a thing. In some of my best teaching moments, I’ve pulled back and left space. I’ve let students and their stories speak. You cannot force understanding. You cannot say okay, we’re all going to transform here and now. You need to set things up in a way in which students can awaken, and then know when to pull back and leave space. Sometimes it happens; sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes transformation happens in small-t ways, sometimes in capital T ways. I often receive emails at the end of a course in which students apologize for not giving their best to the course. They’d wanted to; they’d felt that something good was going on. But things in their life at that moment had prevented them from giving it their all and still, they tell me, still they took away important lessons.

Transformation is a high ideal and when it happens, a high achievement. In The Performance of Self in Student Writing, Thomas Newkirk (1997) quotes Donald Murray’s passage about surprising himself as being the reason he writes:

I want to discover what I know that I didn’t know I knew, to see a familiar subject in an unfamiliar way, to contradict my most certain beliefs, to burst through expectation and
intent to insight and clarity, to hurt and laugh, understand and be confused in a way that I
had not experienced before. (Murray, 1989, p. 47)

At first glance, this is the classic prose of a writing teacher waxing about the ideal of
transformation. Newkirk (1997) says the passage appears at first read mere writing cheerleading.
Newkirk then explains that Murray’s deeper point goes beyond this:

This is more than advice for writing. It is an invitation to construct the self in a particular
way; a self in a state of “suspended conclusion,” open to change, with everything—even
our “most certain beliefs”—on the table. This self is malleable, not exactly fluid, but
open to the transformative moments that can occur when experience is contemplated in
the relative tranquility of writing. (p. 14)

This view speaks of living life in concert with writing as a tool with the purpose of real change.
It is ontological. This view aligns with the stance of Paul Eakin (1999), who sees the self “less as
an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process” (p. x). This view implies a part of the self
that remains suppressed in the unconscious, and that awareness itself is constantly in flux. R. D.
Laing (1965) writes about the “inner self” existing within a “false-self system”:

The ‘inner self’ is occupied in phantasy and in observation. It observes the processes of
perception and action. Experience does not impinge (or at any rate this is the intention)
directly on this self, and the individual’s acts are not self-expressions. Direct relationships
with the world are the province of a false-self system. (p. 94)

Artist Sergio Aragonés’s comic strip in Mad Magazine’s “The Shadow Knows” satirizes Laing’s
dichotomy. Aragonés points out that duality of the selves poses problems to us daily: the man
who gushes his love for his new wife has a shadow that runs from her pregnant shadow; the
hockey players facing off with shadows as primates with clubs. What Aragonés seems to be
showing us, beyond a lesson in societal norms versus inner desires, is that the division between
false and true self is indeed black and white. The psychic space underlying his comic strip seems
to be reminding us of what we know: that uniting them is not easy. Eakin reminds us that
“identity formation is not available for conscious inspection as it happens” (1999, p. x). His point
suggests the need for a vessel such as writing to capture human behaviour so as to make the
unconscious conscious. Van Manen (1998) puts it this way:
In cases when consciousness itself is the object of consciousness (when I reflect on my own thinking process) then consciousness is not the same as the act in which it appears. This also demonstrates that true introspection is impossible. A person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience. (p. 10).

Together with Murray and Newkirk, Linden West (1996) considers autobiographical writing appropriate for helping adults develop (in Fenwick’s words) “a cohesive and resilient self, which [West] argues is critical in this age of fragmentation, anxiety and crisis” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 54). If the central purpose of adult education is considered as fostering individual change, then for West, Eakin and others, autobiography provides a means towards this end. If at the same time a second purpose of adult education is social change, then we might see writing in light of West’s view, that writing can also be a tool for understanding the lives of others, especially since “empathy and relatedness are essential to telling stories” (1996, p. 19). As William Randall (1996) puts it, the story of my life is “a story of which I am arguably, at once, author, narrator, protagonist, and reader” (p. 225). Randall conceives of transformative learning as a process of “restorying” (p. 225).

Drawing upon Donald Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theories, Guy Allen (2000) writes that personal essays operate in a transitional space. “[T]he writing becomes a ‘transitional object,’ an object that mediates between the writer’s inner self and the world the self inhabits” (p. 92). Winnicott (1971) writes of the ‘not-me’ or transitional object as not being transitional in and of itself, but as a necessary tool in the transition of a person towards independence. For an infant, the object represents his or her “transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate” (p. 20). I witnessed such a change watching my young son Tomas with his plush dog, “Bow Wow”. Once, he lost the dog on the wintery streets of downtown Toronto. After a visit to the Lost Articles Office at Bay subway station and several sweeps of the paths my son had taken in his stroller with my wife, I recalled the place I’d purchased the dog, a small store in a Mississauga mall. The next day I made the drive there, pleased that it still stocked the same model. Tomas was young enough to believe my story of finding it. To mark the moment, we videoed the reunion of boy with toy. We did so because we knew how secure Bow Wow made him; having that object in his life helped him cope. With the view of autobiographical narrative as the transitional object in an adult’s life,
Allen (2000) describes the “meaning void” students too often tend to find themselves in when they find themselves having to produce writing in the academy:

Personal essays confront students with the void because they encourage the putting of the self into their writing, into the academy, into the world. They must search themselves and their experience for meaning. Most resist. (p. 91)

Allen writes about adult students finding themselves in the academy believing that in order to succeed they need to uphold a false self. The false self manifests when students approach personal writing with ideas inculcated to them from prior teachers about writing in the context of the academy. New writers who resist often produce stiff, turgid prose formed while second guessing what writing for a professor should look like. For Allen, the opportunity provided for adult learners by the personal essay is the opportunity to put themselves in the prose fully, and to enjoy this process of discovery. When this happens, writes Allen, “the writer becomes an acting subject rather than an acted-upon object” (p. 93). Learning to write autobiographically, with supportive guidance, offers the potential for adults to have writing operate as somewhat of a net, in which pieces of the self may be revealed to the self and to others (Allen, 1989).

One question widely debated by theorists is whether the self emerges from language. Eakin (2008) writes that he changed his mind on this issue, initially arguing that language produces the self. However, Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 197) might agree with Eakin’s original thinking, as Merleau-Ponty rejects any distinction between meaning and language. Jacques Derrida also “argues that the self can never be present to itself without a way to describe itself, which is language” (in Yagelski 2011, p. 78). Yagelski (2011) views language as a tool in understanding experience (p. 93), but rejects Derrida’s claim in part because he argues “that there is an ‘extra-linguistic’ component to our experience of the world, which can never be fully captured in a text” (p. 7). Language, in other words, has implicit limitations. It is important to point out that these very limitations provide fuel to writers who daily craft and toil, pushing language towards the edges of those limitations in order to better capture the essence and nuances of life.

Antonio Damasio’s (1999) view is that the self exists in nonverbal form prior to the arrival of language, as a nonverbal self, and that language always points to an underlying concept (p. 108). For him too, the formation of the self precedes the development of language. He argues that if there were no self to begin with, say in the form of “I” or “me”, language would have nothing to
symbolize. Observing my young son Mateo from birth to his first birthday, I saw moments that
appear to me as consciousness of self and other. He sees me, he knows me. He sees toys, he
knows toys. He sees father, his brother and his mama and knows them as other. Eakin describes
the self as pluralistic and dynamic, and that the self includes “some modes of self-experience
[that] are prelinguistic” (p. 66). Noam Chomsky (1965) argues that children are predisposed for
language acquisition. Eakin criticizes Damasio by saying that his view that the self exists prior to
language does not allow for the dynamic interplay between self and language (p. 67). Language
shapes the self and the self shapes language. This seems to make the most sense to me. When we
obtain language, the presence of language then influences the types of experiences we have and
our perception of them. Yagelski (2011, p. 73) and others have noted this. Postman (1995)
reminds us:

Thus, we may conclude that humans live in two worlds—the world of events and things,
and the world of words about events and things. In considering the relationship between
these two worlds, we must keep in mind that language does much more than construct
concepts about the events and things in the world; it tells us what sorts of concepts we
ought to construct. (p. 181)

With meaning-making as the goal of bridging the worlds of experience and artifact, it seems
necessary to note Peter Elbow’s (1998) view:

Meaning is like movies inside the head. I’ve got movies in my head. I want to put them
inside yours. Only I can’t do that because our heads are opaque. All I can do is try to be
clever about sending you a sound track and hope I’ve done it in such a way as to make
you construct the right movies in your head. (p. 152).

Elbow views language as the building blocks in meaning-making, but argues that “strictly
speaking, words cannot contain meaning. Only people have meaning. Words can only have
meaning attributed to them by people” (p. 151). Alone, language is neither self nor meaning.
Language always exists in relation to the meaning-maker. This view makes sense to me, since I
can read a book or view a film and take away different images and ideas and make different
psychological assessments of the characters than any number of people. I view Elbow’s
explanation as a cautionary pedagogical note: that in our daily lives we might find ourselves
teaching language as though it were the carrier of meaning. As writing teachers we need to be
aware that when we place too much emphasis on language construction, we risk students hearing
an unintended underlying message that language is capable of containing all human experience.
This serves to place language construction on too high a pedestal, creating a distance new writers
start to tell themselves they cannot traverse. In our daily teaching routines we may forget
Yagelski’s (2011) view of experience as containing an extra-linguistic component, that
experience can never be fully captured by language. Yagelski differentiates between the
experience itself and the telling of it. He points out that in the postmodern context, rendering
connotes a transformation of the experience itself, when the experience is placed into language
(p. 73). In his view the problem writing teachers face is that “we teach writing as if it is a
relatively unproblematic vehicle for meaning-making and truth-seeking while embracing theories
of language that suggest otherwise” (p. 6). Writing is not the be-all and end-all. We can re-story
ourselves through any number of artistic endeavours.

I know this much from my experience as a writer and writing teacher. Language both shapes us
and gives us the ability to render our experience into an artifact, which we can preserve and
reflect upon, giving meaning to the self we attempt to portray. Language is not a perfect tool. But
in striving to transfer that meaning, language challenges us, and if we care enough about
rendering our experiences as best we can for the benefit of ourselves and others, the challenge to
bend and twist language so it lands somewhere that feels new and gives pleasure can sweep us
up and take ahold of us in profound ways. The love of that challenge is what rewards me when I
see students who have entered a writing course reluctantly, but who later come to take up that
challenge out of their own newfound love for what they see writing can do for them. In upper-
level prose courses I teach students to “go wild” with their words, to use a word from a different
context to replace a descriptive word that would normally lie within effortless reach. I ask
students to invent verbs and to watch how good writers sometimes endear us to them by calling
something in their prose they can’t quite nail down ‘a doohickey’. We enjoy things like that
because in doing so the writer is telling us he or she doesn’t know all, and that knowing all
doesn’t always matter. The writer’s choice of imprecise language invites us to relate to his or her
imperfection as well as language’s imperfection. At excellent times good writers can be honest in
not knowing precision: telling us, say, they had no idea how much time had passed during
sweaty seconds of tension. My job as writing teacher is to help make things like that happen, and
to remind writers not to being afraid to “go wild” and even sometimes be imprecise. I believe we
need to be humble to Postman’s (1995) point, that language itself instructs us on what we ought or ought not to construct.

In this chapter I moved from the theoretical focus of the last chapter to looking at reading and writing based on my own experiences as reader and writer. It was necessary at this point to ground this journey in experience. I identified the presence of psychic space in writing key to my enjoyment and participation in it. Psychic space is space created that a reader moves into, reacting to what they find and do not find in a piece of writing. Readers fill that space with their own meaning-making. In this process the reader participates in completing the writer’s meaning in a way personal to them. I called this participation a process of understanding.

Next, I unpacked the term “understanding” in terms of writing, again based on my own experience. I concluded that learning by writing—by engaging the process from drafting through to revising through to publication—shapes the writing self. After this I considered “understanding” in terms of adult education theory. I began with the premise that one key purpose of adult education can be understood as individual change, and that writing, particularly autobiographical creative nonfiction writing, well serves this end. The discussion moved to a look at the self and its attributes, including presenting the view that we cannot consciously know and inspect the self as consciousness happens. As such, the self exists within dynamic interplay between self and language, with each shaping the other. Writing can be seen as much more than simply writing; writing holds the potential to operate as an invitation to develop the self into a state of “suspended conclusion” (Newkirk, 1997). The more we write, the better we can understand. Learning to write autobiographically, with supportive guidance, offers the potential for adults to have writing operate as somewhat of a net, in which pieces of the self may be revealed to the self and to others (Allen, 1989).

I end on the note that we must remember Postman’s (1995) point, that language itself often tells us what we ought or ought not to construct, even though we may agree with Yagelski’s (2011) point that the entirety of experience cannot be captured in a text. As writing teachers we must let awareness of this fact filter into our teaching, for it is this very interplay that fuels writers to try to overcome these limitations, just as a musicians and other artists try to push beyond themselves and their forms to reach new plateaus.
It is time now to build upon this conceptual foundation of reading, writing, pedagogy, and adult education to directly consider student learning, and to narrow this inquiry so as to focus on student learning about environmental issues through writing. By stepping forward we can now begin to address the research questions, namely: (1) How do narrative ways of teaching and learning support ecological understanding in adult learners? and (2) How can writing serve as a learning response to environmental and ecological issues? I began here looking at understanding in terms of reading and writing, and continue now into “ecological understanding.”
Chapter 5
Ecological Understanding

5    Ecological Understanding

5.1 Defining Ecological Understanding

One way to approach writing about environment and ecology is to consider how writing as a medium can enhance “ecological understanding.” Beyond exploring what this phrase might mean, in this chapter I discuss the difficulty of developing ecological understanding. As my project is a work of teaching research, this question leads me to consider where it seems most natural to look, which for me is within students’ texts. My own teacher’s use of student-authored work remained key to how I learned to write. Now, as a writing teacher, I continue a pedagogy of publishing the work of my students for use in the classroom. So on both of these fronts, heading towards these particular texts just makes methodological sense.

For Fritjof Capra (1996), ecology “is the study of the relationships that interlink all members of the Earth Household” (p.32). E. O. Wilson (2002) calls it “The scientific study of the interaction of organisms with their environment, including the physical environment and other organisms in it” (p. 214). The common keywords are “interlink” and “interaction”. Looking at ties among living beings and nonliving beings involves a holistic way of seeing. Systems of relationships carry data we do not see when looking at isolated individuals.

To “understand”, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means “To comprehend; to apprehend the meaning or import of; to grasp the idea of.” This word perhaps represents the more slippery one to deal with because understanding occurs along a continuum. A full understanding of anything is not possible, as the thing observed and the observer both change over time. When the greatness of a piece of literature you read when you were 22 years of age strikes you in a new way when you revisit it at 44 or 66 reaffirming its power to you, you could be said to have reached a level of understanding not possible in one attempt, and that your life context around that attempt has also changed your understanding. Even when understanding seems to carry a fullness with it—when you remember the novel moving you so at a young
The capacity to reshape understanding, to broaden awareness always exists, if simply by living the years necessary to see anew with aged eyes. In Louise Rosenblatt’s words:

"The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader." (1978, p. 20)

What we take away from an experience depends in so many ways on us. We might reflect on T. S. Eliot’s (1943) warning that the potential exists for having the experience but missing the meaning. As educators with the best intentions—the best planned lessons and coolest experiences in mind for our students—we fear it all being somehow missed out on by our students. We shrug and try to minimize meaning loss by setting things up in ways we hope will bolster learning, for example, by using small groups in which students talk and make sense of learning. Who we are as learners then, is shaped by those learning around us at the same time.

Vygotsky developed this in his concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the potential for development available in learning with more capable peers (1978, p. 86).

Proposing a definition of ecological understanding emerges from my beliefs and from those who have taught me. Influenced by time spent with the late Thomas Berry and studying his works, I believe that considering the role of the human—because of our massive influence on the planet—should be a part of environmental learning. The 2013 report by the Intergovermental Panel on Climate Change attests that “scientists are 95 per cent convinced that human beings are responsible for climate change because of fossil fuel burning” (Aulakh, 2013). Consider the starkness of this finding up against what one of my former UBC professors, William Rees (2003) writes: “People today are so psychologically alienated from nature that they rarely think of themselves as biological entities, let alone as dependent components of the world’s ecosystems” (p. 898). As such, my working definition emerges:
Ecological Understanding

is

an awareness of the natural, nonhuman world

and the human place in it.

The human/nonhuman dichotomy appears again and again in current ecological literature. Works such as John Vaillant’s *The Golden Spruce* (2005), *The Tiger* (2010), *The Jaguar’s Children* (2015), Jared Diamond’s *Collapse* (2005), and Thomas French’s *Zoo Story* (2010) come to mind. In each of these small up-close journeys tell the stories of humanness in the wild and wildness in the human. Orion Magazine, a leading publication that operates with the tagline, “Nature/Culture/Place,” awards the Orion Book Award annually “to a book that addresses the human relationship with the natural world in a fresh, thought provoking, and engaging manner” (2013, “Announcing”).

One of my favourite environmental writers seems to understand that intersection of self and nature in an original way. David Quammen (1988) writes, “I’m fascinated not only with the Galápagos marine iguana, as it sails through the sky...but equally with the young Englishman who got it airborne, and with the cluster of human ideas and attitudes closely connected to that flight.” Quammen will often take a phenomenon, say glaciers, describe their astonishing characteristics, paint them with words so I see the tongue of a mountainside and then slip into a
story from his twenties about the unexpected death of a friend’s girlfriend. In so doing the piece as a whole becomes a piece about time. He returns to the glaciers in very scientific terms and slips back to the moment of the somber, unforgettable nighttime drive from the funeral with friends now long out of his life.

Reflecting upon my writing (below) about my own ecological upbringing, I see a bit more clearly how certain times shaped me. And my expressive writing preserves that “ecological” part of me. In producing this writing I engaged my memories, which seemed to work nonlinearly. The cluster of recollections that surfaced seemed to speak to this time period, for in the end they were all I had. The act of preserving the piece of me as a child in nature has broadened me as a writer. Considering the expressive genre itself, I conclude that it serves the subject matter well, naturally, even. Being an ecological being and writerly being seems mutually enhancing.

I remember Horseshoe Lake near Parry Sound, good ol’ Uncle Terry’s cottage in the 1970s. Passing the trussed bridge over Moon River, we’d always start to sing. *Moo-oon Rii-ver.*

Built by loggers, the cottage of round log walls and thick ceiling beams contained an old out-of-tune piano in the main room, whereupon one summer I left my large *Book of Gnomes* on top. One night thunder and lightning crashed from the lake’s edge in the middle of the night, holding me awake and scared, me in my parent’s bed, my hands on my ears, my mother comforting me through the vicious booms.

If I close my eyes I can see the carpenter ants and the termites that once infested the cottage, a porcupine on the path in the dark, and I return to the time the motorboat ran out of gas late one Friday evening. Uncle Terry and my father laughed and joked while they paddled in the dark, my father with a canoe paddle, Terry with a brown AstroTurf-covered board from the boat itself, cracking jokes all the way about the irony of how we might get hit by some other careening boat not seeing us. They gave the job of flashlight holder to me.

And catching my first fish, a pint-size rock bass that twisted, alive on the end of my rod, and too, the time my nurse aunt Joanne concealed me in white gauze bandages on the dock like a mummy. And another time, asking the adults about skinny dipping, the
mysterious event that took place after I fell asleep, and from the grown-ups getting no
detail, just snickers and adroit subject changes. And the time old Gerald babysat me. He
taught me to strike a match by pinching the matchbook cover and yanking. My mother
never understood the coolness of that new acquisition.

And Terry’s sense of humour, his Muppet laugh: the time he gutted a fish and removed
the still-beating heart and placed it in a jar of salted lake water on the dock. Hours passed,
probably an entire fishing excursion of the boys, me included, in the little boat to a quiet
remote bay, where we waited for nibbles and took turns farting. “Look,” Terry giggled
when we slowed the boat to tie it up, pointing to the Mason jar to show my dad. “It’s still
beating.”

And falling asleep on the sofa in the room with the piano with the voices all around:
Guido’s, Terry’s and Dad’s, the husbands married to the three Lawrence sisters, everyone
in their early thirties, the backdrop of conversations on far-out stuff from books they’d
read like Astral Traveling, reincarnation, Zen, and the year when the film Alien burst.
The voices in the room, the child on the sofa, those sacred times long ago.

When I turned twelve, Terry and my aunt divorced. Besides being shaken at the split, the first
such sting I’d ever experienced firsthand, the fact that that we couldn’t return to the cottage
seemed to me at that age unbelievable. That summer my parents booked a week at a resort at a
lake, the cheaper resort, not the high-class place we watched from afar—and that summer at that
lodge turned into one of the greatest times in my life. When not playing pinball or laughing at
Cracked! magazine, my father and I donned snorkels and fins and scoured the lake bottom for
glints of sunlight on glass. We pulled bottle after bottle, enough for a trip to the beer store and
my first bottle return money, and a trunk full of collectibles: wine bottles, coke bottles from
decades past and a beer bottle from the 1940s. Many sat on my bedroom shelf for years. The
amount of garbage on the lakebed—and the fact that we were the only ones cleaning it up—
shocked me. During one dive I touched a rusted spray can that spouted chemicals at me, singing
my leg underwater.

During her career as a schoolteacher my mother worked as a librarian and later, an outdoor
educator. In the 1980s rural outdoor schools still existed, as did overnight trips. She took me up
to Saint John’s Albion with her classes, where we visited taxidermists, took rubbings of old
headstones in a nearby cemetery, cross country skied and played orienteering games in the forest. I slept in the dorm with boys two years older than me who giggled and farted way past midnight.

These experiences imbued in me ecological understanding. I was lucky to have them. They now provide a richness from which I can draw as I write myself into the world. So it is the self in the world that concerns me as both environmental educator and teacher of writing.

5.2 An Ecocritical Approach to Developing Ecological Understanding

One approach to looking for evidence of ecological understanding is to take students’ finished texts written for my class and analyze them according to criteria. Here I take two of my students’ place-based expressive texts written in my environment class and analyze them. My choice of using particular students’ work comes about for several reasons. I chose one male and one female writer. The writing, not the writer per se, drove my selection. The two stories have a different feel, not only in terms of subject matter, but in terms of time interval. Claudio Carosi’s piece about walking his dog occurs over one morning, while Yun Ma’s transpires over years. As well, Carosi as a narrator is very much a participant, while Ma writes from the stance of an observer. I also purposefully chose writing with enough sophistication so as to allow for strong analysis.

My choice of limiting this part of my inquiry to two students has to do in part with space, with leaving me enough room to continue to employ a mixed methodology. But returning to my concern with the method itself, I enter this process cognizant of one of its key limitations. Textual analysis done alone, when seeking evidence of ecological understanding, raises the question of where I am looking for that ecological understanding: in the text or in the person, or in both. While I am a proponent of writing as a way of being, I am equally aware that one’s writing alone does not a whole person make. Nonetheless, textual analysis is the right place to start this inquiry.
Since I am ostensibly looking at the production of environmental texts in the writing classroom, Lawrence Buell’s (1995) four criteria of what makes an environmental text serves to be particularly relevant to this inquiry (p. 7):

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.

Buell is an ecocritic. “Ecocritics,” writes Glotfelty (“What is”), “encourage others to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications.” This role of the ecocritic aligns well with my definition of ecological understanding. Thus ecocriticism well serves the methodological task at hand. I begin by outlining the assignment itself, and proceed to the analysis. The stories may be found in full in Appendices 2 and 3.

### 5.3 The Environmental Autobiography Assignment

The first assignment I give in the *Writing about Environment and Ecology* course is an *Expressive Writing* piece. In order to register in the class, students must have completed the WRI 203 *Expressive Writing* prerequisite. I do this to get students writing soon on in because I believe that writing classes should do this. Too much time spent talking about writing rather than doing it can too easily tune people out or make them start to over-intellectualize the task at hand. I also assign the piece because I believe students should begin with where they are in relation to the course theme they have signed up for. The assignment is to be a short, expressive, first-person, creative nonfiction piece based on the writer’s life experience and observations. I give the following instructions to my class:

The purpose is to explore who you are in terms of your relationship with the natural (i.e. non-human) world. This can include time spent outdoors, moments learning natural
science or about environmental issues, coming across ecologically-minded people in your life or even the opposite: disliking nature, feeling forced to be “environmental”, a time when nature somehow shocked or disturbed you, or a time when your actions towards the natural world weren’t ideal.

Too often in literature nature appears as the stage upon which the human story is acted out. Start with a moment when, if only for a second, nature appeared as an actor in your drama. You could write a straight-up story about learning about natural science or environmental issues and meeting ecologically-minded people. These stories might fall under the categories of childhood, family, school, work, relationship, a character or place profile, or other.

Whatever you do, keep it character- and incident-based. Write a story where you showcase nature and human nature. We need to meet, see and care about people. And something needs to happen—an incident. In short, a good story will be about more than one thing.

- Show, don’t tell. This means you must leave the reader space. Too much interiority crowds the reader out. Don’t write a reverie. Make sure you include other people and dialogue.
- Make up the truth. Do not invent scenes or characters. Base your story on a real life event you observed or experienced. When you have trouble writing dialogue from the past, approximate it. You can approximate the qualities of less important physical details as well if you can’t find them by looking them up online or viewing photographs.
- Don’t write cheese. Don’t write a touchy-feely piece. The chances of writing cheesy, formulaic garbage with this assignment are high. I may ask you to rewrite.
- Keep it place-based. Tell the story of a place through details: little pictures. In fact, if you have related photos, I recommend you go through them to twig your memory.
- Consider using vignettes. With this structure you write a story as a string of pearls, postcard snapshots each with a short beginning, middle and end, and an ending that leaves a small impression. The little impressions will add up to what your piece is about as a whole.
Somehow the natural world should present itself, almost as a character, even if you leave it in the background for most of the piece. Don’t write an outdoor sports story that has nothing to do with the natural world. Write about nature commanding your attention—through a teacher, a person, a place or an unanticipated event or itself that makes itself known to you and possibly others. Nature in this sense need not be confined to harsh weather, but may be a water strider skirting across the water. The moment may—and probably should be—subtle. But the characters should be strong—and believable.

T.S. Eliot advised writers to never speak of feelings and to produce the objective correlative, the physical objects and/or gestures which suggest emotion.

Remember:

- Perfect worlds are boring.
- A story where you’re the hero is next to impossible to pull off well.
- “Slice of life” stories can work—but should have some tension, some conflict: the possibility of things not going smoothly, or of the sting of something (say, aloneness, fitting in, wanting something and not getting it) in the background.
- Don’t invent nature drama because you think your life is boring; speak to me.

### 5.4 Oreo: Participants and Perspectives

Claudio Carosi chose to write an expressive piece about something simple, an everyday morning walk with his dog in the natural area near his home (see Appendix 1 for the full story). With the narrator and the dog as sole characters, the piece easily lends itself to the second of Buell’s criteria, that the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. Right away, upon meeting Oreo, we see the writer using a novel technique for showing the dog’s presence—its “dogness”:

Oreo poked his head out of his doghouse when he smelled me coming and hurried to the door of his cage. I heard him breathe and slobber as he hopped on his hind legs and pawed up the fencing, making it rattle.
Goodmorninggoodmorninggoodmorninggoodmorning. “Yes, yes I’m here,” I said.

Pushing the writing in a new direction in that last line shows the writer’s ability at capturing Oreo’s excitement. The writer is not afraid to break the rules to bend the text towards meaning-making in order to try to create a true image, one with forward movement and vigor. The image not only stays true to the dog’s instinctual behaviour, but also right away introduces the dog as a character unto its own, a character as unmistakably other-than-human. The narrator speaking aloud right after, as if with no other choice but to respond, also rings true to the impact of the lively presence of his beloved dog before him. Even though Oreo has left him a mess to clean up, the narrator comments on his fur “looking more silver in the morning light,” appearing “very showy.” It’s easy to see the bond between canine and human owner, a love despite tensions, marked first here, and later seen in the pinnacle moment in the piece’s finale.

Next, we see a nod to the environment as process rather than as a given when the narrator passes the hedge.

When I was younger the hedging was thick and rich and dark green. As I grew older it thinned. The deer loved to chew at it in the winter and the weeds managed to tangle themselves into its space. Now you can see through empty patches, across to the neighbour’s lot and onto The Gore Road, where cars speed because someone always steals the 50 km/h sign. Late at night I hear the loud engines of modified cars zipping across.

The change in the hedging has grown alongside the narrator’s maturing. While the knowledge of what a modified engine sounds like a narrator who has learned a thing or two about the world, the view itself through the “empty patches” speaks perhaps more to a changing perspective in the narrator’s life. Privacy is a thing of the past, and that privacy was marked by a lush, rich, dark, green boundary. The world is neither a simple nor innocent place. People steal road signs so they can speed in souped-up cars as loud as they want, without regard for people sleeping. Nature has changed and I have changed, the writer seems to say, accomplishing these implicit ideas through simple setting detail and a little exposition, and in so doing meeting Buell’s fourth criterion of nature represented as process in a story.
This analysis might be extended to consider the empty patches in the hedging as exhibiting a vulnerability coming with age. This vulnerability rings through the rest of the piece. When the journey begins, the narrator tells us:

Whenever he walked on too far I’d jerk the leash back. He’d stop until I caught up or got close enough and then do it again. Always at the end of his leash, Oreo walks me.

Again, we see the interests of the nonhuman showcased in the writer’s choice of words, particularly in the last three: “Oreo walks me.” The orientation is significant. It might be said to hint at Buell’s first criteria, that human history is implicated in natural history, if even for a glimmer, a gesture to the fact that humans aren’t always in command, nor need they always be. In fact, not being in control here is a moment of enjoyment, freedom, and vulnerability. Even as the narrator has matured and gained strength, the walking of the family dog is a lesson in letting go, since Oreo’s power and instinct cannot be matched. Yet a pleasure exists here. I sense a pleasant resignation in the tone of the writing—one that I can almost hear the narrator saying, when we go out, I’m here to learn to be led. My humanness in this moment is expanded upon by relinquishing control to the animal. The animal is in touch with the natural world in a way I cannot be. In a micro sense then, one human’s history is implicated in the history of a dog thriving in the natural world, tugging on, making forward-pulling movements unavailable to the human alone. To all the places a dog’s nose leads, human footsteps follow. After this passage the narrator’s thoughts drift toward empathy of his dog’s wellbeing when he wonders how cold he must feel on November mornings. From there, the narrator tells us:

That’s what I thought about that morning. Not the fight I had with Mom last night, or that dad confiscated my mickey of Wiser’s and there was no more Alyssa and I. That morning I didn’t consider any of that. I just watched Oreo take me behind the shed in the corner of the lot like he always does.

The simple moment elevated itself enough for the human to turn his mind from the stressors of his day. In a small way, for a short second, his human self—all that that phrase implies in daily life—disappears. The walk, the being led, is all that matters. Is there more to history than human history? In this fleeting moment, yes. The two are intertwined. In the next moment, the narrator again gives into Oreo’s lead:
I followed him through, ducking under the cedar ceiling and taking short steps in the wet slime that sucked at my feet.

Normally, the wet slime would not be the narrator’s chosen walking path, but in the company of his dog in this place in this moment, the giving-in is all that matters.

A moment of reverence ensues:

I slipped off my right glove and my hand felt the wet chill of the morning as I fumbled with my cigarette pack. I leaned in a little and rubbed Oreo’s ribcage. His ears teepeed and his hind horseish legs looked solid and strained with his white-tipped tail straight in line with his spine. He looked busy. “Sorry to disturb you,” I said.

The descriptors the narrator uses show a heightened sensitivity to the animal’s existence before him, so much so that he humbles himself before Oreo and apologizes for trying to impinge on the dog’s wildness. The invention of the word “horseish” suggests a writer again pushing the language in a way that feels right, that delivers the intended effect. But the story soon turns beyond any clichéd, idyllic ‘human so happily in love with nature’ dynamic. The narrator’s fall down the hill and resulting anger juxtapose nicely with all of this that came before, bringing the story both literally and figuratively down to earth. The human is in command. We see this with:

I straggled towards him. My knee hurt and I felt dizzy. He started up down the bank again and I bellowed “Oreo!” once more with a wild whip at his collar. He sat.

I can almost hear the dog whimpering at this point. But the truth is, the narrator can spout all he wants: the fact that he could have hit a rock and bled to death doesn’t change a thing. The dog is a dog; the human, a human. The dog belongs to the scents on the path; the mud belongs on his paws, for outside is where the dog walks, discovers, sleeps, eats and shits. The human keeps nature on a human-constructed leash. When the wellbeing of the human is at stake, it is at this point we see the human/non-human power dynamic surface. Gone is the softly spoken apology, “Sorry to disturb you.” The above second last three-verb-long last sentence exists as if only to set up the final two-word subject-verb point of emphasis: “He sat.” We hear the dominance in the rhythm of the flow of the words. We see the dominance in the powerful small picture made. The writing is operating on more than one level at once to convey that emphasis.
The piece ends with the narrator’s hesitation:

As my arm reached out to Oreo’s head, I stopped. Panting with his tongue out in a doggy smile, Oreo looked up at me, then out into the trees again.

The concluding focal point suggests some awareness of the depth of the difference between human and animal. It also seems to hint to a return on the narrator’s part to a necessary resignation. For all the rest of his daily life will be steeped in human doings and human concerns, while only a few things like these walks will remain as living reminders to the power, danger and depth of the natural environment just outside his door. This ending lets the bond linger with the reader, Oreo’s snout headed somewhere new, beckoning us to give up what we thought we knew and take a chance on adventure, no matter how potentially perilous. But also, in a real way there is nothing else for the narrator to do but watch Oreo turn away from his master. The leash, while made to serve us, tugs at us again. The criterion of Buell’s I have not yet mentioned is his third: an ethical orientation that shows humans as accountable to the environment. The symbolism of the leash may be seen in this light, as can the focus at the end of the piece on the dog looking towards moving on in the natural environment it lives in. Humans do have nature on a leash, but as the fall suggests, nature often pulls back unexpectedly, with the consequence sometimes being that humans see that no matter our intentions, no matter how strong our leashes, our actions place us directly accountable to a force that is larger than us. Some of us get reminded every natural disaster or so that our species grew up in societies that lacked the technology for fully reliable leashes, leaving us for thousands of years to live in awe of nature’s power. We might consider whether or not to accept the domestic dog as environment, and this is certainly one possible interpretation. Accepting this, the human can be seen to be accountable to nature in the dog’s necessary care: through the walking itself, but also in caring for Oreo’s feeding, cleaning and the learned respect over time for Oreo’s beauty and folly. This raises the question of how domesticated humans are. Nature as dog might have gone on “sniffing and snuffing” while his master bled and died. A tethered leash may have kept him from scampering for help. Nature is nature: at times interested in the human, at times not. Because of this, the human remains inherently accountable to nature—whether or not the human chooses to see this. This criterion of Buell’s may be both the most fickle and most crucial of all.
In sum, using Buell’s criteria Carosi’s piece shows evidence of ecological understanding. My broad definition of ecological understanding—as awareness of the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it—can be said to meet Buell’s four criteria of what comprises an environmental text. Carosi’s piece, as I have stated, is in a macro sense entirely about ecological understanding. The writer’s care to detail, honesty, economy and voice show through in the polished work. In fact, I will argue that the story showcases, through its narrator’s suggested transformation of consciousness, what Buell calls “a mature environmental aesthetic” (1995, p. 32). There seems to be an awareness gained implicitly by the narrator at the end, and that awareness is sophisticated. As a piece of writing, the piece for me accomplishes what a good nature story should accomplish. It does not aim for as simple an aesthetic as portraying the land of idyllic human-nature love and peace. The narrator pulls hard on the leash and commands the dog to obey, to sit, finally swearing at him—as if perhaps on another level resentful at his foray into this clichéd literary territory. The story as a whole expresses the tension present in humans seeing nature as wild and free (i.e. nature as Oreo) in yet always in a position of trying to be controlled (the leash) by humans, even in uncontrollable moments (the fall). Gabriel and Garrard (2012b) relate Buell’s mature environmental aesthetic to Terry Gifford’s (1999) hope for us to “find a discourse that can both celebrate and take some responsibility for nature without false consciousness” (p. 148). The consciousness portrayed in Carosi’s short creative nonfiction story converges these ideals well.

5.5 Yun Ma: The Observer

Yun Ma’s “Mom’s Backyard Garden” (2011), the story of a daughter observing her mother’s pleasure in de-stressing through tending her backyard vegetable garden, rings true to most, if not all of Buell’s criteria (see Appendix 2 for the full story). Several of the criteria, such as nature (i.e. the garden) as process, do not require an overly liberal interpretation to fit. The vignette structure of the piece itself speaks to this. Ma lets us observe the garden in different seasons. She wisely starts the piece showing the bounty of her mother’s hobby, hooking us with her mother’s excitement. Ma then takes us back to the time before the garden existed, to when it was a vision.
Mom walks on the grass and approaches the platform. She examines the soil plots. Dark brown soil lumps, weeds and pebbles pepper the soil. I stare at the apple tree and the raised platform. If we take away the apple tree and the raised soil plots and mow the grass, we could build a swimming pool. (p. 62)

The child’s vision for the backyard alongside the mother’s works well. We hear the narrator later state, “I hate gardening” (p. 63). The garden takes shape, the child matures and the narrator finds herself an observer, at times coming across almost as if there is nothing else to do but pay attention. The season-ending imagery, in tandem with the vignette structure of the story, suggests renewal, circularity.

Leftover dried-up green beans blacken on the pavement beside row two. Naked wooden bean poles stick out from the soil. The apple tree bears no apples and no leaves. Mom’s backyard garden waits for next year. (p. 65)

The last sentence forays deeply with its simplicity. A lovely spaciousness exists in these words. The repeated phrase, “Mom’s backyard garden” clearly reinforces the stance of the observer. The verb “waits” suggests promise. Mom, through her actions, is showing the narrator patience. Nature changes. Time passes. The greenness recedes. Hope for its return requires patience. Nature and life as unassuming processes of renewal exist for us to learn something from. Learning occurs through the narrator’s witnessing, a witnessing transmitted through words on the page to the reader. The reader becomes the witness. Watching requires giving attention to the other.

If we care to see human history implicated in natural history, we can consider this in terms of food. The quality of fresh garden food in the piece can be seen as representative of this, Buell’s first criterion. The excitement of the harvest in the first three paragraphs showcases Ma’s mother’s excitement in feeding her family a fresh return of green beans that will add to and maintain good familial health.

I stand in the kitchen and the screen door slides open. Mom takes off her gardening shoes, an old pair of running shoes caked in dried dirt. In her hands, she carries a basket of green beans. “Yun, come here.” Mom walks into the kitchen and places the basket on the island counter. “Look. Look.”
I walk over to the island counter and glance down. Strands of flat beans and stubby beans overfill the opening of the basket.

“All organic.” Mom beams. (p. 61)

If we see human health as tied to natural history—in the sense that we take Thomas Berry’s mantra that “You can’t have well humans on a sick planet,” (Webb, 2003, p. 2) Ma’s story, through the detail of the organic nature, fulfils Buell’s first criterion. This part of the story serves as a signpost in this direction of this criterion, particularly Buell’s (1995) key words that the nonhuman environment “begins to suggest”—i.e. through eating healthfully, especially organic produce grown by our mother’s hands—“that human history is implicated in natural history” (p. 7). The text does not thrust this concept, but instead leans toward it. It begins to suggest profound connection. The lesson is one we know, but perhaps cannot enough be reminded of. The mother’s care for her family bonds to the care she gives to the natural world, through the garden, which repays the human endeavour with its healthy bounty. It is as if Ma’s mother knows Berry’s mantra or some other similar wisdom, but never fully speaks it. Instead, she lets her small actions speak it. She perhaps knows this is the best technique to capture the attention of her teenage daughter. Simple words: “All organic.” Simple wisdom.

Through the life-death feel of the entire piece we see the cycle of a garden through the attentive lens of the child. Implicit in the way the text is written seems to be the feel of a child growing aware of the passing of time. Contained in this positioning appears to be unspoken questions. The psychic space—that which is left off the page in yet influences how we experience the story—seems to contain underlying questions: Will I be like Mom when I reach her age? For now, I am reconciling what I am observing through writing, but perhaps later in life I may begin a garden of my own. The history of this particular family, told in this particular story, suggests in the micro at least, that the legacy of the human resides in the treatment of the natural world. The concept of stewardship is brought to life in the narrative. How will I care for the earth? This central question too seems to be spoken in the story’s subtext.

Buell’s (1995) third criterion, that human accountability to the environment can be seen in several moments, could apply to the mother’s mention of compost. Whether or not composting helps stop global warming, as she says to her daughter—this lightness helps the text breathe—the mother saying so aims to situate small actions in terms of greater cumulative global benefits.
Still, probably the best instance of the text displaying human accountability to the environment, by far, is the scene with the sparrow.

Once, Mom forgot to stick one side of the wire covering back into the soil. A sparrow snuck under and could not get out. Mom and I stood and watched as the sparrow turned in circles and clawed against the mesh. We stared until Mom turned and walked to the toolshed. She slipped on her garden gloves, reached under the wire mesh, grabbed the sparrow, pulled it out and set it free. (p. 64)

The sparrow scene reminds us of the sparrow’s legitimacy in being there, in its foraging of food for itself and perhaps its family. In freeing the sparrow, Mom shows her daughter human accountability to the natural world, for in freeing the sparrow the characters free a part of themselves. Neither guilt nor bad dreams related to inaction or ineffectiveness can haunt the characters since they responded humanely to a fellow creature in need. The sparrow passage showcases Buell’s second criterion that the human interest exists not as the sole legitimate interest. Nonetheless, the garden’s mesh exists to keep animals out. This fact is brought to light because of the trapped sparrow. Fencing in a garden is done to preserve the food grown for human consumption. If pests spoil the food, the yield and all its benefits will not make it to the writer’s plate. Agriculture, by implication—especially organic agriculture—requires methods of squaring off potential yields for human use and protecting them from other species’ use. I once rented an apartment I first viewed before the previous tenants had moved out. They had allowed their balcony to be used as a nest for pigeons. This alarmed me, for an apartment with a balcony was important to me, for my use. Taking a breath of fresh air or watching the sunset or checking the temperature—for these personal reasons that balcony was to serve my uses. When I moved in, the pigeons and their eggs had, naturally, disappeared. Did the pigeons have a right to nest on the balcony? I thought not. The human interest as the inescapably dominant interest always seems to make itself known in good nature writing. The act of gardening is meant to better the lives of the humans first. We have to eat, after all. We have sunsets and a lit-up CN Tower to watch from our Toronto balconies. Good nature writing expresses this reality, and Ma’s story leaves us that little bit of space in which we can consider it and reflect on our own impingements upon the natural world. Yet at the same time, a nature text can meet Buell’s (1995) third criterion, of human accountability to the environment as an overall ethical orientation, as Ma’s does. If we think in terms of land use, the choice to garden on land that might have been made
into a swimming pool, an undertaking with a large ecological footprint, we see that the sparrow
would not have been in that same spot would the garden not have been built. There are gains and
there are losses. We have a responsibility to the natural world, but the natural world does not
always win, does not always get set free. Nonetheless, as Ma shows us with the sparrow scene,
we should help when we can. It is in this sense that I will argue that her piece leans to an ethical
orientation of human accountability to the environment in part—again, Buell is careful to qualify
that the text need not wholly position us somewhere along an ethical spectrum, but rather contain
a trace of that ethical orientation. Ma’s work does this masterfully.

While I conclude that “Mom’s Backyard Garden” meets Buell’s criteria as an environmental
text, as well as my definition of ecological understanding, in which it conveys an awareness of
the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it, the story operates differently than
Carosi’s “Oreo”. The observer stance points us to the realm of the possible. For Jarvis (2012),
fiction “not only creates understanding and empathy with those who are different from us but
also allows us to imagine alternatives to the way we live now” (p. 490). Ma’s narrative—in the
way it is told as a whole, through the use of headings, the slow pacing, its cyclical nature, and the
wonderful spaces left between details and moments—seems to have the narrator observer seeing
alternatives in the sense Jarvis speaks of. Ma’s mother is no doubt a contrast to the narrator, yet
she is also her blood. This brings another dimension to the writing. The question of what might
good families do in respect of the natural environment filters through in the child’s perspective,
speaking to us all, as children and/or as parents.

The ending of “Mom’s Backyard Garden” does not leave the reader wondering if the narrator has
made any leaps from her newfound awareness and has since changed her life. The piece exists as
a loving account over a span of time of a change. It conjures a sense of home and of home life. It
is in the telling of this tale—and in the tale as a whole, without tension, rising action, without an
identifiable climax, falling action and a resolution—that ecological understanding occurs. In the
absence of these traditional components a story sits with us differently. Writing coach Jon
Franklin (1986) defines a story as such: “A story consists of a sequence of actions that occur
when a sympathetic character encounters a complicating situation that he confronts and solves”
(p. 71). Franklin argues strongly that without these elements, a story does not exist. I work hard
with new writers to try to dispel this notion. I see where Franklin is coming from, as the case can
be made that most narratives in the mainstream that we consume belong to his recipe, and that
we consume these unconsciously and happily. But I take pains to show my students, through example after example, that a story can simply exude a strong feeling throughout, a strong sense of place and character and that an ‘incident’ may either be directly visible or lurking in the shadows. The presence of a strong preceding incident such as divorce may permeate a child’s world, and within the piece nothing much beyond mundane actions may occur. The writer may detail a weekend spent with her father. The absence of the mother, along with a slight mention of divorce, then frames these ordinary events. Waking up, tugging on daddy to wake up, wanting him to turn on the television and make breakfast: the foreground events unfurl and take shape before a difficult reality, backgrounded by the writer, mentioned only in passing. The absence sets up everything else the reader witnesses. The story to which I am referring is “Sesame Street” by Laurel Waterman (2008). For me, Ma’s story too contains a backdrop, though hers is much more positive, and I would call it innocence. To borrow from William Blake, the story juxtaposes songs of innocence with songs of experience. The everydayness of the piece speaks to the everydayness of the child’s perspective, and to the everydayness of family life and our concepts of home. The ending, so lifelike, brings no tension-resolving resolution, for there are no loose ends to tie. In a certain sense for this reason, Ma has written some nonfiction at its best.

The problem with teaching with Franklin’s model is that new writers will tend to turn in predictable pieces, often with false resolutions so as to adhere to the structure. I face enough of these as it is, where characters rapidly turn the direction of their feelings simply because of a lurking end point to which the writer writes. Without reimagining writing we can internalize mainstream Franklin’s formula and never question it. In judging a piece, I primarily ask myself these complex, yet simple questions: Did it hold my attention all the way through? Am I learning something I didn’t know? Am I feeling something? I look for a sense of character, setting and incident, but neither expect nor teach creative nonfiction writing intent on seeing moment after moment of transformative experiences foregrounded on the page. Ma’s writing portrays realism, and her prose portrait has the feel of coming across effortlessly. As a writer I often find myself striving to not try too hard on the page. Ma, and many other new writers I have worked with, achieve this well. Such is the delight of working with new writers.
5.6 The Naïve Narrator

First-person nonfiction narratives bring with them certain inherent attributes. To focus on the narrator is to focus on the persona of the teller behind the words. The narrator is always a construct that exists and breathes in the text. Sometimes we hear their voice while reading and form a picture. I know that having heard one of my favourite writers, Richard Ford, read one year at Harbourfront, I always hear his voice in my ear when I read his work, and I enjoy it. But without having heard or met the author, the narrator’s persona still resonates, and in ways beyond an aural voice. Unconsciously, we build a picture of the type of person the teller is, complete with our judgements in terms of their believability and their perspective on the world. We decide as we read if the teller is a person we would like to have a beer with, if they are someone braver than us to take us into worlds we would never go, and if they have the strength of character to be admired or pitied. We consider whether they’re honest, if they’re like us, if they seem worldly or fresh, astute or authoritative, and if they have perhaps pushed their pen a little too far, taking perhaps a tad too many liberties jamming the psychic space with fragments of judgement, thereby pushing us out of the text. The telling is as much the story as the content is the story. Michael Pollan (2007) gives the following advice based upon his own writing practice, to try to be more conscious of this at the outset of composing a piece:

The key is to realize that once you’ve made the decision that you’re writing a first-person piece, you’re not done. There’s a second decision: Which first person? You have many identities when you’re writing. For example, I could approach a piece as a gardener. Or as a Jew. Or a son. Or father. As someone who lives in Berkeley, California. As any number of identities. When you’re writing in first person, you’re not using your whole identity. You’re choosing what is useful to your story.

In writing her piece, Ma reflected on her experience, dug out pictures of the backyard garden, and interviewed her mother. Ma writes in the “About this Story” section that accompanies her piece: “Through her voice, I want to show the enjoyment Mom receives from gardening” (p. 65). It is an interesting choice of words, “through her voice,” because the teller’s voice is unmistakably a daughter’s. Ma couldn’t help but be herself: the daughter as onlooker, learner; sometimes befuddled, sometimes fully engaged, and sometimes put off. Her creative narrative
act of honesty seemed to choose its own voice. Ma is Ma. And the humble, unassuming perspective in the voice seems to jive with Jarvis’s (2012, p. 490.) position that good imaginative writing can bring about empathy for others (the mother, the sparrow, the nonhuman) and can provide alternative ways of being in the world (the mother, the backyard space, the physical and psychological benefits of hands-on labour, the organic food bounty). There is much to say just about the simple, straightforward take on things Ma paints as they occur, giving no need to go overboard into assuming symbolism in the prose, suggesting say, that the garden might represent the Eden we’ve lost and that we work unconsciously every day to reclaim (Merchant, 2003). Ma did not seem to intend such a hifalutin a reading of her work. Instead, Ma, as a new writer masters quite naturally what Pollan (2007) warns that seasoned writers often lose:

> Journalists often write as people who have mastered subjects and are telling you about them. That’s a real turn-off for readers. In my work I often begin as a naïf. It’s a good place to start because it’s a lot closer to where your reader is. Instead of starting as someone who knows the answers, you begin as someone learning about something. That’s a good way to connect with readers.

What Carosi and Ma have in common is the persona of the narrator as naïve narrator. The very stance of the curious, down-to-earth narrator allows for the development of what Buell (1995) discusses as a mature environmental aesthetic (p. 32). The narrator is not trying to be something other than a good teller, a good renderer—so that the reader can feel and enjoy the pieces and enter them in their own way, without feeling pushed. The reader is left to make up his or her mind on the environmental topic at hand. There is no voice of “the environmentalist.” In fact, the voice of “the environmentalist” is not necessarily best for generating convincing environmental writing. Righteousness, even expertise (or worse, feigned expertise), can invade the psychic space necessary for a reader to move into, space that should be free of judgment, space that allows readers to participate by making their own meaning, by making their own minds up based on the quantity and quality of detail presented and the ordering of which it is presented. It is a narrator who, in Aristotelian terms, evokes ethos. The credibility of the writer is established by appearing to have the good of the audience at heart. Doing so implies more than a feeling that the narrator would not deceive the reader, perhaps more to do with the humility of staying in a simple presentation mode, a conveyance that might sound like this:
Hello. I have a story of my own that moved me. I will now recount it as best I can. Here goes. This is what I saw happen.

Ethos is about constructing that persona that eschews throughout the message, I am worthy of your attention and trust. A naïve narrator need not be overly introspective. The naiveté inherent in the simple presentational mode invites the reader in as co-learner on a journey. Overly introspective narration can come off as self-absorbed rambling or pontification, destroying directness and leading to mistrust or boredom. Again, because there is no environmentalist per se present in either piece there is no agenda. For these reasons the stance of the naïve narrator is particularly appealing to most readers, especially other new writers at the same experience level.

5.7 Adult Learning and the Naïve Narrator

A recap: Carosi and Ma’s work both can be seen to portray ecological understanding, defined broadly as an awareness of the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it. Moments in the work can be seen to allude to key ecological principles. An example I gave was Thomas Berry’s mantra that “You can’t have well humans on a sick planet,” (Webb, 2003, p. 2) that portions of Ma’s piece suggested. In each work I identified the presence of what I call “the naïve narrator.” Now with these findings in mind I will consider their relevance to adult education.

While the naïve narrator stance in environmental writing can assist in developing a mature environmental aesthetic (Buell, 1995, p. 32), it may also be something we should consider more broadly, as in assisting reflexivity in adult learning situations. When we approach fashioning a stand-alone glimpse of our lives through writing, we should do so humbly. There has to be something there in the writing for the writer and the reader to care about. If we will have been honest in our writing, we will have transcended the mundane and the emotionally absent. I caution new writers about writing ‘plot-only’ pieces, in which we learn little about characters. I also caution new writers about writing a piece that belongs too much to themselves, and little to the reader. I generally call these memories or accounts. They tend to take on a laundry list feel of micro events and the narrator takes a spotlight role in ‘telling’ as opposed to creating space by holding back and letting the ‘showing’ speak for itself.
Let us assume we have transcended these pitfalls in our writing and have moved our reader with our rendering, as my two new writers have. Quite likely, we will have gone somewhere we did not intend to go. This is exactly what happened with me way back, when as an undergraduate I first took the *Expressive Writing* course I now teach. The instructor encouraged risk-taking while making the classroom a safe space. It is not easy to list all the little things the instructor did to create this space of security over twelve short weeks, but I do know that I responded as a whole person in that course, because I felt treated like a whole person. I don’t just mean the instructor treated me as a whole person, but the pedagogy asked me to respond as a whole person. The university became a place where my life experiences mattered, not just my ability to learn the dialect of the university. That combination of safety allowed me to write about something dark and deeply personal—the joys of making music with old friends who revealed themselves as drug abusers. Telling this story naively was the only way that made sense to me.

Now, that story appears in the collection of peer model stories I use in teaching *Expressive Writing*. While I never teach my own work, because I do not want the focus to be on my work as a writer, a student will sometimes mention the story. It usually happens when I’ve shared an especially good bond with my class, often towards the end, and a student will feel comfortable enough to broach the difficult subject matter in that piece. I tell students the story of writing the story. I tell them that at the time I lived at home and shared a computer with my mother. I tell them of how terrified I was for her to stumble upon the document and find that my friends from way back had become drug addicts, and that I placed a password on the file. I tell them of how wary I felt about the piece, bringing it to my professor, wondering if I’d done something way off base, committed some sin of “telling what shouldn’t be told.” And I make sure to tell my students that when I sat in their seats there was no way at the I could have imagined this present moment years later—them reading it, it being published and discussed in a university course, me reading it publicly at a writers’ festival and on community radio. I tell students I hope they will take risks, write without a parachute, and enter into a mysterious space of openness in their writing during our brief time together.

Again, as Allen (2000, p. 91) contends, autobiography gives adult writers in a university setting the opportunity to fill the void that this very setting sets up. And if we choose to write moments that are meaningful to us, and if we care enough or find ourselves swept up enough to enter into learning about and playing with writing so as to portray those moments with taking the reader to
those moments, cultivating the naïve narrator can well serve this type of storytelling. The restraint and space-creating of the naïve narrator often sits in opposition to the other extreme, which may involve a know-it-all narrator who revels in the spotlight, telling readers what to think. Sometimes this is what we need and crave as readers and writers. But usually, with our lives as material, with new writers, when we have transcended the impetus to paint ourselves perfectly, as we do daily in our résumés, and to our workmates, spouses and children, a humble, realistic, restrained narrator can serve to invite others into vicariously living our life experiences through our writing in a relatable, personable, human to human manner.

In this chapter, I defined ecological understanding as “awareness of the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it.” I examined who I am as an ecological person by recounting life experiences that imbued in me ecological understanding, and provide a richness from which I draw as I write myself into the world. It is the self in the world that concerns me as a teacher of environmental writing. I introduced the methodological approach I have arrived at during this moment in the thesis. I first situated my rationale for analyzing student texts, and then discussed the purposive selection technique that led me to choosing the writing of one male and one female student. I discussed my choice of employing Lawrence Buell’s (1995) four criteria for what makes an environmental text. I concluded that both students’ texts display ecological understanding, and then unpacked an aspect of their writing that contributes to this: the naïve narrator. I then tied this to how the cultivation of a naïve narrator can enhance adult learning, and can assist in developing what Buell (1995) calls a mature environmental aesthetic.

The next natural step in this methodology is to move away from textual analysis. I have always intended this work to go beyond the limitations of looking solely at texts for evidence of ecological understanding. I am interested in how writing can serve as a learning response to environmental and ecological issues, and the textual analysis done here provides one answer to that. To consider my first question—How do narrative ways of teaching and learning support ecological understanding in adult learners?—we need to look to those learners. Chapter 6, marks a move towards including the voices of my students alongside continuing the theoretical discussion. I continue to explore and build upon Yagelski’s (2011) framework while working towards developing my own.
Chapter 6
Towards an Ontological Theory of Writing for Ecological Understanding

6 Towards an Ontological Theory of Writing for Ecological Understanding

6.1 Being

Nick Tingle (2004) notes that “According to Winnicott, there is a kind of doing that emanates from being. He calls it creativity and places it in opposition to the other kind of doing—rule responsive doing—which he calls “reactive-doing” (p. 114). As adults with years of life experience we are in a unique position not only to reflect and transform our life material into textual material, but to engage with the creative form called writing in a way that can be presented to us not as a punitive set of rules disengaged from our own interests and motivations. For Yagelski, Winnicott’s “reactive-doing” occurs in the way most of us learn writing. He describes the mainstream Cartesian view of writing as “a straightforward conduit for already-formed thoughts” (2011, p. 124). In this view writing as a technology for language serves as a kind of net for capturing thought processes that form and reside in the mind prior to the mind and body (psychic and psychomotor processes) making meaning on the page. The Cartesian mind/body split operates as though language were capable of capturing all thought. The implication of this, for Yagelski, is that a good deal of writing instruction bases around mastering the rules of grammar—in order to better craft language, in order to better serve thought. The cumulative effect of this way of seeing is perhaps its prominence on the psyche of generations of potentially strong, reflective, new writers who shy away from writing because of the stronghold of this view in their unconscious. I believe that this is the experience of Rebecca, a student who I did not teach, but who had a thorough adult learning experience in the program where I teach:

In the beginning, when I saw the title for the program, it said Professional Writing. I’m like oh, I’m going to be taught how to write professionally. That was what went through my mind. So when I took Expressive Writing I was kind of shocked because it wasn’t
what I expected but at the same time, I did like it because it was me writing the way I would want, rather than the typical....I take Psychology, so it’s APA. You have to write a certain way. You can’t use active voice. It has to be passive. And you can’t say I. You have to be a bit more impersonal in everything. So for me it was like okay, this is different. I get to write the way I want rather than you have to write a certain way—you have to find out what is acceptable and what isn’t and how you cite and all these things that you don’t learn in Professional Writing. I like the fact that what it encourages you to do is to be creative...to really think of what you’re trying to get across with your writing, whereas in the other programs it’s more like well, you have to write something that’s particular. Here, yes you’re guided but at the same time you’re kind of writing what you want to write rather than what you’re being prescribed to write.

In her words, it is apparent that her academic history has taught her to think about writing in the university in a specific way, of what writing primarily is, what it is for, and what it can be. She is factually off on a few points, namely that Professional Writing does not teach citation. I did in my research course. The program does not reward free-for-all, anything-goes writing. Students tell me the program has perhaps the highest quality standards in the university. When I teach Expressive Writing I spend a class at midterm outlining my grading criteria. I have made the case several times in this work that good creative nonfiction writing requires several key ingredients, that it is a difficult undertaking, and that only a commitment to revision improves it. What stands out in Rebecca’s commentary is the way she conceptualizes writing. “Okay,” she says, “this is different.” Because it is different, the experience as part of her university education stands out. With this in mind I again wish to emphasize that I am not advocating wholesale change to the ways universities teach writing. The sideline position of the for-credit creative nonfiction courses in the program where I teach attracts a non-specialized, voluntarily participative, multidisciplinary group of students. Their writing major or minor adds value to their overall academic experience. It compliments their experience in a meaningful, memorable way. I only wish that programs such as mine continue to earn respect.

Rebecca has memorized the rules so well, she effortlessly spouts out a string of them, as well as the big no-no, using “I”. While teaching this rule streamlines grading of undergraduate papers, the sixth edition of the American Psychological Association’s style manual warns that avoiding first person can lead to problems such as anthropomorphism (McAdoo, 2009). On the APA blog,
McAdoo (2009) notes that the manual states that an experiment cannot “attempt to demonstrate,” but I or we can. He writes:

> It’s not always right, or always wrong, to use the first person. We all have different writing styles, and the use of first person may come more naturally to some than to others. The most important thing to consider, whether using APA Style or another style, is the clarity and accuracy of each sentence in your text.

Science writing outside of the undergraduate experience is more tied to professional realities than set rules. Meaning-making, precision, and clarity trump blind allegiance. My point here, again, is that Rebecca’s experience of writing as one thing appears to have set up her expectations of what writing might continue to be, because she has been thinking of writing within that same framework. Rebecca’s impression of *Expressive Writing* exceeded her expectations. The program as a whole left her with a freeing experience in terms of her conception of what writing for her might mean. She conceived of writing done in the program not as rules-first institutional obedience, but instead as firstly encouraging her “to really think of what you’re trying to get across with your writing.” With this statement she’s questioning language as a meaning-making vehicle.

I tell my students I won’t teach them grammar, but that if they get in the writing zone, so to speak, they’ll want to look up on their own time online what a dangling modifier is. Rebecca calls this purpose-driven problem solving “creativity.” I agree with Winnicott and consider what Rebecca undertook in her learning as “a kind of doing emanating from being” (Tingle, 2004, p. 114). This sense of being gives a sense of freedom together with purpose, imparting an implicit goal of improvement, similarly as one who enjoys playing a musical instrument might experience.

The way Rebecca has grown to see the program meshes with how she sees herself as a writer. She sees the program’s approach as offering a place for personal, as opposed to impersonal writing. The purpose of her writing aligns with who she is as a person, for she is a blossoming professional and academic (at least during her years at university). Too, she is a whole person with a cultural, familial, educational (and so on) history. She says, “it was me writing the way I would want.” The problem with the mainstream view, argues Yagelski (2011), is that “the student’s experience with mainstream writing instruction has resulted in his or her conceiving of
himself or herself as a certain kind of self while writing” (p. 124). Writing occurs in a context, and a selfhood arises in that context. Essentially, Yagelski is offering a way of seeing writing as beyond a cognitive activity, something that a psychological lens can ever only see in a limited way. A phenomenological framework, according to Yagelski, may be best for understanding writing. He employs Barbara Couture’s (1998) view of phenomenology, in that it “defines knowledge as a relation between self and other resulting in meaning” (p. 65). When we write, we write ourselves into the world. In Yagelski’s parlance, “an act of meaning-making is in effect an act of being” (p. 114). This has good implications for the reader as well, for as Peter Elbow (2000) writes, “What I like about personal or expressive writing is how it usually acknowledges what is at stake for the writer. So often, as a reader, we only know what is at stake in a larger more impersonal sense.” (p. 317).

Encouraging a pedagogy that enables adult learners to put their self into the work is crucial because the self is shaped by the context in which it is allowed to shape. Ma’s and Carosi’s work convey a sense of the writer’s personhood as being inserted in the writing, as opposed to being distanced. I have not included work here where a sense of the writer’s personhood feels distanced in the writing, though I encounter it. When I do encounter it, I work with students one-on-one towards surpassing it, beginning by showing the merits of writing in which the writer feels present, of how it invites the reader into it because the reader can relate. If writers such as Ma and Carosi choose the environment as their topic, then it follows that with writers whose selfhood can be found as present in the writing should reflect a certain sense of selfhood with regard to the topic they engage. In fact, I would say that when a writer is doing, “emanating from being” (Tingle, 2004, p. 114), he or she brings three selves to the act of writing: the whole person, which includes the personality, culture and life experience of the writer, the person as emerging writer, and the person engaged with the topic—which in this case happens to be ecological in nature.

Carosi recently wrote me a nomination letter for a teaching award. It stood out because of the high degree of reflectiveness Carosi had on his learning. I was struck by how brave, authentic, diverse and mature John’s student text selection was. I recall a reading by one student who jokingly quipped, “I am Mississauga’s Michael Moore.” She had written a research piece on exhaust emissions at drive-thru
restaurants. No kidding, I thought, the way she had stalked the Tim Horton’s parking lot. This particular author wasn’t trying to be a journalist, she had truly and unexpectedly become one. Reading her work influenced me to write my own journalistic narrative on a major mining protest in Ontario. I knew these students had done it; that was reason enough to pick up the phone, to stop worrying and simply become a reporter. I conducted a phone interview for the first time in that class with the mayor of Melancthon, Ontario. It was perhaps my most thrilling and practical experience of university.

By responding the way he did to what was at stake for him as a writer, Carosi shaped the writing context. His chutzpah to go ahead—and in a certain sense add himself to the list of writers who had successfully interviewed someone—made all the difference. The three selves came together in this moment: himself as a whole person, his emerging writer self, and the person engaged with a topic. Carosi attributes his inspiration to reading a former student’s writing, but I know I too played a role in coaching him one-on-one towards him carrying out the nerve-wracking new experience of speaking with a stranger—in the same way as I had done so years earlier with the writer in the book to which he refers. I asked Carosi what students might be thinking who struggled with the interview assignment. He told me they tended to think “Who am I to ask this person questions? I am just a university student.” The whole person needs, in a sense, to overcome the whole person for change to occur. The circumstance of being in the course with a particular teacher sets things in motion, and the most important message the teacher must give relates to reassurance and building confidence. This is what I mean about the student’s context shaping everything—such that I see the instructor’s role as helping students overcome their fears around writing by aiming to continually shape the learning context in a positive way. Long ago, Canfield and Wells (1976) made this very point:

The best system of positive reinforcement is, of course, to evaluate a student’s work from the viewpoint of what is right with it rather than from that of what is wrong with it. Show the student what he has going for him. Point out his strengths. Show him he can develop his strengths; that is, treat error in the context of nurturing capacity rather than as a process of revealing ignorance. The student already knows he’s ignorant. That’s the one thing they succeeded in teaching him before he got to you. Now he needs to know that he can do something about his ignorance. (p. 83)
Following this advice hinges on subtleties. Students are used to receiving punitive feedback, so much so that they internalize what writing means because of it. I pointed out evidence of this in Rebecca’s testimony. Because of the subtleties involved in the acts of teaching, creating and maintaining a positive pedagogy can be challenging. A teacher can slip up one day, say by being annoyed by the amount of latecomers and giving a small speech about it. Depending on the mix of personalities in the room, how much rapport the teacher has built up with the class, and how much students are enjoying themselves in that moment, the zeitgeist of the classroom can be poisoned, sometimes never to be fully turned back around.

To my luck, my strategy with Carosi worked. He continues, in the letter:

> If someone asked me how exactly to teach an activity as subjective as writing, I would refer to the way John provided a space of reassurance. The way he guided me, and then stepped back. The mantra of his class was “show don’t tell”, and indeed, the freedom to choose assignment topics, to uncover our own personal stories and environmental issues to write about, showed me how to be a writer.

> I voiced myself both on and off the page. There was no “way” to write, only a living truth I could grasp by the activity itself. My subjectivity—this totally personal thing—was what John was interested in. Really, he didn’t “teach” me ecology, nor even how to write about it. He simply directed me to it. He sparked my imagination through readings and discussions, urged me to keep meeting with him and with my editing group and to every so often present my work in class. What mattered were simply these milieus, these environments he constructed: student-teacher in personal meetings, student-student in editing groups, and student-class through collective workshopping of in-progress student-written material. When I entered these milieus, I discovered my own ecology.

Carosi echoes several of Rebecca’s sentiments. He uses similar words, such as “freedom” and “personal.” More than that, Carosi makes the same argument as writing educator Lad Tobin (1993), who writes, “The written product and the writing process always exist within—and are always shaped by—a particular network of interpersonal relationships” (p. 14). Looking carefully at establishing, monitoring, and maintaining productive relationships should, for Tobin, be not merely another item on our to-do lists, but instead become “the primary thing we must do if we want to be successful writing teachers” (p. 15). Really looking at relationships, writes
Tobin, involves looking at power dynamics and all the various aspects the student-teacher relationship conjures up. What is noteworthy is Carosi’s superb grasp on teaching and learning. His philosophy background has given him the language to articulate it well. Good teaching for Carosi means, in a certain sense, turning teaching upside down, at least from traditional notions of the teacher up high as expert disseminator of knowledge. He even rejects the word, “teach” and favours the notion of the instructor directing him to something great he could then discover for himself—by doing. Again though, I must say, that as much as I am honoured by Carosi’s detailing of his positive learning experience, his personal learning context that had perhaps precipitated prior to his entering my classroom had readied him for the experience he had with me. In an interview Carosi mentions his dissatisfaction with his other academic major, saying that he was at a turning point. I was fortunate to have him in my class at that precise moment. I am the first to admit I perhaps may not have had the same success with him during another period in his learning. For those students in my writing classes that do not achieve as highly as they may have wanted, my hope is that their experiences will still have been positive, and that these moments will stay with them and buttress their learning in future courses and writing situations. Just as the student has to be ready for something good to happen, so must the teacher. Just as the other selves exist along continua, the self-as-writer grows out of writing milieus.

Yagelski (2011) writes that “Writing is...not only an expression of the self as being-in-the-world but also an act of meaning-making that inherently involves all other selves” (p. 118). This point allows us to consider the experience of writing as “an experience of our being as inherently social” (p. 118). He considers an act of writing “as rooted in the dynamic present, and cumulative, in that it contains the writer’s history and is informed by all previous acts of writing and acts of meaning-making” (p. 121). With these points, I agree. But where I differ, based on my own experience and what students tell me, is on Yagelski’s insistence that the primary benefits of self enhancement through writing occur during the act of writing. Here he dissects the precise moment of composing:

The paradox here is that the writer cannot articulate all of what he or she is experiencing at the moment or what he or she is writing about at that moment, which may contribute to the intensified awareness of self: that is, the self trying to articulate itself is aware of what it cannot articulate as it is of what it can render into language, which will always be an approximation of the experience at that moment. To put it somewhat differently, the self is
more present to itself when writing because of the inability to fully “say” (write) its being points to the part of being that cannot be said (written). In this regard, the limits of language to capture our experience of our selves help illuminate our sense of being during the act of writing. (p. 118)

In other words, encountering our own limits helps us to grow. This struggle helps us to see glimpses of our various selves. I relate to Yagelski’s dissection of the act of writing to my own experience playing music. As a semi-pro drummer, when I begin practicing regularly I want to push myself. I learn ways of playing by playing in styles of other musicians. I also have my stock of ways of playing drums that belong to me—or that so far, I am unable to consciously tie to anything I have heard. In the act of writing a song in a band, I am always trying to make the song that much better, to showcase my talents as well as to serve the talents of the other players and to serve the song itself. In this drawing forth, I am always butting up against my limitations. And those limitations are always changing. I may surpass what I could play a year before, so long as I keep practicing. Or, if I put down my sticks for a period I will have to begin playing at a level prior to my last peak. In songwriting, the song gets served only in the sense that it receives the best drumming I can pull off at that moment. It does not matter how good I wish to be, the actual playing tells the truest story of where I am, just as the collaboratively written song reflects all players’ abilities at that moment. This is not a bad thing, for there will be great songs, good songs and weak songs—as this is all part of what it means to be making music. Here is a moment that occurred to me while practicing:

The other day I heard a double-bass pattern I admired in a song. The feel of it crawls, then gallops, then returns to crawling, then picks up again. Its difficulty lies in the changes. In practicing it I realized that I could take a shortcut and leave out one note. In a band situation, that one note would not be missed. It might even be ‘heard’ even in its absence, like a ghost note. But I know too that pushing myself to hit that one extra kick at the end of the roll would make me a better drummer. The truth is, if I were asked by a band tomorrow to play that song live, I’d shortcut my way through. But for now I’m not giving up on practicing the part until my body gets it. One note—because of the timing of the hit and the rest after it and the left and right sequence landing just so after it—can cause you to push yourself and realize the lesson you already know, that there’s always higher ground to get to.
Yagelski sees writing as a kind of performance of the self, for the self. But where I diverge from his thinking is that the performance aspect of writing extends beyond the moment of writing. To return to drumming: I am as much making meaning whether I am practicing alone pushing my limits, or while rehearsing with a band pushing my limits, or playing a live gig as a band. Any praise I or the band receives after the show is also part of the milieu, also part of the experience in the unfolding, enveloping process of self-as-musician. All of these experiences in their own way expand my being in the world as musician. All of these experiences extend beyond the creativity of practicing alone. My argument is that the same goes for writing, and that we should view it as a process—for it is in a process in its entirety that the undertaking enhances our being in the world. During editing stages, parts of the self are revealed that were not able to be revealed during drafting. When editing for publication, for instance, when as a writer I already know that the piece I am working on has been accepted, the editing I enact takes on a flavour different than it does when I am writing something not intended for publication. I liken it to getting a set down with a band for an upcoming show. You don’t want to mess with the set or the song structures, but you will polish the songs so that your strengths as a player meet the set’s strengths. For me that means vamping up transitions, knowing the places I can shine while adding to the strengths of the songs.

If I were to value the act of writing above all other stages in the process, I would be limiting a view of the writing self—and violating knowledge I have gained through my own experience and that which I have gained by working with hundreds of students: that by drafting a piece and sleeping on it, we return to it with new eyes, eyes afresh with which to add to the meaning-making. The editing process also involves others’ eyes to help us make meaning. Revising towards a final product is a social process, exactly as playing songs in a band is. For me, it is a moot point to get stuck on wondering where the writer’s and the editor’s contributions begin and end. The point is that like the self, which Eakin (1999) and Newkirk (1997) view as malleable awareness, so too can we view the piece of writing. Allen (2000) reminds us that the writing operates in a transitional space. As “transitional object” the piece of writing “mediates between the writer’s inner self and the world the self inhabits” (p. 92). The artifacts we make are there for us to inspect, revise, and learn from—should we care to. Just as the self comes into being due to the environment and with interaction among other people, so does the piece of writing in the editing process. When I publish students’ work into book form, several will write me emails at
the last minute when they realize that their window for changes is coming to a close. Please change the names of people. Please change the names of places. I believe that while some slim chance exists for the people they are writing about to see the published work, what is really happening in these moments is that to the writer, their writing has become real, born into the world, out of their control.

In a way, Yagelski counters his own argument. He is saying that because the writer cannot articulate all of what he or she is experiencing at the moment of writing, that in the moment of creation “the self is more present to itself” (p. 118). I am saying that because the writer cannot articulate all of what he or she is experiencing at the moment of writing, let’s give thanks to the security of the editing process and the involvement of others, whereby the self can return to being present to itself as the creation changes—in concert with others. The editing process pushes the precision and quality of meaning-making. It enhances the writing, the writer, and the self in relation to the theme or content of the writing.

I interviewed three students who had completed Writing about Environment and Ecology with me: Waffa, Jessica, and Robert. Each in their early twenties and a few years into their undergraduate degrees, I chose them because they were articulate, and had different experiences. Waffa and Jessica were non-science students, which is the largest group I tend to encounter in my classes, while Robert majored in Environmental Science. When I asked her about the impact of taking several writing courses in the program, Jessica replied:

It teaches you that writing is a process, and that’s what I like too. Because you can build your portfolio while you’re in school and learn those principles. Because by the time you get out, you could have publications in Mindwaves, in the Making a Book course, or you could build content that you could potentially publish somewhere else, competitions or whatever. So because it’s a process, obviously the first piece isn’t going to be perfect. And the writing program teaches you that with the editing groups, and it teaches you how to take criticism. Because before, in high school, I probably couldn’t take all that criticism that I would get in class or from an editing group. It teaches you to be open and it helps you to improve yourself and how you can help others by looking for the strengths. The strengths, edits and opportunities—I feel that that’s a really strong structure because once you start with the strengths it shows you like, okay, my writing
doesn’t suck, there’s actually some potential in this. And the edits show you from an outside point of view what you don’t see and the opportunities—it’s more positive—because they’re helping you get further, and everyone’s helping each other, so it’s kind of like a little community in your editing group and in the class.

Jessica uses the word “process” to speak to the central principle she takes away from taking several writing courses, including mine. She speaks of process both in the micro, in terms of revising a draft, and in the macro, as a learning curve over the course of completing several writing courses. It is noteworthy that she mentions the goal of publication as central to the writing process. I fathom that like any professional writer she knows not all of her writing is publication worthy, therefore some writing will be writing for learning, writing for unwinding even, writing for problem solving, writing for health benefits—and so on. It sounds to me that Jessica has made writing a way of being, at least more so than ever before in her life, and that the milieu of being part of a writing community has helped her as a writer mature. Jessica’s mention of her ability to take criticism is significant, as the community of practice she has joined has helped this happen. A setting of positiveness for burgeoning adult writers is not something practiced everywhere. Carl Leggo (2000) writes of his workshopping experience with Rudy Wiebe at the University of Alberta:

In a typical Wiebe class students also read their work, but students attacked instead of supported one another. Wiebe had set the tone in the classes with abrasive and rough criticism, and most students in the class took their lead from him. Each class was conducted like a roast where the goal was to reveal everything that was wrong with the student’s story. While the writer's story was attacked and dissected and ridiculed, the writer was required to sit in silence. Only after the victim had been scourged with verbal whips was he or she given the opportunity to reply, to offer a rebuttal or defense....I recall only too vividly how I wept on the bus returning home on the nights my writing had been discussed in class.

I often tell students I am essentially teaching them revision. This has to do with my philosophy that “writing” is something they teach themselves, something they have prior knowledge of, but may not have been given the opportunity and setting to allow their expression to spring forth. Most students’ impression of revision is of it as a section between arrows on a process diagram.
Teachers emphasize how important revision is, but in my experience of first taking *Expressive Writing* as an undergraduate student, I felt that course was the first I encountered that really made room for real revision to take place, due to the portfolio system of grading. Too often university courses ask for an outline, then perhaps allow for a single draft submission before a final. To my disappointment I found myself in courses at the doctoral level that operated this way. Expressivist pedagogy encourages a cycle of regular revisions before the course’s end, so as to mirror how writing works in the real world. When a student comes to enter into a revision practice this way, truly as a process, there is more going on than the student learning to enact steps. Murray (1982) sees the realization in deeper terms: “The student has to have faith in the evolving draft to be able to see its value. To have faith in the draft means having faith in the self” (p. 30).

The writer invested in bettering their own writing invests a piece of him or herself in the process. Part of this involves a blossoming identity as a writer, and part of this involves seeing writing as an extension of the self, a bettering of a revision as it were as an extension of bettering the self. Even if new writers aren’t conscious of this idea in the language with which I am expressing it, most get the simple concept that investing time and energy into one thing, as opposed to something else, shapes us. A trip to the art gallery, if even short, to see Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work, can add something small, yet enriching to your life. I think of the great amount of time I spent writing up a teaching award application, of how I felt I had given it my all, then learned that another person had won. After investing so much of my heart for so long into teaching I craved recognition. The writing was honest; I did not paint myself as perfect. I was disappointed, but eventually realized that the feedback given to me by the committee was true: I still had things to learn about writing these applications. Investing myself in my writing was not enough. I had to think about how the committee wanted to receive the information I was telling them. But up to the moment when I handed my application in, I’d felt good about it, and confident in myself. The writing and the sense of achievement intertwined, and when the letdown struck I felt that terrible sense that I could only blame myself for not having read the criteria more closely and that I really should have asked someone’s help in going over things before submitting. What I wish to say here is that Murray’s point is easily relatable. An ontology of being through writing, with particular emphasis on the revision process, seems implicit in his remark. It does not make sense
for me that Yagelski deemphasizes the editing process as an important part to creating selfhood, especially when he quotes Mezirow (1991) with regard to emancipatory education:

> Emancipatory education is about more than becoming aware of one’s awareness. Its goal is to help learners move from a simple awareness of their experiencing (how they are perceiving, thinking, judging, feeling, acting – a reflection on process) and beyond this to an awareness of the *reasons* why they experience as they do and to [take] action based upon these insights. (as cited in Yagelski, 2011, p. 134).

The editing process, when done well, can help emancipatory education occur. The student who is ready to learn and grow in their various dimensions will be the ones to benefit in this way. I refer to Jessica as an example. She referred to the learning underneath the editing process she experienced in class: “It teaches you to be open and it helps you to improve yourself and how you can help others by looking for the strengths.” I’m not sure if she meant to say “improve your writing,” but I believe her phrase “improve yourself” is what came out. It rings true to her experience, as she says that she could not have been this open a few years earlier while in high school. So by learning to be vulnerable while gaining confidence and knowledge about writing and the process itself, she has improved herself *and* her ability to help others. This is what she says. She has had insights around her learning and has taken action based on those insights. More than just her self-as-writer has benefitted here: the person as a whole grows from a regular editing process. I assume the way I do it has helped: regular in-class workshopping and peer editing groups that meet outside class time with no direct grades tied to them.

In class, after a student has read a revealing piece, everyone operates as editors. This involves learning the language of editors. We speak of “the narrator” and “the characters”. We speak of scenes “where the kids are playing.” We objectify the textual content in order to talk about the writing as writing. The personal experience in editing becomes objectified, so that we can talk about it *as* writing—yet still to the writer we are discussing a lived experience that belongs to their personhood now encapsulated in a text and now shared with a roomful of supportive fellow learners. For readers, listeners and peer editors this objectification of the writer’s experience—framing it now as a piece of literature-in-progress helps universalize the experience. The writer and editors, now given the chance to be placed in these roles, have the unique opportunity to
come to see that they are not alone, both in the relatable lived experience shared in the process of editing, and in the process of editing itself as a group. Truly, the evolving story lives in the telling of it as much as in the story itself.

Thus the editing process can be therapeutic for both reader and writer in that through the reflection involved in revising, rethinking, and re-visioning the piece, so too others can see their life experience. Allen (1989) calls this revealing the self to the self and to the self to others. The piece of writing in a certain sense becomes another body in the room. The underlying emancipatory education message is that the writing is in flux, as the self is. Both can be endlessly improved upon. Making writing a part of one’s life is an act that can be boundless. Writing alongside others in community, and helping writers find the right words to articulate the inarticulate segments of their experience is, as Elbow (2000) puts it, “learning to listen more carefully to what I haven’t yet managed to get into words” (p. 284). He writes that paying attention to the inarticulate—not just paying attention, but respecting the inarticulate he seems to be saying—helps us to grow as writers. I have seen these types of moments unfold positively in group editing settings my entire teaching career. The points I have just made, along with Jessica’s reflection about writing as a process, support my perspective that an ontological theory of writing should consider the entire writing process as shaping the self, not placing as Yagelski does, the actual act of writing above all others in achieving this.

6.2 The Research Challenge

In broadening an ontological theory of writing for ecological understanding, it is important to speak not only of environmentally-focused creative nonfiction, as I have assigned research-based journalistic pieces. Two challenges I have faced with students are introducing them to research-based writing and to the topic of the environment. Jessica and Waffa had taken writing courses, but these courses were in creative nonfiction. They both told me they had encountered journalistic research-based writing for the first time in my environment course. While Waffa said she had little difficulty with the newness of this task, I consider her experience rare. When Jessica speaks of the research component, she conveys what I consider a much more common sentiment:
I found it a little more difficult because it was the first kind of research writing class that I chose. To be honest, I had tried to avoid the research classes, but I wanted something to fit in my schedule—but now I think I want to take more of those. Because—it’s interesting—in the future I’m pretty sure I’m going to have to learn how to integrate research into my writing. It was a good icebreaker but I really just found it difficult because the articles I chose were a little bit complicated.

What is reassuring here is that Jessica overcame her fear of taking research-based writing courses. What she speaks to is the difficulty of having to learn the language of research articles. Waffa shared similar thoughts, for when I mentioned research-based writing, Waffa immediately spoke of academic writing:

I think that the way that academic writing is now, it’s just so stringent. Like you have to use this format and it has to be like this and you lose marks if this is missing. I guess it works well for those that have been in that field for many years and they know all the rules and they have the jargon—they know it well—but for someone who just wanted to learn more about a subject it’s very hard, almost impossible.

Her comments exhibit a mindset of tedium around tackling writing conventions that belong to a discourse community foreign to her. In order for one to simply learn something about a subject by writing, the learning of the expected conventions can overshadow the learning of the content of the inquiry, dampening the drive to know and discover. Scientific discourse communities use discourse its participants can speak and agree upon. Naturally, this world is intimidating for students, who remain outsiders. Waffa continues:

I don’t know what the purpose of having such heavy writing, where you have to use words that only other sociologists can understand...unless the readers are just sociologists. That makes sense....But if the purpose is to have this study or research method benefit society, then it’s better if we can use tools that we learn in this program.

Waffa is making the point a good science journalist might make, which is that academic findings can be transmitted in lay language, while aiming to transmit the amazingness of those findings. She locates the purpose of research and science journalism as benefiting society. Waffa’s comment places the mission of her practice beyond her own self-interest, and this becomes her
purpose in tackling the discourse of a community to which she does not feel she belongs. Bizzell (1994) writes of the danger inherent in the message academic writing can carry in the academy: “It is as if we can overrule the students’ right to their own language only if we can somehow prove that ‘our’ language—the language of academic discourse—deserves its ascendancy” (p. 130). The academy is the habitat to academic discourse, a discourse owned and used by those in power within the academy, so if students grow to feel alienated and confused by it and threatened by it, we should not be surprised. The challenge to teaching research-based writing in this milieu is to help students find purpose in their research quest and to use their own voices in telling research-based stories. Waffa begins her piece, “Dance of the Peacock”, as such:

In the process of selecting a mate the peacock will fan out his teal and purple tail of two-hundred and fifty feathers. The peacock begins the dance to attract the peahen (female peacock). The peacock struts forward and backward and frolics from the left foot to the right. Occasionally, the peacock will shiver and shake its feathers creating a dazzling effect to the eye.

The language is hers. It may be that Waffa was able to do what Vygotsky (1978) calls “internalization”—as Jerome Bruner (2002) summarizes: “to characterize how we take over and emulate established ways of talking and telling, and then make them our own” (p. 98). She may have decided to start the science piece with a narrative image because I stressed the benefits of doing so. Yet, the language—all the micro decisions made for the reader’s engagement—belongs here to the writer. Elbow (1991) reminds us that “Often the best test of whether a student understands something is if she can translate it out of the discourse of the textbook and the discipline into everyday, experiential, anecdotal terms” (p. 98). He cautions though, that academic discourse can sometimes be used to mask genuine understanding of a concept. A student (or academic) might be able to lay out a principle, says Elbow, but not be able to write a story of what happens in a room on account of that principle, or what might happen in that same room without it. This kind of writing pushes the writer’s ability beyond merely translating jargon and transcending conventions, it sets up the writer to display working knowledge of a concept, to become an illustrator of a prototype concept with words. His point is that the good writer brings to research-based writing skills that the researchers may themselves lack. This is an important point to make to students, and it is one I stress to non-science students in terms of the strengths they bring to the classroom. Elbow states that the goal of any good writing should be to have a
certain inviting feel to it, one that exudes confidence. Yet he concedes that he too, when writing as an academic, feels wary of himself.

Have you ever noticed that when we write articles or books as academics, we often have the same feeling that students have when they turn in papers: “Is this okay? Will you accept this?” But damn it, I want my first year students to be saying in their writing, “Listen to me, I have something to tell you,”—not “Is this okay? Will you accept this?” (1995, p. 382)

If writing as a way of being is to include research-based writing, it is necessary for students to craft a sense of purpose. Waffa seems to have done this. She has taken on the role of writer as educator, added this self to the selves at work when she writes and revises. As Bizzell (1994) notes, in learning new discourse conventions students are learning a new world view, one distant from their own. Educators must address this distance, if we want students to become what Bizzell calls “bicultural” (p. 169)—able to see the academic worldview while at the same time not losing their own worldview.

6.3 The Environment Challenge

How do I set the stage so that students connect the topic of environment to their lives? This is a challenge I have faced with science and non-science, environment and non-environment students alike. I identify with Stephen Fishman, speaking here to Lucille P. McCarthy:

“It’s a highwire act,” Fishman told me, and I feel like I’m being pulled in two directions, my professors from graduate school whispering in one ear, “Initiate ’em into philosophy with a capital P, with close critical analysis of canonic texts.” In my other ear is sounding my own conviction based on twenty-five years of teaching: students don’t learn very well unless they have an emotional connection. If they cannot relate their own lives to philosophy, their familiar languages to the new one, the papers they write will be no more than products of a mind game. They won’t be their own, and they won’t help them live their lives. (Fishman & McCarthy, 1992, p. 654)
Elbow calls the question of relevance in teaching one that “cuts right to the heart of good pedagogy” (p. 295). The topic of environment is unique in that it is called by many thinkers the most pressing issue of our times. That said, environmental issues are complex. Climate change occurs on a gradual, generational pace, often invisibly. Teaching climate change is compounded by the fact that more and more of us live in cities and have had few experiences with the natural world. Richard Louv (2008) begins his book, *Nature Deficit Disorder*: “A kid today can likely tell you about the Amazon rain forest—but not about the last time he or she explored the woods in solitude, or lay in a field listening to the wind and watching the clouds move” (p. 2). He takes this further, stating that:

> Our society is teaching young people to avoid direct experiences in nature. That lesson is delivered in schools, families, even organizations devoted to the outdoors, and codified into the legal and regulatory structures of many of our communities. Our institutions, urban/suburban design, and cultural attitudes unconsciously associate nature with doom—while disassociating the outdoors from joy and solitude. (p. 2)

While this view may not be endorsed by everyone, I know for certain that the school board that once employed my mother as an outdoor education teacher has closed several schools, and that overnight trips are a thing of the past. I think we can all agree that in living the urban lifestyle it takes extra work to set aside moments for time in nature. Environmental historian J. B. MacKinnon (2013) puts this reality in perspective. He points to what he calls the shifting baseline syndrome affecting us.

> We are an incredibly adaptable species. Whether or not we notice a change in our circumstances, the change itself is real, and we quickly adapt to the new conditions. Once we’ve done so, there is little point in holding on to memories of how things used to be. The shifting baseline syndrome applies as much to the way we forget what houses cost ten years ago or fail to notice that fast-food portion sizes have tripled since the 1970s as it does to the natural world. (p. 22)

The adapt-and-forget pattern is amplified by modern life. If you, like me, are a city dweller, then you’re unlikely to suffer change blindness to shifts in the natural world, because you’re not there to witness those shifts, and you don’t suffer much environmental amnesia, either, because you don’t have many memories of nature in the first place. For
you, the baselines that shift will be mainly urban and technological ones; your generation will accept as normal that which your parents struggle to adapt to, and your children will carry forward little memory of the city as you knew it. (p. 23)

It becomes more difficult to care about environmental issues if our baseline keeps shifting. One part of my approach toward this challenge has been to begin a research-based class by assigning an environmental autobiography piece. Once again, I tell students that the piece may just as well show their own disconnect with nature, or a time when nature was badly or superficially taught—as opposed to expecting them to show up with a wealth of positive, deep, environmental learning. I work hard with students to find an environmental moment in their lives from which to draw upon, even if they tell me they have no such moment. Part of the learning is to write about a time simply when the natural world came into the fore—and this could be through talking about it just as much as experiencing it. It could be a profile of a person who embodies something about the natural world just as it could be a student’s direct experience. One student wrote a great piece about her elderly aunt who lived with a low carbon footprint because that was the way she had learned to live. She took us through all the ways she saved water and electricity by, for instance, hang drying her clothes.

I agree with Constance Russell (1999), who argues that “Part of the problem, I think, is that nature experience is often seen to automatically contribute to environmental awareness, commitment, and action” (p. 124). In other words, we cannot assume as environmental educators that by giving students experiences in nature we are compelling any sort of deep learning experience. Another aspect of my current pedagogy is to ask students to conduct a profile interview with someone with an environmental project, done face-to-face if possible. The interview serves as a sort of environmental experience—primary if done in the project’s setting, and secondarily done through the environmental stories told by the interview subject. Given that they had done these two assignments, as well as assignments based on academic journals, I asked Waffa and Jessica to consider whether there was one greater takeaway from the course, a “writing” (process-based) takeaway or an environmental (theme-based) takeaway. Jessica replied:

A little bit of both, I guess. For the interview... I actually did learn a lot about what the person did as an environmental consultant. So it teaches you self-learning too, but it also
teaches you how to integrate information you don’t know into a piece. It’s good for curiosity. You’re always going to run into things that you don’t know about, that you’re going to have to learn about....What good would it be to stay in our comfort zones if we just stuck to everything that we knew? Because it’s something that’s definitely out of my range. Like, I never thought that I would take the environment course. It just happened to fit in the schedule, so...It’s because of that course that it’s encouraging me to take more research courses, which I’ve kind of been running away from.

Her comment on self-learning stands out, though she does not define this term. She mentions the writing challenges as being good learning experiences. With Jessica, I do not see evidence of environmental learning beyond the content of the interview—certainly no call to action occurred based on her carrying out the assignment. However, I am pleased that her greatest takeaway was overcoming a fear of research-based writing. Her line of action, to take more research-based courses, is a good outcome, but I do not wish to portray her experience as typical. Jessica visited me a great deal during office hours and we worked hard on her overcoming her challenges.

Waffa responded to my question as follows:

I think with the interview piece I really wanted to learn about the environment aspect versus how will I write an interview, I guess. But for the first two [environmental autobiography] pieces we did that was in narrative, I learned a lot about writing and writing about nature and environment, which I never thought about before. And I thought that was really interesting. It kind of opened up places for me to write. I loved writing those two pieces....Just because you never think....Nature’s in every kind writing that you do, but to focus on it was really nice, so in the first two pieces I really learned a lot about myself as a writer and writing for environment and nature, but for the interview piece I was actually more interested in learning about the environment aspect.

The takeaway can be threefold: (1) learning about environment; (2) learning about writing; and (3) learning about the self. There is much I do not know about Waffa that might have served her in preparing her to having a good learning experience. Can I say that ecological understanding occurred? If so, based on these limited comments, ecological understanding certainly seems intertwined with the process of writing. What I am hearing from Waffa and Jessica is that having had the opportunity to write on a theme involved herself as an emerging writer, her self engaged
with the theme of environment, and the self as a whole person. Waffa’s autobiographical narrative was about Eid ul-Adha, a Muslim holiday. In it, as a young girl, she cannot bear to eat the goat slaughtered for the occasion. It was in this piece that she placed details of her culture, family, and neighborhood overseas.

![Figure 6.1 The Three Selves](image)

The three selves: the whole person, the emerging writer, the writer engaged with a theme, which in this case is environment.

### 6.4 Toward an Ecological Pedagogy of Writing

Ecological understanding is an awareness of the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it. I will now return to the main questions that have guided my inquiry: How do narrative ways of teaching and learning support ecological understanding in adult learners? How can writing serve as a learning response to environmental and ecological issues? My goal here is to set out what an ecological pedagogy of writing as a way of being might look like in practice. My focus thus far has been my own practice, primarily on the use of reflective assignments. In the research-based course I teach, I begin with an assignment that asks students to write a story about an environmental experience. The experience need not be cliché, in that a one-on-one moment with nature saves the day. It can be negative. One purpose of the assignment is to situate
students’ life experience in the course right away, giving students the opportunity to have something meaningful to say about how the topic of environment touches their lives even before they have decided on a research topic. For the duration of the course students’ writing bases on traditional, formal research. The creative nonfiction piece builds upon students’ prior learning, since by taking the environment course they will have completed the Expressive Writing prerequisite, giving them experience writing narratives. This fact serves another purpose, which is to get students writing as soon as possible, something I believe a writing course should do, so as to initiate a sustaining momentum. Teaching this piece in my context involves reviewing how good narratives work, writing for an audience, providing examples of narratives done by former students, warning about writing clichéd stories, explaining what I mean by nature/environment/ecology and emphasizing that the piece should let us into the life of one or more characters and also be place-based. I also provide guidance in topic selection. My belief is that every student has had some kind of environmental experience, even if they initially believe they have not. I often remind them to think of a story in terms of a person, a character that somehow makes them think in some way of environmentalism. In working with many classes, I have yet to encounter a student I have been unable to help find some environmental moment from their lives to write a narrative on.

The creative nonfiction assignment invites students into the learning setting as whole people by valuing the life experiences they bring to a topic area. As stated earlier, Brown (2000) notes the wealth of lived experience adults bring to a learning situation as good reason adult educators over decades have called for the recognition and valuing of this experience. When narrative writing serves as the representation of that experience and the product of that learning, Clark and Rossiter (2008) call this narrative learning in adulthood. Newkirk (1997) says of Murray’s (1989) passage where he lays out his rationale as to why he writes—“to discover what I know that I didn’t know” (p. 47) and “to contradict my most certain beliefs”—that writing in this way is essentially an invitation to construct the self in a state of “suspended conclusion.” For me, Murray’s words gets at the heart of Yagelski’s (2011) goal of teaching writing as a way of being. Murray’s and Yagelski both say that we must teach writing true to how we see it operating in the world and with ourselves, specifically in the notion that what we write, the product of the act of writing, is not fully predetermined in thought. In a general way, what this might look like in practice might involve not focusing solely on linguistic or grammatical mastery, for this can keep
the instruction tasked on writing as a solely cognitive activity. Again, this is a subtle message of writing instruction, received often unconsciously and throughout our educational upbringings. Once again, Eakin (1999), reminds us that the self is “less as an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process” (p. x), and this view of the self in motion is what I believe can underlie good pedagogical practices. Turning a mainstream pedagogy around towards healing what Yagelski calls the Cartesian mind/body split can involve a great deal, especially when the topic is environmental writing.

I interviewed two environmental writing educators on their practices. Sonnet L’Abbé taught creative writing and poetry at The University of British Columbia’s Okanagan campus. One of her research areas is plant sentience. With her students, L’Abbé created The Plant Intelligence Project. She described it as a faux science fair. She wanted students’ writing to involve representations of plants, or for them to conduct an experiment with plants that they write up or present. She insisted the writing project had to involve a live plant, and also that students interview people. The project presented student work online and in a public event during the university’s research week. She has also worked with students to write poetry collaboratively online through platforms such as Twitter. As well, she has taken her class to visit the greenhouse to interact with a biologist about various research projects. L’Abbé (personal communication, reflects:

> For the creative writers, the pushing of the envelope was to make them see that they are in a continuum with scientists, as far as representing the world around them. It’s not one or the other....I hope it allowed them to see the disciplinary constructs around what counts as science writing and what counts as art—and what that means to write the same sentence in the frame of science or the same in the frame of poetry.

L’Abbé is one of a growing number of Canadian eco poets, including other contemporaries such as Rita Wong, whose writing and teaching involve creating dialogues around environmental issues through poetic inquiry. The idea of working toward new writers seeing themselves in a continuum with scientists is laudable in its aim to help students see how language exists along disciplines, with the implicit message that they are capable of mastering dialogue in more than one area.
Rick Van Noy teaches a variety of genres at Radford University in Virginia. Sometimes when he teaches literature and the environment he asks students to start with an essay about a place and their experience of a place. Then, he asks them to imagine what would happen if that place were threatened. Van Noy (personal communication, March 17, 2015) says writing at a basic level provides information, and place-based writing provides information that we might not have known about a particular place. However, he tells his students “It’s also more than that. It provokes an image-making faculty. We start to imagine a depth to certain places that we may not have seen before.” Place-based writing shows up in his other classes as well:

One thing I have them do in creative nonfiction is visit the nearby river three different times. It’s still summer when they first start it, then it’s winter when they end it and they’re paying attention to the passing of time. I try to have them braid that into another essay. I have them look for an image or theme in the pieces of their journals. They see roots of a tree, then the next section has them thinking about their own roots. So they’re thinking about a metaphor or an image. Or they’re thinking about the river and the current, and the passing of time.

Getting students outside is central to Van Noy’s pedagogy, as he has practiced this with his own children. He believes “You’re not going to raise a generation of kids to care about the environment unless you get them involved in it. And I think that writing is a stage after they’ve swam in the river or the lake or wherever, hiked the woods—then there can be that reflection that they’re not going to do when they’re ten, but when they’re eighteen, twenty.” In other words, adulthood provides a reflexive vantage point that should be given an opportunity to be captured.

By getting students outside, Van Noy wants students to pay attention. His place writing assignments are an intervention of sorts. It provides a reason for students to sit, look, notice, and reflect. Says Van Noy:

I want to get them connected to the place they come from, and noticing things that surprises them. And I think that’s part of what a good essay is anyway: some sense of what’s surprising and what’s changed. That’s what I don’t want to lose when I teach them writing—I still want them writing good essays. I’m not trying to make them, I don’t know, environmental soldiers or robots or something like that.
Good writing is the point. We are teaching writing. If environmental awareness happens or a revisioning of the self, great. I cannot go into a class hoping to sway anyone toward an environmental ethic. This is folly. Russell (1999) makes the point that despite the prevalent focus in environmental education on giving students nature experiences, you cannot assume any kind of linear progression of their care, commitment and action following from those experiences. I go in with the agenda of students learning to care for their writing and taking this care and knowledge and applying it to other writing situations in their lives. I too know that the writing experiences I give students are but one of many, and that their improvement depends on many factors such as their readiness to learn, strengths, interests, and learning styles. What I do know is that reflexivity occurs naturally as part of the writing process. The act of writing up an experience begins this process. This is Eisner’s (2002) notion of inscription, wherein an image or idea gets preserved in a durable form. Writing provides a venue and a moment for reflexivity to occur. Bruner (1990, p. 138), Luce-Kapler (2004, p. 45), Murray (1982, p. 3) and others have noted this. My stance is that this reflexivity extends from the act of writing—where Yagelski (2011) leaves it—across the span of the writing process as a whole, particularly during revision done with co-editors. “Editing,” writes Eisner, “is the process of working on inscriptions so they achieve the quality, the precision, and the power their creator desires” (p. 6). Just as the piece develops in these process moments, so does the reflective writer. The opportunity to write and revise provides the person the potential to develop as well. Likewise, the form and content of the texts edited together can potentially seep into their personhood.

As well, that while I agree with Yagelski in that textual production should not be the sole reason writing is taught, and as any writer will tell you, writing well means spinning a great deal of yarn that will never be used in the garment. The standard of high quality writing I define in the grading information sections of my syllabi is final work that is publication-worthy. Peer models form an important cornerstone of my pedagogy. Most writing classrooms employ textual models. Models exist to suggest possibilities and convey standards. Models have helped the university students I’ve taught learn to write creative nonfiction and research-driven narrative journalism. One of the basic needs of new writers is to use language that belongs to them and to find their voice. Bizzell (1994), however, argues that learning to write within the context of the academy can affect students’ perceived right to their own voices. Allen (2002) claims that this tension can lead students to constructing false versions of themselves on the page. Elbow (2000, p. 292)
insists that reading has been given primacy over writing in higher education, and that doing so often locates authority away from the student, keeping it “entirely in the teacher or institution or great figure.” Van Manen (1998, p. 130) equates “true writing” with exercising authority: “the power that authors and gives shape to our personal being.” This echoes the theories of other adult educators mentioned earlier, including Randall (1996) and Clark and Rossiter (2008).

6.5 Peer Models

Many writing classrooms rely upon what Allen (1989) terms “masterpiece models.” Extraordinary works can intimidate new writers by conveying unattainable goals. Their presence often emphasizes the vast distance between esteemed published author and new writer. The master belongs to a different community of writers than the novice. In order to counteract these problems, the innovation I have employed is to rely upon peer model texts in courses I teach comprised of new writers. After course completion I select representative samples of student-authored work the class has agreed upon as being high quality and publish it in book form for use in future classes. Our criteria reflects writing virtues we have discussed: economy, directness, detail, and voice.

Peer model texts differ from conventional texts in that they reflect the community to which students belong. They contain moments of students’ lives, communities, cultures, languages, identities, struggles with writing, and modes of expression. One student, Canya, called the models cross-categorical: “It was sort of a textbook, but it wasn’t a textbook that limited you to specific definitions.” In Samantha’s words: “It was written by us, for us. I really liked that.”

Students learn to write hearing the voices and subject matter of students who literally sat in their seats and who faced the same task of filling a void with self-expression. Through its use and participation in it, the text extends the community of new writers from past to present.

One student’s focus on identification in evaluating a text I designed for use in an upper-level thematic course suggests him coming to a community of practice. In Robert’s words: “I do like that you can identify with the students. [The text] also lets you kind of see where you should be at. It gives you an idea content-wise, style-wise, where the expectations are.” Wenger (1998)
claims that individuals seeing themselves within these communities come to see learning in relation to community.

Students analyze peer models by conducting rhetorical analyses and discussing them. I localize the innovation when I teach upper-year thematic courses by augmenting peer models with professional works. Advanced students respond well to this blending. At this level, having work slightly beyond reach impresses them. Elbow (2000, p. 380) emphasizes that “if I want them to see themselves as writers, we should primarily publish and read their own writing.” For Elbow (1993), this practice returns authority for meaning-making to the student. For Allen (2000, p. 91), peer models make clear that students “are indeed free and responsible for what they produce.” Canya commented on the fact that although I conveyed my expectations in lectures and through the use of peer models, I did not set them out in writing. “I notice that in a lot of courses where they go really detailed on the expectations, it boxes you in and you trap yourself because you want to follow everything exactly. But with this there was sort of a buildup. We knew what we had to do—to have that final, perfect product—but we were not boxed in on how to get there.”

From my experience, peer model texts help in both of the challenges I have outlined: the research challenge and the challenge of environment as relevant to students’ lives. They not only display standards, but can help invite students into the writing process in conveying the message that other students similar to them came before them and have faced similar challenges. Peer models help to place the goal of new writers writing well within realistic reach.

6.6 Process Reflection

Measuring awareness of ecological understanding presents challenges. The problem with any critical literary analysis is that it focuses on the self constructed through writing. We cannot easily extrapolate that self with the true self of the writer. It might be true that the writer took great care to honestly portray their awareness, but we will never know for certain if their doing so and saying so is not a charade. We get glimpses. The reader’s level of knowledge and degree of interpretation combine to so that we read texts in ways that illuminate what we bring to them. This is Louise Rosenblatt’s (1978) “compenetration” or coming-together of reader and text (p.
In this thesis apparatus I am a particular writer, reader, and researcher. These are my students and I am in sense evaluating my teaching through their progress. I may be setting myself up to see what I want to see, to find what I unconsciously expect or hope to find. I am prepared to recognize the notion that the teacher-researcher is prone to want to see transformation by his or her teaching, and I am no exception. I need to try to be aware of the extent to which I have internalized the ethos of an expressivist/process pedagogy and the context in which students write.

Newkirk (2004) raises some concerns about these issues. In his article, The Dogma of Transformation, he begins by citing Walter Ong, who argues that no form of personal expression, “not even the diary...exists outside the bounds of conventions or situational expectations” (p. 252). What we write—and perhaps who we are—is always bound in ‘other’ and ‘environment’. Newkirk examined students’ writing from the 1930s and concluded that transformation was not a goal of the instructors of the time. He argues that in present times student writers “are consistently ‘invited’ to view their self-development as a series of pivotal moments that result in qualitative changes in their value systems or identities” (p. 264). Newkirk rightly makes the point that as instructors we tend to consider transformation as emblematic of what constitutes good writing. I try to neither follow nor prescribe any structural formula, such as rising action, climax, and falling action, and by downplaying this clichéd arrangement I have had great success with writers such as Ma who simply portray life as it is in snapshots. I often ask students to rewrite a piece if it’s not “interesting” enough, and then unpack that term with them. But “interesting” need not mean a pivotal moment of transformation occurring within a character. Newkirk is right to point out that we get what we ask for as writing instructors, and within that work we look for what we want to see, and that transformation is the soup du jour.

This happens in life, too. Based on feedback from a committee member for the award I didn’t win, I got the sense that she wanted a story, a before and after: my teaching was like this in the old days, and now I’m renewed and it’s so much better. It’s not as simple as that, I thought. But the committee rewarded the applicant who delivered the story told in the manner it wanted to hear it. In Newkirk’s terminology, there is a “performance of self” on the part of the student and, I would add, a “performance of self” on the part of the teacher. This is why good teachers are reflexive practitioners, and this is what I have tried to do more than any one thing in this thesis.
Another of Newkirk’s points struck me. He characterizes the experience of the writing student to be often considered by the writing teacher as them entering class “embedded, often happily, in an inimical value system-they operate out of ‘false consciousness’- from which critical reading and dialogue will rescue them” (p. 266). To this I would add ‘writing’. Again, I am guilty of this. I do hold writing as a positive way for the professional and personal lives of my students to move forward. I do hope that after the course reading and writing will enter their lives a bit more, no matter their learning style or level of ability. But Newkirk is right to say that if I were lock myself into seeing students’ value systems as being off from the start, I risk not being able to see the places in which our values agree.

Things are more complex than they seem. There are always methodological imperfections. Potential bias aside, I can make the case as follows: Why wouldn’t I turn to what my students wrote in my pursuit of understanding them and therefore teaching them more effectively? My approach in this work has been to incorporate stories of my own teaching and life experience when appropriate, as a part of the methodology. I am discovering what I know by writing. Leaving my experience out—that lack—would say something about me as a teacher-researcher. Since I teach students to write based upon their life experiences and observations, my research methodology stays true to the intent of my pedagogy at every step. Since in my course the theme of environment is self-taught through self-guided research and writing, the depth of inquiry depends upon a student’s motivation, curiosity, confidence, and readiness—and all of these depend in turn on the learning atmosphere set by the teacher. Experienced, caring teachers know this and students reflect it back. Lad Tobin (1993) uses Freudian term, countertransference, to speak of the unconscious ways in which students and teachers respond to one another, and how this affects their writing relationships, which are built inside and outside the classroom. In Tobin’s words, countertransference is “our unconscious responses to our students or, more significantly, our unconscious responses to their unconscious responses to us” (p. 32).

The qualitative data here comes from a small sample of students in particular courses in a particular program at a particular time. The students’ comments allow me to hear their views outside and beyond the course, and aid me in reshaping it. Ecological understanding is still—and perhaps will always be—difficult or impossible to pin down. Pinning it down then, is perhaps not what I have done. I have explored around the edges of understanding, and with great luck coming across the odd fresh footprint in the country road after rainfall. Derrick Jensen’s (2004b)
words come to mind: “The task we all face as human beings...is to find and become who we are. The task teachers face is to find their own way of teaching, one that manifests who they are” (p. 144). My journey continues then, in as much for seeking ways to teach ecological understanding as it does for discovering who I am and what I can offer as a teacher.

6.7 Seven Principles for Teaching Writing for Ecological Understanding

Ecological understanding can be thought of as an awareness of the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it. This last section represents the culmination of this research effort: a list of seven principles meant to be informative, not prescriptive, for those engaged in teaching writing for ecological understanding. Intended not as a ‘how-to’, but rather as a principled guide based upon teaching experience and the research herein with regard to adult learning that has allowed me to think deeply about writing pedagogy.

1. First-person, place-based creative nonfiction (and other types of creative writing) can serve as an excellent entry point for students into the topic of the environment.

Guy Allen (2000) speaks of the void in undergraduate education—the lack of something precious in students’ postsecondary educational experiences that they need and want in yet do not recognize it until they see it. Speaking of the course selection she faced, my student, Jessica, said: “There really isn’t a class where you get an opportunity to express yourself that much.” Then she discovered the creative nonfiction course I taught. She reflected upon encountering the true stories written by others who had sat in the same classroom seats: “Simplicity is what caught me. I’m so used to reading academic scholarly journals and all that stuff, it’s nice to read something condensed and something that’s relatable. The course is meaningful to your life.”
Creative nonfiction provides one opportunity for that void to be filled. The form invites adult learners to bring their observations and lived experiences into a process that requires discipline, creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving—while improving one’s writing and practicing what it means to function as a writer. David A. Kolb (1984) writes that, “The simple perception of experience is not sufficient for learning; something must be done with it” (p. 42). Creative nonfiction provides a mode of representation that can help adult learners sort out their preconceptions, ambivalence, knowledge and lack of knowledge with the topic of the environment. The topic of the environment, for those not close to it, can be oppressive in its complexity, its immediacy, and its abstractness. Bringing life experiences to the topic of the environment helps learners see themselves. Filling the void genuinely and reflectively helps set the stage for further learning. When adults write up their lives as stories, the purpose can be understood as being one important way to create potentially transformative learning experiences. Research-based writing can continue on this encounter with the self and the topic, with the writing providing a space for the researcher to come to terms with their learning.

It is possible for creative nonfiction prose to meet all four of Buell’s (1995) four criteria to fit into his definition of this type of work being considered an environmental text. Storytelling is powerful, argued by some, including Gottschall (2012) and Gold (2002), to be that which sets the human species apart from other living beings, and as that which has brought about significant evolutionary changes, allowing us to survive and flourish. Swimme and Berry (1992) maintain that the universe is story. There is something inherent to storytelling about finding our place.

The message of environmental action needed by us to evade planetary doom is one we both receive and repress daily. Environmental historian J. B. MacKinnon (2013) writes of the importance of seeing nature: “The issue today is not whether you see heaven in a wildflower, but whether you look at the flower at all” (p. 82). This quote provides purpose enough to teach environmental writing. But more broadly, the practiced act of revealing the self through writing has the potential inhabit a central place in being a reflexive adult learner. It would be a shame to call ourselves educated without having been given the opportunity in a supportive setting to write thoroughly using the knowledge and experience as adults we carry. We are the protagonists of our own lives.
We are also our own antagonists. Honest, reflective creative writing can help us locate ourselves to ourselves and others, and awaken us to the places we inhabit and to how those places inhabit our lives. Writing as a potential way forward must be noticed as a way forward. The issue today is also not whether or not students get to see heaven in being given a chance to write personally, but if they are even given the opportunity at all. Undergraduate education in Ontario has been criticized in a recent report for its large class sizes and in providing too little contact between students and faculty (Chiose, 2015). What I have done for hundreds of students is provide them with an experience in which many tell me I am the first professor who knows their name after four or more years at university. What I have done is teach classes topped at 35 students, where communities of practice have formed, and writing has come to be seen not just as a process, but as a social activity. What I have done is to invite students to bring their lived experiences and observations into the classroom and to have the accurate and engaging rendering of those experience form a cornerstone of learning.

I consider myself lucky to have chosen to take an elective creative nonfiction course when studied for my undergraduate degree. The experience pointed me in the direction of becoming a professional writer. When I taught a research-based narrative journalism course called Writing about Environment and Ecology, I wanted to retain a flicker of the freedom I felt by writing in that genre. The same freedom that was later expressed to me as part of the formal research I conducted for this thesis by students such as Rebecca—as memorable, integral, and transformative. By offering creative nonfiction to students I wanted to scaffold students by asking them to write first-person narratives, since as a prerequisite they would have first completed Expressive Writing. A student of my environment course, Waffa, said earlier in this research that until she had been given the opportunity, she had never thought about writing about nature and environment before. She reported: “It kind of opened up places for me to write. I loved writing those two pieces....In the first two pieces I really learned a lot about myself as a writer and writing for environment and nature.” Waffa had first built up some writing experience by taking a few courses. With what she has reported in this research, she appears to be saying that her self in the world as a writer had broadened from being given a new canvas, and by
being given the task of painting words upon it. As a teacher of writing, this is precisely what I aim for.

2. Environmental writing can both celebrate nature while showing the human/non-human disconnect in a way that is not false, contrived, or clichéd.

My analysis in this work showed that Ma’s and Carosi’s prose achieved originality. The writers cared about their writing. They wrote with honesty about genuine lived experience. Rendering their experiences in ways that reflected those experience to the reader became their challenge. Reflecting on his experience in *Writing about Environment and Ecology*, Carosi says: “I voiced myself both on and off the page. There was no ‘way’ to write, only a living truth I could grasp by the activity itself.” My impression of this insight is that Carosi did not need to go through a process of ditching clichéd ideas of what environmental writing might be—he writing sprung from his being ready to use writing to further something that needed furthering inside him at that moment in his life.

It is not easy to distill the complex process of teaching in order to set the stage for successes such as Ma’s and Carosi’s to occur. But I believe it has something to do with seeing the teaching role as being an enabler, with the major educational function being the teacher’s ability to set up an atmosphere that leans as much as possible to allowing breakthroughs to take place. It has something to do with community. My student, Canya, reflects on her experience of what made taking *Expressive Writing* unique:

I think it’s the connections that you make with people, even though you might not see these people ever again—it’s just in that moment—being in that kind of classroom setting, it’s nice instead of being just a number in a room of like three hundred other people that you don’t talk to and you’re all stressed out and freaking out about the same things but you never talk to them about it. Whereas here, I remember coming to class every day and everybody had some issue that
they were talking about, something they were de-stressing about, and it was just such a relaxed environment, which was a really nice change for once.

When people feel part of something positive, they tend to respond in positive ways. Security allows for risk-taking to occur. When students hear, early on, what other students are writing—what risks others have taken—implicit permission to take risks is granted. This is why I begin in-class workshops in the third or fourth class. Hearing the work communicates the standards. Learning to comment on the work’s strengths before any weaknesses reinforces the fact to new writers that their work, no matter how they think of it, has merit. Knowing that the work is in-progress sends the message that writing is a process.

Humour is also key in teaching. Humour not only relaxes students, it makes them want to come to class. I have used humour to show examples of clichéd writing. Another thing I do, since it is narrative I am usually teaching, is to break free of teaching the complication-resolution model many writing teachers rely on.

While Carosi’s work could be said to follow a complication-resolution model with a climax, rising action, and a resolution, Ma’s piece broke free of this model. Her observer stance points us to the realm of the possible. Both were effective in their own ways. Carosi’s participative narrator was essential to his single piece of writing by both showing and skewering the human/non-human disconnect. Both authors wrote from their hearts. Ma’s young observational narrator allowed readers to see the world through her eyes, taking in glimpses of her mother over changing seasons. If the writer cares about what they’re writing about, that care comes through in the writing—no matter the topic. It is not necessary to teach the complication-resolution model in narrative writing. Over the course of their lives students have nonetheless internalized a version of it anyhow. Teaching the model might be misunderstood by new writers as it being essential to good storytelling, thereby disqualifying other potent, less predictable methods of human expression. Some good stories are all about conveying a feeling or meeting a character or a place up-close, rather than following an anticipated path or containing a tangible outcome or resolution. The words a writing teacher speaks amplifies in students’ minds.
As good practitioners we need to take care with what we say and how we say it. The moment we define what a story is, we close doors to what a good story can be.

3. Cultivation of the naïve narrator well serves environmental writing.

The telling is as much the story as the content is the story. One aspect common to both Ma’s and Carosi’s pieces is the presence of the naïve narrator. The effectiveness of this humble, restrained narrator can be shown to students in contrast with a pumped-up narrator that likes to show off. The naïve narrator well serves environmental writing because it helps invite the reader in and helps leave the reader to make up his or her mind on the environmental topic at hand. It establishes the journey with the reader and the writer being on the same page at the start, leaving space to learn together as the journey progresses, ending with an enlightened reader and writer with neither feeling intimidated or condescended to.

The naïve narrator helps establish the credibility of the writer by having the good of the audience at heart. The voice of “the environmentalist” is not necessarily best for generating convincing environmental writing. Righteousness, even expertise (or worse, feigned expertise), can invade the psychic space necessary for a reader to move into. A writer can gain expertise at the same pace as the reader. Michael Pollan (2007) tells writers to begin as a naïf. “It’s a good place to start because it’s a lot closer to where your reader is. Instead of starting as someone who knows the answers, you begin as someone learning about something. That’s a good way to connect with readers.”

The topic of climate change is complex and abstract. It can occur gradually, over generations, often invisibly. People do care about climate change, but the topic often lacks the immediate appeal to self-interest that other issues of the day can. People know of its urgency and its potential direness. Yet the climate change message is science speaking, and because it is science speaking, its interestingness is lost among some of us. The concept of the naïve narrator applies to more than narrative storytelling. The science writer bridges the gap between the culture of science and the wider culture of educated, curious readers. Good journalism that serves to bridge this gap strives to start on the same
page as the reader, that person who would normally not read the academic writing. People need to feel cared for as readers.

My student, Waffa, made the point a good science journalist might make, that academic findings can be transmitted in lay language, while transmitting the amazingness of those findings. She locates the purpose of research and science journalism as benefiting society. Her comment places the mission of her practice beyond her own self-interest, and this becomes her purpose in tackling the discourse of a community to which she does not feel she belongs. Bizzell (1994) writes of the danger inherent in the message academic writing can carry in the academy: “It is as if we can overrule the students’ right to their own language only if we can somehow prove that ‘our’ language—the language of academic discourse—deserves its ascendency” (p. 130).

The academy is the habitat to academic discourse, a discourse owned and used by those in power within the academy, so if students grow to feel alienated and confused by it and threatened by it, we should not be surprised. The challenge to teaching research-based writing in this milieu is to help students find purpose in their research quest and to use their own voices in telling research-based stories. Waffa begins her piece, “Dance of the Peacock”, with an inviting narrative image. It was her voice, and that voice was attractive, and that hook led me as a reader to the science of peacock mating, a topic I had no idea previously how much I could have an interest in.

In this project, I am the naïve narrator. The voice is the journey, shapes the journey, and purposefully invites the reader to pick up a paddle. I do not have all the answers. And because I have never before undertaken a journey on the page such as this, I write as I would like to be read to. The impression of a narrator having all the answers arises from its creator’s insecurity. I am secure in my naïveté. I am more learned now, at the end of this journey, as I expect my readers to be. Naïveté is a word that tends to carry negative baggage. For me naïveté has to do with care: with treading carefully and destroying egotism and remaining open to the unexpected and the counter-intuitive. The opposite, the voice of the all-knower is too prevalent and too unappealing. Impersonal writing removes the learner from the learning.
4. Teach narrative writing in the way it works with readers: by the creation of psychic space that invites readers’ participation.

Another way of saying show, don’t tell is to emphasize the creation of psychic space in texts. Texts with strong psychic space ask readers to understand concepts through pointing to them, rather than directly being told what those concepts are. This participation on the part of the reader and the anticipation of this participation on the part of the writer work together, making the central challenge of writing the text furnishing and unfurnishing the psychic space. This participation is a form of direct engagement with the world through reading and writing. Koerber and Allen (2015) define psychic space as follows:

As readers, we move into that space, we look around, we listen, and we react to what we see and hear there. Good writing gets readers to move into this created space and become co-creators of the meaning in the story. We have to make assessments and conclusions about what’s happening and the intentions of the characters because [the writer] doesn’t make them for us. This involves the reader. (p. 16)

Artists well know the task of creating space in their work to elicit the viewer’s imagination in co-creating meaning. Photojournalist Larry Towell (Nelson, 2014) puts it this way: “I’m looking for images that tell a story, obviously, and things that suggest sometimes what’s going on outside of the frame, not necessarily what is in the frame.” Van Manen (1998) makes a similar observation with regard to how strong writing works. The bulk of my university, community college, and high school educational experiences expected a different kind of writing from me, one that relied on exposition, argumentation, and explanation. The frame was the frame. When I was taught to write in the way that good narrative writing operates—with the reader’s imagination—I developed different writing muscles. I recast the reader-writer relationship for myself in a new way. I see the frame now as more than the frame. Because I had this learning experience, I am a stronger writer. Learning to write with the creation of psychic space is a non-rational pedagogy. Because I learned to write non-rationally, the breadth of my academic learning experience intensified.
Writing to create psychic space is often an act of stripping prose down. Alice Munro (Harron, 1978/2013) puts it this way: “I know when I go over things, I keep taking out and taking out, and perhaps I take out too much. If anything seems to be decoration, I will take it out.” In taking things away, it is important that what is left is strong. This creates economy or muscularity in writing: every word serves a purpose. Psychic space, when combined with other rhetorical tools such as understatement, can produce prose that conveys complex ideas narratively, ideas conveyed with no scent of pretense, ideas completed by the participative, engaged, enlivened reader.

The creation of psychic space can be thought of as a life principle. If you want to ask someone with power for something, or simply convey your point of view so as to be understood, you may consider using this life concept. Rather than instructing the person to traverse your point of view from A to B to C, take them first to A. Take them to A in a significant, visceral way that hints at C, and let them get to B, and eventually to C on their own. Teaching narrative writing from the standpoint of creating psychic space is a valuable experience for adult writers. This research has shown that in Ma’s and Carosi’s environmentally-themed narratives, the psychic space they created helped develop ecological understanding.

I had known and taught the principle of psychic space before I researched it. However, by examining students’ writing within this work I gained a new perspective of it. By looking as closely at student-authored texts as I did here, I witnessed the concept showing me more than I had expected. In Ma’s piece, the psychic space seems to contain underlying questions: *Will I be like Mom when I reach her age? For now, I am reconciling what I am observing through writing, but perhaps later in life I may begin a garden of my own.* Both Ma’s and Carosi’s stories leave us that little bit of space in which we can reflect on our own impingements, for better or worse, upon the natural world. Psychic space is a writing concept that serves environmental narrative writing and can be seen in this study to bring about awareness of Buell’s (1995) third criterion of what makes an environmental text—in this case, human accountability to the environment.

As a teacher, I seek to teach writing with the way that strong writing operates with people forefront in my pedagogy. As a writer, the challenge of furnishing and unfurnishing the
psychic space so as to achieve that near flawless mix of the suggested, the hidden, and the revealed feels like a continual, bottomless well of learning—a challenge that will keep me reading, writing, and learning for decades. In teaching the foundational course have I taught for nearly a decade, *Expressive Writing*, I seek to keep the pedagogy fresh, both for myself and for the changing needs of new writers. I used to introduce the concept of psychic space several classes in. I now jump right into it in Class One. In that class I don’t label it, for it is so central a concept that I don’t want it to be intellectualized away by learners. I let the concept speak before teaching the name of the concept. In Class One, I share my awe of psychic space functioning in a piece of writing I read aloud. The class reaches around for what it is, a concept that can sit in writers’ minds as fuzzy, just as it does at times sit in my mind. Yet when we identify and discuss it, it stands before us, unmistakable.

5. Leave space: In writing and in teaching writing, leave space.

In some of my best teaching moments, I’ve pulled back and left space. You cannot force understanding of anything. New writers need to come to reading and writing on their own terms. The same goes for ecological understanding. My student, Robert, attended the same class as Waffa and Jessica. I asked him about the challenges of teaching writing and he conveyed this concept masterfully:

> I think it’s a very delicate balance when it comes to teaching writing because you cannot tell someone, here’s how to write a sentence, here’s the right way to do this, here’s the right form, here’s the right prose, here’s the right style. You can’t just give them a formula like that tell everyone to use the same style and tell everyone to make a similar piece because that’s not how it works. There’s general principles that make writing better. Those are very good to teach, and you covered a lot of them, but each individual writer has their own style that they eventually come to, and it doesn’t always follow ABC by the book. So I understand that it’s a very delicate balance between the flexibility of how much is “this is how to do it” and [how much is] letting the person try to develop on their own.
I have always known the value of setting goals in life. But the older I get, the more I realize that how you get to a goal and what that final goal actually looks like when you reach it—usually changes. In teaching, I have found that new writers begin with a perception of writing that has emerged from not writing in a system that truly encourages revision. They do not see writing as thinking. I do not expect them to discover, let alone practice ideas such as these in the first while of the courses I teach. I have learned you have to start where they are. As such, space I leave.


Many writing classrooms rely upon what Allen (1989) terms “masterpiece models.” Extraordinary works can intimidate new writers by conveying unattainable goals. Their presence often emphasizes the vast distance between esteemed published author and new writer. The master belongs to a different community of writers than the novice. Peer model texts differ from conventional texts in that they reflect the community to which students belong. As my student, Samantha, reflects on the peer model text in a course: “It was written by us, for us. I really liked that.”

Students learn to write hearing the voices and subject matter of students who literally sat in their seats and who faced the same task of filling a void with self-expression. Through its use and participation in it, the peer model text extends the community of new writers from past to present. Peer models implicitly convey standards. In my student Robert’s words: “I do like that you can identify with the students. [The text] also lets you kind of see where you should be at. It gives you an idea content-wise, style-wise, where the expectations are.”

Another student, Jessica, put it this way: “What [the peer model text] does is it provides examples to the students without being a straight out example of what you’re supposed to do or how it’s supposed to be.” Her words carry implications for the ways in which the writing teacher presents these texts. Peer model texts showcase direct evidence of teaching and learning. One assumes that if the teacher is scouting for high quality student-authored material for publication while teaching, the teacher will work hard to
keep the quality of teaching high enough that publishable pieces can come to fruition from their classroom.

Students can analyze peer models by conducting rhetorical analyses and discussing them. Elbow (2000, p. 380) emphasizes that “If I want them to see themselves as writers, we should primarily publish and read their own writing.” For Elbow (1993), this practice returns authority for meaning-making to the student. For Allen (2000, p. 91), peer models make clear that students “are indeed free and responsible for what they produce.” Teaching writing within an atmosphere conducive to the potential of publication does not imply that all writing assigned in a course should be produced so as to be potentially publishable. Elbow (2000) suggests a mix of low- and high-stakes work. This practice reflects how real writers operate.

7. More than any one thing, the experience of a positive pedagogy stays with students.

Adult learners have much to learn via writing. Yet too often, young or old, these new writers have experienced the act of writing as a bewildering, punitive set of rules disengaged from their own interests and motivations. Often, their experience with the institution of learning has shaped that learning. This concept can operate in a positive, rather than a negative fashion. Setting a positive atmosphere while teaching, throughout the myriad challenges, is where the art of teaching comes in. Create a classroom that is a space for mutual learning, where everyone is there to learn. Keep that learning active and participatory, so that a sense of community invigorates that learning. Show students that you genuinely care about their learning, and that you believe they can meet the high standards of a course. These are all not small things. As Tobin (1993) reminds us: “The written product and the writing process always exist within—and are always shaped by—a particular network of interpersonal relationships” (p. 14).

I practice in-class workshopping, usually beginning in the third or fourth class. The class acts as a board of editors, giving strengths-based feedback, followed by critical yet supportive commentary. Doing this brings the class together. At first I mostly model the
delivery of good, detailed feedback, but soon on students’ participation in giving feedback and the quality of that feedback rise. After our first in-class workshop, students form self-led peer editing groups. These groups meet outside of class time with no grades directly tied to them. Students report to me that these communities of practice provide positive reinforcement, routine, enjoyment, and the kind of learning that can only come from others in the moment facing similar academic tasks. The communities built by these activities not only help students tackle the demanding activity of writing and revising together, it often gives them a memorable, collaborative experience often missing from a good part of their university education.

When we take an ontological view of writing, that it can benefit adult learning as “a way of being in the world,” we need not stop at the potential for self-growth during the act of writing alone, as Yagelski (2011) does. Editing can be taught as an enjoyable, collaborative social act, one which holds potential for continuing to develop the whole self, the self-as-writer, and the self engaged with the topic at hand. The story is always enmeshed with the telling of it. And as my mentor used to say in my early years, “Take great care in what you say to new writers. They’ll remember it when they’re in their sixties, seventies, and beyond.”

6.8 Further Research

This inquiry has shed light on moving towards an ontological theory of writing for ecological understanding. Its completion also raises several questions that may be addressed by further research, both in terms of writing pedagogy in general and writing that focuses on environmental and ecological issues.

6.8.1 Enhancing Methodology for Ecological Understanding

The methodological approach in this work focused on paying attention to students’ voices and to students’ writing. Perhaps the most valuable insights using this approach came from students
whose work I examined and interviewed as well. A refinement on the methodology used in this work is to focus on the work of students I can then interview about their work. This would lessen my involvement in potentially projecting my views on the work itself and the learning. It would strengthen my stance as detached observer. A further refinement may be to ask one set of students to read another’s work in order to consider ecological understanding. It would be interesting to note similarities and differences in authors’ attitudes to their work versus attitudes and opinions of writers at the same level who read the work blind to the author’s name.

6.8.2 The Roots of Ecological Understanding/Developing the Environmental Imagination

I am interested in whether a predisposition towards ecological understanding develops in childhood. Do sufficient positive outdoor experiences growing up correlate with empathy to the natural world. When asked to write about the natural world without these formative experiences, can a writer still write well on the topic? Richard Louv (2008) believes that children, most of whom now across the globe grow up in urban and suburban locales, cannot develop empathy towards the natural world if they are not exposed to it. Rick Van Noy (2015) certainly believes in getting students outside to write as part of his pedagogy. This is an interesting approach, as it perhaps negates the argument that one needs to have an ecological upbringing in order to be an ecological writer. His comment that children have the environmental experiences and then as young adults learn to write about them is pertinent as well. An inquiry of this sort might also draw upon Mitchell Thomashow’s work on ecological imagination (Jenney, 2015) and ecological identity (1995). The research question is: Does a predisposition towards writing for ecological understanding develop in childhood and if so, can it be offset by pedagogy in experiential writing?

6.8.3 Teaching Narrative in the Academy

In the course of this work I have spent considerable time detailing the use of narrative-based writing within the context of an undergraduate program. A writing program that attracts students
who do not all consider becoming writers per se sets it apart from other undergraduate programs that do. Often these programs expect students to know how to write before they arrive, by requiring submission and approval of a portfolio to gain entrance. The writing crisis of universities, in which departments bemoan students’ writing abilities before graduating and employers bemoan them after, has tended to be addressed in North America by a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) strategy. WAC promotes writing instruction by the disciplines, for the disciplines. What WAC strategies tend not to do is focus on nonacademic writing. The assumption is linear: Why teach nonacademic writing if we wish to improve students’ academic writing? What I have observed by teaching in my program for nearly a decade, primarily by what students tell me firsthand, is that writing narrative improves all aspects of their writing, and the experience allows them to consider themselves, for the first time in their lives, as writers. Students tell me their time in the program, after a few and sometimes just one course, their grades in other courses improve. If what my program is doing does this, and if its existence fills an important niche alongside WAC strategies, then researching this in further depth makes sense. Can participation in a single or several professional writing courses improve students’ grades in other courses? If so, how and why? These are complex questions, ones that may require a statistical quantitative approach. This would likely be a longitudinal inquiry requiring proper multi-year funding.

6.8.4 Peer Model Texts

I am interested in mapping out how many writing programs use peer model texts, and how they use them. Are they online? Are they traditional books? My assumption has been that the focus on peer model texts is a unique practice. The Acting Dean of an A-list university’s creative writing program told me that this is the case. I have begun in this work looking into how peer model texts help students to write, and have collected some data. I feel that before I look further into how peer model texts operate, I need to get a sense of whether their uniqueness is more than a hunch. This study might occur in the form of online surveys to writing programs and result in a journal article.
I am also curious in following students who are published in peer model texts to see how the experience affected them. Does this group veer more towards writing-focused careers? Do members of this group develop a degree of confidence around writing that others do not?
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Appendix 1: Oreo by Claudio Carosi

I woke up that morning in time to see the light of the early sun, when it rose orange and weaned away the autumn fog. I didn’t see the fog leave but by the time I had finished pouring a glass of milk and drinking it standing at the kitchen counter it was gone.

As I peeled off my pajamas I sorted through the pile of clothes on the floor next to my bed sheets, which I had kicked off in my sleep. I found my torn and patched blue jeans, reserved for dog-walking and other dirty chores. In its pockets I tucked away a chapstick and a pack of cigarettes.

The living room reflected morning blue and orange from the skylight as I moved through it. Dad lay sprawled across the sofa half-covered in blankets. On the kitchen table calcium and vitamin D lay on a napkin. Mom had already left for work.

In the basement I exchanged house slippers for insulated rubber boots, put on my heavy winter coat and recovered a dirty pair of gardening gloves from the floor. I used the empty Folger’s coffee container to scoop Purina Dog Chow from the 18-kilo bag by the door, and unhooked the retractable dog leash from the wall. A few months earlier dad had attached a body strap to the leash that loops around your chest like a soldier’s ammo belt, so I wore that too.

Oreo poked his head out of his doghouse when he smelled me coming and hurried to the door of his cage. I heard him breathe and slobber as he hopped on his hind legs and pawed up the fencing, making it rattle. Goodmorninggoodmorninggoodmorninggoodmorning. “Yes, yes I’m here,” I said. I upped the latch and slipped my hand into the cage to grab his collar. “Pooed in your cage, I see?” I let the door open and held him down as he looked up and jumped until I finally got him on the leash.

The grey of Oreo’s fur looked more silver in the morning light. Contrasted with his brown speckles, it looked very showy. I grabbed the floppy skin behind his neck and shook it and watched his ears like big heavy leaves flop against his head. As I let go of his collar I jumped away, but he didn’t jump.
Using the poo shovel I relocated Oreo’s mess to the farthest end of the yard, under the cedar hedging. When I was younger the hedging was thick and rich and dark green. As I grew older it thinned. The deer loved to chew at it in the winter and the weeds managed to tangle themselves into its space. Now you can see through empty patches, across to the neighbours’ lot and onto The Gore Road where cars speed because someone always steals the 50 km/h sign. Late at night I hear the loud engines of modified cars zipping across.

“Oreo!” I spouted. He tiptoed along the hedgerow gliding his nose over the dirt through spiny weeds and vines. The foliage parted against his head as he buried his floppy muzzle into a straw-like thicket. What’s that? What’s that? What’s that? I waited. It was nothing.

Whenever he walked on too far I’d jerk the leash back. He’d stop until I caught up or got close enough and then do it again. Always at the end of his leash, Oreo walks me. How cold must he feel on frosty November mornings when I can see my breath? He’s not that furry, but he has enough, I think.

That’s what I thought about that morning. Not the fight I had with mom last night, or that dad confiscated my Mickey of Wiser’s and there was no more Alyssa and I. I didn’t consider any of that, that morning. I just watched Oreo take me behind the shed in the corner of the lot like he always does. The ground quickly grew from grass to mud as we turned the corner and reached the hole in the fence. Oreo likes the mud, loves the mud. He could walk along the drier sides of the path but he stays right in the middle because he likes to paint himself black. “Get out of there!” I pulled his leash. I always stay on the sides.

Oreo vacuumed across the mud and through the hole in the hedgerow. I followed him through, ducking under the cedar ceiling and taking short steps in the wet slime that sucked at my feet. I kept the leash short in case he pulled as the path narrowed. He had stopped though, posing statuesque with his front paws resting on a mound of dried clay and rocks we’d dug out from our basement last year to install a water pump. Hard and dry, the mound of clay sits at the edge of the path, just before it descends steeply into a gorge lined with the rotten fallout of dead trees, sharp sticks, wet crumpled leaves and cut grass. A little farther ahead the gorge becomes the river. Oreo stared over it into the trees on the other side.
The sun by then had risen fully naked and came at me in blades through the branches. I slipped off my right glove and my hand felt the wet chill of the morning as I fumbled with my cigarette pack. I leaned in a little and rubbed Oreo’s ribcage. His ears teepeed, and his hind horseish legs looked solid and strained with his white-tipped tail straight in line with his spine. He looked busy. “Sorry to disturb you,” I said.

The river trickled below and I drummed around in my pockets for a lump. No, that’s chapstick. Goddamnit, no lighter. What’s this? From the coat pouch I pulled out a box of Red Bird matches. Dad must’ve left them after wood burning. I don’t know what it is. He’s always cutting and burning wood. He says he’s clearing the dead parts of the trees in the yard.

I slid the matchbox out, plucked one from the pile, levered it against the strike strip and snapped it. I dropped the pieces and watched them roll down into the gorge. I plucked out a new one and it snapped too. I dropped it and plucked yet another one and this time, realizing what I was doing wrong, struck the match across once, twice and then it exploded, right about when I felt Oreo’s strap tighten on my chest and pull me forward.

Not forward, down. Rolling down the ridge. Rolling in the mud clumps and barely sprouted young trees.

Rough.

And dry.

And that light gray species of mud that’s always speckled with rocks. Roots poke out and hang in dirty bunches like strands of witchy hair. I tumbled down through it all and I must’ve knocked my head on something, because when I saw again, lying in the rotten compost by the river at the bottom, it hurt to blink.

“God fucking damnit.” My legs felt chewed all over and damp. I felt my face caked with black peat and mulch in my fists. “God fucking damnit.” I looked up at the clay mound. Oreo pawed along the river bank, always looking nervously across the river. He saw something.
I rested my palms on the prickly heap and struggled myself up, spat, and unzipped my coat. I studied my palms and could not see blood. While washing my face in my sweater, Oreo edged farther along the bank and tightened the strap again into my shoulder.

“God fucking damnit, Oreo!” I ripped at the leash and jerked him backwards. He sat in the mud.

I straggled towards him. My knee hurt and I felt dizzy. He started up down the bank again and I bellowed “Oreo!” once more with a wild whip at his collar. He sat.

Stupid dog! If the gorge were iced over I could’ve died and you would’ve just gone on sniffing and snuffing everything! What if I had hit that mound of clay on my way down? I could’ve lay here bleeding from the head and still you would’ve pulled me down the river bank after some goddamn squirrel! How about you pull me into the river next time? Try it! I’ll sink to the bottom and be a sinker on your line until you paddle to exhaustion and join me at the bottom!

As my arm reached out to Oreo’s head, I stopped. Panting with his tongue out in a dog smile, Oreo looked up at me, then out into the trees again.
Appendix 2: Mom’s Backyard Garden by Yun Ma

The Present

Third Week of August

I stand in the kitchen and the screen door slides open. Mom takes off her gardening shoes, an old pair of running shoes caked in dried dirt. In her hands, she carries a basket of green beans. “Yun, come here.” Mom walks into the kitchen and places the basket on the island counter. “Look. Look.”

I walk over to the island counter and glance down. Strands of flat beans and stubby beans overfill the opening of the basket.

“All organic.” Mom beams.

Every spring, Mom softens the hard winter soil with a rake. When the soil softens, she spreads a thin layer of compost made from vegetable and fruit peels, eggshells and used coffee grounds. She sprinkles the compost onto the surface and mixes it with the soil.

“You have to mix it really well. Mix well and wait two weeks. Then the soil becomes really nice,” Mom says. “You know what’s good about compost? First, you save money. You don’t need to buy topsoil or sheep and cow manure. Second, there’s not a lot of weeds. Third, you can use the kitchen waste. Also, compost uses no pesticide. It helps stop global warming.”

Due to the unusual amount of summer rain this year, the green bean crop Mom grows in row one and row two continues to provide our family with various green bean dishes for dinner. Green beans with tofu. Green bean potato salad. Green beans with pork. Green beans with green beans. What will Mom make tonight?

Fourteen Years Ago

First Week of February
Mom, Dad and I step into our two-story Mississauga house. Bubble wrap covers the legs of our dining table. Dining room chairs, two TV stands and our new three-piece leather sofa set pile against the living room wall.

I follow Mom down the basement stairs and out the back double screen doors into the backyard. Steps lead to the deck upstairs. Underneath the steps, a toolshed holds a rusted rake and a shovel left behind by the former tenants.

I stand by the screen door and look out at the backyard. Uncut grass surrounds a raised platform. The platform contains five rows of rectangular soil plots. Two black plastic compost containers sit beside the fence and an apple tree grows in the grass.

Mom walks on the grass and approaches the platform. She examines the soil plots. Dark brown soil lumps, weeds and pebbles pepper the soil. I stare at the apple tree and the raised platform. If we take away the apple tree and the raised soil plots and mow the grass, we could build a swimming pool.

Second Week of April

Mom rings the doorbell. She bangs on the front door. I run to the door, unlock it and jump down the porch steps. Dad unloads bags of cow and sheep manure from the trunk. Mom hands me two Canadian Tire bags. I carry the bags inside, leave them in the hallway and peek inside. The bags contain garden gloves, a garden hose, a watering can and a set of garden tools. Mom carries a smaller Canadian Tire bag of tomato and cucumber seeds.

Two Years Ago

Last Week of April

A coworker gives Mom a pack of strawberry seeds. When Mom comes home, she spends the evening in her garden. She pulls out weeds and rakes the soil. I pick up the rusted pitchfork.
Minutes later, a splinter of wood cuts my finger. A black ant crawls up from a hole in the pavement. Dirt from the rake gets under my nails. I hate gardening.

In two months, Mom’s strawberry seeds turn into a cluster of white flowers. The white flowers grow yellow buds. The yellow buds change into green rounded tops somewhat like strawberries.

Second Week of July

I watch from the living room as Mom runs down the deck and chases sparrows that peck on her strawberries. Mom curses at the birds. I suggest she build a mesh barrier.

The next day after work Mom comes home with a row of wire mesh. Mom measures, cuts and trims her strawberry covering. She lowers the mesh over her strawberries and uses her fingers to bend the wire ends so they stick into the soil.

Birds no longer pick on Mom’s strawberries...most of the time. Once, Mom forgot to stick one side of the wire covering back into the soil. A sparrow snuck under and could not get out. Mom and I stood and watched as the sparrow turned in circles and clawed against the mesh. We stared until Mom turned and walked to the toolshed. She slipped on her garden gloves, reached under the wire mesh, grabbed the sparrow, pulled it out and set it free.

The present

First Week of September

I watch Mom in her garden from the living room window. She bends, hunched over green bean vines. They wrap under, over and around the wooden poles she has built into the soil.

Most weekdays, Mom comes home from her nine-to-five job and changes from her blouse and pressed pants into sweatpants and a tattered long-sleeved shirt. “This is my hobby.
Why do you buy a house? You buy a house to enjoy the flowers and trees in the front and the backyard in the back,” she says.

Third Week of October

I stand on the edge of the raised platform that encases Mom’s garden. Below me, chewed-up green leaves twist around Mom’s wooden poles. A handful of beans continue to grow. Two green tomatoes still cling to their vine.

“When you grow your own vegetables, they taste better than the ones in the store. I’m not saying store-bought vegetables are bad,” Mom says. “The difference is vegetables from the garden have no chemicals and don’t come from a fridge like some of the store ones. They’re more fresh.”

I stand over row five, the last row. Short, stubby, green strawberry plant leaves cover the soil.

First Week of November

Mom leans over her green bean plants. She uses scissors to cut off vine leaves and a trowel to dig up her crop. Mom throws leaves, vines, dried-up beans and leftover rotted apples into the garden waste bin.

Over the years she has grown zucchini, butternut squash, cucumber and strawberries.

This summer Mom’s backyard garden supplied us with green beans, tomatoes, Chinese chives, Chinese honeydew and Romanian lettuce.

“Gardening is good exercise. You pull weeds and build wooden bean pole frames. Also, I like to share what I grow with other people. I have given Chinese chives to friends and brought in strawberries for my coworkers.”
Leftover dried-up green beans blacken on the pavement beside row two. Naked wooden bean poles stick out from the soil. The apple tree bears no apples and no leaves. Mom’s backyard garden waits for next year.

About this story

Ever since Yun Ma moved with her family into a two-story Mississauga house more than 10 years ago, her mom has taken over the backyard. For as long as Ma can remember, summers meant cars trips to Canadian Tire and Home Depot and bags and bags of cow and sheep manure.

Over the years, Ma often watched her mom through the window in the living room as she worked on her garden. The vignettes in this piece came from first-hand observations of memorable events. Ma wrote the piece with several pictures she had taken in late October, one week before her mom dismantled the crops and cleaned up her garden. Ma also interviewed her mom.

Writes Ma: “Through her voice, I want to show the enjoyment Mom receives from gardening.”