In response to changing global circumstances and the need for a writing approach that takes into consideration the writer’s place, compositionists began to take into account how the environment affects the writer and vice versa. In 1986, Cooper proposed an ecology-based metaphor of writing and exposed “composition to the notion that writers interact with systems that affect their writing” (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002, p. 19). Based on this ecological metaphor, “writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (Cooper, 1986, p. 367). Dobrin and Weisser (2002) build on this metaphor and argue that ecocomposition “explores the relationships between individual writers and local environments as well as ways in which populations interact with environments” (p. 18).

These descriptions emphasize intersecting and individual constituents of writers and their effects on their place, which are also linked to overall culture and society that in turn affect individual writers and their selected locations. This theoretical framework focuses on relationships between the writer and the physical or non-physical environments in which the textual-production takes place (Dobrin, 2001; Owens, 2001a; Owens, 2001b). Further, ecocomposition views as central the question of how different environments affect the writer and the writing process, since environments play a crucial role in the production and maintenance of social, cultural, and economic environments which the writer, and consequently the writer’s text, are inevitably a part (Dobrin, 2001; Owens, 2001a; Owens, 2001b). In an effort to highlight the need for environmental responsibility, but also to raise awareness of a writer’s agency and potential effect on interrelated and interconnected systems,
ecocomposition has been adopted by compositionists and writing programs (Cahalan, 2008; Hothem, 2009; Ingram, 2001; Mauk, 2006) and can also be highly effective in the multilingual composition classroom.

In this paper I argue for the need for collective action towards a more sustainable future, and I argue that the multilingual classroom offers an ideal space for the construction and co-construction of globally relevant place-based writings that can set the stage for internationally based dialogue and understanding necessary for global action.

**The Need to Respond:**

**The Benefit of the Multilingual Composition Classroom**

We are in a time of an environmental crisis; it is therefore necessary to use not only our classrooms as spheres for writing about natural environments, but also to expand these efforts to multilingual classrooms, which frequently consist of a diverse, global student population. Teaching ecocomposition in the collegiate multilingual classroom not only allows students to value and maintain aspects of their geographic heritage and place of origin, but also enables the cohesion and awareness needed to address global environmental issues. Here, students can gain an understanding that there is no location-based immunity (Brown, 2008), thus the classroom allows them to make connections among environmental effects and comprehend how all humans are responsible for such consequences.

The importance of place in ecocomposition emphasizes an integral element of this theoretical perspective because place offers an opportunity to connect academic writing to something relevant and to recognize interdependence with various environments (Mauk, 2006; Owens, 2001b). Further, “we need to recognize the spatial complexities that define our students’ lives ... to include them in our understanding of how to write” (Mauk, 2006, p. 214) instead of maintaining the idea of detached and unrelated places, and consequently ignoring how place affects the writing process. Owens (2001b) emphasizes that “local places that students, staff, and faculty go home to after leaving the university behind remain largely indivisible, supposedly unrelated to the activity of the academy” (p.70). Place then becomes a central component of the writing process and teaching thereof rather than a coincidental, insignificant, or arbitrary factor. Dobrin (2001) supports Owens by reinforcing the idea that our academic and non-academic lives must not be separated and must
exemplify the fluidity that marks malleable boundaries of an organism or system.

Multilingual learners, especially at an advanced stage, could greatly benefit from this ecocomposition, particularly through assignments and approaches dealing with place. This can allow them to maintain elements of their identity associated with their first language (L1), as the academic push toward the elimination of this identity often poses an issue when they attempt to attain fluency and linguistic identity in a second language (Callahan et al, 2009; Harklau, 2000; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008). The continued, institutionally recognized value and relevance, as well as the academic incorporation of the multilingual learners’ previous home or place, emphasize the value of such location and the learners’ linguistic and physical heritage, which can be beneficial for the learning outcome and development. In other words, if multilingual students are allowed to maintain an aspect of prior linguistic affiliation and association, such as place, their attainment of fluency and multilingual identity is positively influenced as struggles with emotional ties to the first language and identity associated with this language are lessened (Harklau, 2008; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008; Spack, 1997).

In an effort to review and redefine human-imposed and constructed boundaries, Cahalan (2008) suggests the teaching of place in the writing classroom, remarking that the students must comprehend that “every place on the globe is also local” (p. 251). When incorporating the teaching of place-based writing into the multilingual classroom, it is important to focus on the combining of places: home or place of origin and the current location where the student is enrolled. The combining of places allows for the evaluation and perhaps juxtaposition between home and a current place, plus raises awareness of student places for other learners. This is significant as we are facing environmental issues based on global systems and ecologies including both organic and inorganic systems, and thus must be approached from a communal, global perspective.

Incorporating ecocomposition, specifically place-based writing, into the collegiate multilingual classroom therefore seems productive, efficient, and imperative as the learners’ sense of control of their learning and language acquisition, and therefore their language-based knowledge construction, are integral to their successful language acquisition.
Practical Approaches for Place-Based Writing in the Multilingual Classroom

Regarding practical approaches to place-based ecocomposition, this type of writing allows students to not only engage in a variety of research processes and methods but also to acquire experience with different types of publications and varying genres of writing. Also, they will be able to write and place themselves into several rhetorical situations while recognizing the need for variable approaches to writing. For example, in the collegiate multilingual classroom, autobiographical writing about something as personal as place strengthens the sense of identity as the L1 identity is supported instead of threatened. As Harklau (2000) points out, assigning such writings linking academic with personal experience allows multilingual students to feel proud of their status as they are encouraged to express “feelings and thoughts and to cast themselves and their experiences in a positive light” (p. 48). Hothem (2009) mentions that “the more our inquiries reflect students’ lives, the more forthcoming they are with their ideas, the more included they feel in the production of knowledge, and the more comfortable they are with exploring their positions as writers and thinkers” (p. 41), thereby supporting the idea that students can feel empowered, motivated, and interested by incorporating place-based writing approaches.

For one of my own place-based assignments, students research various areas of their places in order for them to gain a more holistic understanding of a location. Most often, I ask them to bring in information regarding history, current and past social trends, important local events, economic backgrounds, scenic attractions, and so forth. Also, I ask them to supplement this more formal material with information that makes their places special to them. This might be a type of flora or fauna, the distinct smell of pine trees, and the secret hangouts they used to frequent. This allows students to place themselves within their selected location and realize that their individual identities are part and result of the given place and that they, by their existence and actions, also influence their places. With the use of Google Earth or Google Maps, they can easily share their favorite spots, their general locations, or other elements of their place.

As stated, this type of assignment enables students to take advantage and become familiar with an array of sources. While I usually ask them to include at least three academic articles to elaborate and explore some facets of their places, they may also supplement this research with popular items, interview individuals for oral histories
as primary sources, go to a library’s archives to search for the history of the given place, or investigate existing academic databases to further their knowledge. This approach allows them to work with numerous sources and directly apply various forms of research to their own writing while recognizing the extensive and expansive texts such approach yields.

Regarding genres, I’ve asked my students to compile multi-genre and multimodal place-based pieces to increase their awareness of generic conventions and to allow them to be free of the restrictions or limitations that most mono-genre assignments entail (Rioux, in press). As I ask for a comprehensive description of their place (history, society, culture), most students automatically select an informative research paper as the backbone of their work. Such research is then supplemented with narratives to explain the personal meaning of the research while allowing them to write themselves confidently into their places. At times, I’ve seen my writers use poems, scripts, news articles, memos, graphics, postcards, or love letters to convey their associations with their places. Others have creatively bound their own books and created brochures, newsletters, newspapers, pamphlets, posters, and comics. Still others draw from a multi-modal approach by creating websites, videos, blogs, or social media outlets. The idea of form becomes flexible and fluid as they recognize the ability to select appropriate genres and presentation types to effectively address the purpose of their pieces.

Presentation of the work is an important factor when performing place-based writing. While the use of multi-modal writing binds the students to a tablet, computer, laptop, smartphone, or other device, the use of a more traditional writing assignment or the multi-genre assignment broadens the options in regards to the form of presentation. One of my classes created an e-book with the use of an online publisher. The benefit was that students were able to disperse the link to friends and family, therefore transcending the boundaries of the classroom and campus. Some students mentioned embedding the link on their social media pages, and I integrated it on our LMS site to allow them to review it at their leisure.

One of my favorite components is the diversity and wide-ranging scope of places that place-based writing captures. In my multilingual classrooms, the place-based writing assignment allows students to explore both their own places and those of their peers, thereby breaking down potential misconceptions or misunderstandings regarding geographic locations or simply enabling them to gain an understanding of
places beyond their own. In addition, the combining of places helps students to conceptualize the interconnectivity of places, thereby increasing their awareness of the global nature of our current environmental situation.

Another element of ecocomposition that always stands out as beneficial, engaging, and educational is the place-based writing assignment’s ability to transcend boundaries. By using assignments either published online or multi-modal, the students’ perceptions of audience can shift from viewing only the class as readers to understanding that their work is accessible to other potential readers outside of the classroom. Also, the purpose of the students’ writing is affected by the thought of transcending the class boundaries as they learn to understand that their writing is incredibly valuable as a tool for the co-construction of intercultural and interpersonal meaning making and that their text’s content can influence their audience’s understanding of the interconnectivity of place and the implied need for global action.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The need for ecocomposition and writing about place in our current environmental situation is apparent. As Dobrin and Weisser (2002) point out, “one goal of ecocomposition is the eventual development of epistemological acceptance of human’s interconnectedness with nature and environment, not simply the use of these as categories of inquiry” (p. 28). The mentioning of “human” suggests a species-based and global effort towards the incorporation of nature into our understanding of environmental matters and concerns and the communal and global addressing thereof. It is therefore imperative to include as many diverse people and populations as possible to establish a sense of global urgency and effectiveness that can be achieved only through human dependence on one another as well as on our environmental surroundings.

Dobrin and Weisser (2002) state that “it is only natural that composition studies recognizes its affiliation with ecological and environmental disciplines, and it stands to reason that our understandings of discourse can only become more precise and sophisticated through investigations that recognize the importance of these studies” (p. 3). Similarly, it appears natural that we teach ecocomposition in the collegiate, multilingual classroom as our environment and the need for global understanding are as international as several students. Multilingual students’ broad knowledge base of and connection to unique places and their interdependence and interconnectedness with places, systems,
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writers, and texts are valuable and effective when attempting to solve environmental problems as a global rather than local community.

Further, Owens (2001a) raises the question “what are the most important things for them [students] to read and write about? Of all the information out there in the world, what is absolutely crucial to their intellectual, spiritual, economic, and physical survival?” (p. 35). Regarding our present global environment, the answer to such a question should be simple: students need to attain greater awareness of the fundamental importance of our natural surroundings, how the surroundings are affected by their actions, and how nature also affects them. The diverse richness of multilingual classrooms offers an excellent foundation for the exploration of learners’ places in an effort to understand the complexities of the organic and inorganic systems that we belong to. Here, the combining of places through writing should be the answer to the question about what students must write that is a crucial necessity in regards to “intellectual, spiritual, economic, and physical survival” (Owens, 2001a, p. 35).

So, why teach ecocomposition in the collegiate multilingual classroom? Because the environment must concern us all despite our different geographic locations and as part of our environmental responsibility, we must find ways to combine our places to collectively find global solutions for environmental threats.

References


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