

# **The Growing Seed: Ecofeminist Values in Classroom, Campus, and Community**

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## **Abstract**

The authors share an overview of, and narratives tied to, a new course on Ecofeminism. The course and its attributes are offered as a model for educators of various disciplines and interests to integrate inclusivity, communal learning, hope, and community engagement in classrooms with an aim of advancing sustainability. The concept of place and a highly collaborative approach to course design provide rich fodder for critically considering daily practices, how we engage with the world, and the importance of connections to each other and the more-than-human world.

## **Keywords**

experiential learning; collaboration; reflective practice; social change; postsecondary education

## **Introduction**

That rare moment arrived; my department chair offered me a new class. I did not hesitate. While environmental issues are woven into all my classes, I have never had the chance to plan and teach an entire class on the issue that takes up so much space in my heart. I was elated at the opportunity to teach *Women's Studies 303: Ecofeminism*.

A group of us, instructor, university partner, community partner, and student, wrote this article after reflecting on the first iteration of the class. The first section provides an overview and the second provides personal narratives from the four of us. Through this process, we have

developed a road map for anyone interested in applying similar collaborative and/or experiential methods, whether in formal or informal educational settings.

## **Mechanics of the Course**

Ecofeminism is a movement for social justice and ecological justice. It can also be perceived as a theory, a way of life, a philosophy, a value. Drawing from intersectionality<sup>1</sup>, it provides us with a multi-layered structure with which to view the world and make connection<sup>2</sup>. In August 2018, University of Calgary launched its first Ecofeminism course, offered as a Block Week class, which translated into a full five days of immersion learning for 35 university undergraduate students. Block Week proved a perfect format for experiential activities, outside time, theoretical discussions, self-reflection, and community building.

Students discovered the theoretical and practical analyses ecofeminism offers, and came to appreciate a complex, contextual way of thinking and perceiving the world. By the end of the course students understood: the broad range of issues about which ecofeminists are concerned; how a concept can be theoretical, practical, action-based, and value-oriented; the relevance of ecofeminism in today's world; and the practical implications of ecofeminist theorizing and action. They also experienced a classroom where three values central to ecofeminist theory and practice— inclusion, communal learning opportunities, and providing hope—were woven into the curriculum.

## ***Inclusion***

Inclusion is a value central to feminism. Thus, as an instructor who practices intersectional feminism, it was important for me to integrate this value into all facets of the course, beginning with the readings. As an Arab-Canadian queer person, I know the importance of seeing oneself reflected in the reading list (and the significance of not seeing oneself in the reading list). As I gathered the essays and articles, it was heartening to see the availability of strong ecofeminist material coming from a broad group of folks.

Students in the class came from a wide range of identities relating to gender and sexuality, race, disability, class, and age. They were encouraged to articulate the way the issues we were learning about directly linked with their lives (e.g., Indigenous students shared information about the ecological state of their home community). I attempted to reference inclusivity in all kinds of small, daily ways, referencing the gender inclusive bathrooms in various buildings. I also issued reminders about how to structure small group work in positive ways so everyone participated. In

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<sup>1</sup> Intersectionality is a concrete, multi-layered strategy aimed at transformation of social and material conditions that requires paying attention to many realities simultaneously. It emerged from the Black feminist/activist community and has been taken up by activists across the globe. At its heart, intersectionality is about relationships and connections—between people, between social systems, between Earth creatures, between structures, between ideas and concepts. It allows us to view the world holistically and contextually. This definition comes from a current writing project between Eli Clare and the instructor.

<sup>2</sup> The instructor has come to the understanding of ecofeminism as a movement for social justice and ecological justice, as well as a theory, a way of life, a philosophy, a value, as a result of many years of work. The instructor has been influenced by the thinking, writing, and activism of many people, including but not limited to Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, Robin Wall Kimmerer, David Suzuki, and Eli Clare, as well as second wave feminist groups such as the Voice of Women.

addition, I provided handouts explaining our definitional framework and Braver Space guidelines<sup>3</sup>, which helped establish a common language.

The choice of classroom is important to inclusivity. For this course, the space needed to be physically accommodating/accessible, welcoming, and conducive to group work. To state the obvious, if folks cannot enter the room, literally and figuratively, and then stay in the room, literally and figuratively, it is not an accessible space. Accessibility means ensuring the building, classroom, and the washroom are accessible to folks with mobility impairments, and ensuring it accommodated those with hearing impairment, visual limitations, reading challenges, and mental health struggles.

### ***Communal Learning Opportunities***

Each day we engaged in communal learning activities, a combination of experiential and intellectual work, and a mix of physical movement with quiet time. Some examples include the following.

1. Our first communal learning activity was the KAIROS Blanket Exercise (KAIROS Canada, n.d.). This interactive, experiential exercise provides accurate information about Canada's colonization of Indigenous nations.
2. We spent one morning pulling weeds in Whispering Woods, a local natural area.
3. Reading comprehension quizzes happened in small groups, which meant a portion of students' grades were dependent on other people.
4. Students took part in a campus sustainability tour during which they learned about Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified buildings, ecological features of the landscape, and community gardens. Most students knew nothing about this aspect of campus life and were inspired by it. One revisited the community garden and picked apples, some were eaten as snacks, and some were made into an apple crisp for our closing day.

### ***Providing Hope***

In fields such as Women's Studies and Environmental Education, we are not teaching easy, straightforward, non-emotional subject matter. As we teach content reflecting the reality of the world we live in, we have an obligation to balance information about the state of the world with the reality of the positive social change work happening.

Positive environmental messages and examples of social change work had to be integrated into our work, so learning about the dire state of planetary health did not lead to feelings of helplessness and despair. In addition, the more students are exposed to concrete examples, the more likely they are to see themselves as people who might engage in such work.

Ecofeminism students learned about Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement (Green Belt Movement, n.d.), listened to radio interviews with Jane Goodall and Vandana Shiva (Democracy Now, 2013), and read about the activist work of Sheila Watt-Cloutier (2015). One day they had a chance meeting with a City of Calgary parks ecologist who showed up during the weed-pulling extravaganza. He treated students to an impromptu talk about the importance of natural areas and his hope they would use their education to help restore the planet.

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<sup>3</sup> Braver Space principles provide concrete guidelines for a positive learning environment based on inclusion and respect.

## Partner Narratives

### *The Student – Lynn MacCallum*

Hopeful, enlightened, changed: The Ecofeminism class allowed me to align my feminist studies, my love of the natural world, and my previous career working for an environmental non-profit agency. I was eager to unite facets of my life and create a feminist practice that encompasses what I care about most.

I take pride in being a responsible consumer and a lover of the natural world. However, as we read and explored tenets of ecofeminism, I realized I could do more to protect our environment and practice what I preach, in particular, in relation to non-human creatures as “no one, human or animal, can be free unless we all are” (Vance, 1993, p. 134). If I wanted to integrate intersectional feminism into my life, then I needed to reconsider my meat-eating habits.

The most significant life-changing text in the course was Taylor’s (2017) *Beasts of Burden*. I wept when she recounted the story of a fox with arthrogryposis (the same condition Taylor has), shot by a local resident because “it had an abnormal gait and appeared sick” (p. 23). The author explains while the fox’s disabilities were significant it also exhibited healthy muscle mass and a stomach full of food, meaning the animal could hunt and forage (Taylor, 2017). I felt an overwhelming sense of grief about the senseless loss of a life, and about the belief the animal was better off dead (Taylor, 2017). What amplified my despair was that my own dog, Diego, resembles a miniature red fox. I read Taylor’s words as I scratched the belly of my little dog and wondered what makes him more valuable than other animals eaten as food. Why does he get to live as my pet, while other animals are hunted for sport, or end up on my plate? As far as I was concerned, there was no difference. Taylor’s words were a punch in the gut, providing the motivation I needed to get serious about returning to vegetarianism.

Changing one’s diet may seem an extreme reaction to a Women’s Studies class, but not for me. I want to lead by example. I want to know my behaviors truly reflect my beliefs. This class provided me with the tools and vocabulary to articulate what I had always known: that to care about the welfare and treatment of others, my feminism must include people, land, and animals. As ecofeminists we must act “to the best of one’s ability from a sensibility that ... is creative, undergoing self-transformation through cultivating a relation to collectives ranging from human families to the planetary community” (Lahar, 1993, p. 112). This class left me hopeful, enlightened, and changed.

### *The University Partner – Rachelle Haddock*

The magic of matchmaking: Call me a matchmaker, but not of the Eros variety. My role in the Office of Sustainability at University of Calgary involves bringing together academic partners with operational staff to create experiential learning and applied research. At its heart, my work cultivates core competencies in sustainability leadership including empathy and understanding, critical thinking, and systems thinking (University of Calgary, 2016).

The instructor approached me about finding experiential learning opportunities for his Block Week course, and we attempted to set up a work experience on our campus. When we realized this was not feasible, we organized the on-campus tour for students, and set up the weeding activity at Whispering Woods. Both activities helped students consider sustainability challenges

such as climate change, biodiversity, water management, and food systems. Further, these activities also connected with the core competencies in sustainability leadership.

When I reflect on this experience, I think about the need for long planning horizons, and about the need to be flexible when designing experiential learning. Size and scale are central challenges to experiential learning for sustainability: How can we take the learnings from this course and build upon them so that more students can benefit from this type of approach? Further, how can we scale up collective social change?

### ***The Community Partner – Polly Knowlton Cockett***

**The seed that grew:** As a teacher and community activist, I use a place-based approach for developing partnerships for school and community stewardship activities, and for connecting curriculum to place (Knowlton Cockett et al., 2017). I was thrilled to receive Joe's email inquiring about the possibility of involving students in stewardship activities for Whispering Woods, a small natural area and relict fragment of grassland in my neighborhood. Thus, began another experiential collaboration framed in conservation and led to relationships between people and place. Joe, Rachelle, and I met several times to brainstorm. We attended to myriad details, including directions, transit, risk, accessibility, and bathroom facilities. I alerted my City Parks contacts, and they provided leather gloves for students, as well as garbage bags. A City Parks ecologist happened to end up onsite the morning of the weeding experience and addressed the students. Together, we approached the opportunity with trust and positive anticipation.

**Embracing ambiguity:** Trust as well as belief in possibility define my overall approach to ecological work, and these are closely aligned with ecofeminism. Allowing the unknown to unfold, embracing uncertainty, encouraging questions, these become an essential part of the process of taking students and teachers outside of the traditional classroom for experiential learning with community members. With outdoor study, place and nature also become co-teachers in overall course construction, core elements of ecofeminism.

### ***The Instructor – Joe Kadi***

My personal values of kindness, social justice, thoughtfulness, and relational life are expressed in my teaching work. In this Ecofeminism class, I strengthened my commitment to collaborative work, experiential education, student engagement, and holistic learning. Let me share four stories/moments that illustrate this.

**The rarity of enthusiastic email responses:** Early on, I connected with Rachelle from the Office of Sustainability, who helped me set up hands-on work for students. At one point, we reached out to the volunteers at Calgary's Nose Hill Park. It did not seem likely this group would refuse an offer of 35 volunteers for a morning's work. In record time, I received an enthusiastic email response from Polly, who became our community partner. Coincidentally, Polly teaches at University of Calgary and is also involved in the Whispering Woods community project. She has been instrumental in helping restore that small piece of land, bringing together schools, parents, community, and city government. At our first meeting, Polly, Rachelle, and I drank tea and ate homemade banana bread; we connected in a meaningful way. It made me think about the importance of authentic connections, given one key factor in our environmental crises has to do with profound disconnection, whether person to Earth/other species, or person to person.

An invitation to students they accepted: I chose to begin our week together with the KAIROS blanket exercise. If I want an experiential classroom, best to start with an experience. Risky, yes. Worth the risk, yes. For our first half hour, students were, unsurprisingly, somewhat shut down, uncomfortable, and “holding their cards to their chests,” to use a poker expression from my grandmother. I do not know why, but somewhere around the 30-minute mark, the group dynamic shifted to deep engagement. In later conversations students spoke openly about their initial anxiety, what it took to open up, and how much they benefited from starting the week in this fashion. They understood the KAIROS experience set the tone for our time together.

Yes, it is possible to include prayer and meditation in our classes: I included the chance to meditate and pray as part of this immersive experience, since ecofeminism is a holistic worldview with space for the life of the Spirit. I set this up carefully, ensuring voluntary choices and voluntary participation. I offered three optional activities, which took place on three different afternoons: students could choose solitary time that would involve a meditative practice, as they defined it (one student defined it as skateboarding); they could participate in group activities designed to strengthen communal bonds; or they could engage in the Prayers for the Earth activity folks at the Faith and Spirituality Centre and I had set up. These optional activities were an excellent addition to the course. I saw Solitary Time students sitting quietly on the grass after their official end time had passed. The second group planned visits to a hands-on animal farm and a vegan café while the six students who attended the Prayers for the Earth experience appreciated the variety of experiences, particularly the outdoor drumming activity.

The feeling of inherent rightness, in a university classroom: On day four, I gave a half-hour talk with a photograph of the beautiful snowy egret on the wall behind me. I set the context with a description of Florida’s Everglades in the middle of the 1800s, and the snowy egret coming within a hair of extinction as they were slaughtered for the profits of hat manufacturers. I talked about Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall, cousins who took up the challenge of saving a bird at a time when they could not vote or participate in government. So many things struck me at that moment: sharing with students my emotional connection to other species; inviting students to connect with Hall and Hemenway in the same way I connect with social change activists from the past; and the way values of a social justice movement (in this case ecofeminism) can be interwoven into the values of a classroom experience.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

With this article, we wanted to convey the power of integrating the values of collaborative learning, inclusion, and hope into the classroom; we also wanted to provide a creative and concrete example for educators. The learning curve for this course has been steep, and we have come away with several insights. Firstly, collaborating with university and community partners is worthwhile. While it is a time-consuming activity that requires advance planning, it helps contextualize learning for the students, and models good relationship practices for students. Secondly, providing tools and resources for students who are already experiencing anxiety about the planet’s health is an appropriate and tangible antidote to our current ecological crisis. Thirdly, naming and demonstrating inclusivity is appreciated by this generation of students. In so doing, we are showing students, our future leaders, how to put an intangible value into tangible actions that support the strength and health of a community. Lastly, it is always a good idea to get students outside. The feedback on this aspect of our work was strong and clear.

The article has also given us the chance to reflect on this class and take note of important questions. How can we support each other as we attempt to integrate new elements into our teaching work? How can we continue to grow, as teachers/educators intent on sustainability and collaborative learning? Which creative ways of sharing educational frameworks can we devise? Are there ways to build support for those of us who want to integrate collaborative, experiential learning into the curriculum? How do we sustain this work over the long haul? How can we evaluate the long-term impacts of supporting intentional learning?

Creating this experience, and this article, has convinced us of the many reasons for developing and strengthening our collaborative work skills. We have experienced the way the whole really can be greater than the sum of its parts:

... a group is not just a collection of individual talents. Instead, it is a chance for those talents to exceed themselves, to produce something greater than anyone thought possible. When the right mixture of people come together and when they collaborate in the right way, what happens can often feel like magic.” (Lehrer 2012, p. 139)

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## Territorial Acknowledgement

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