

A8. Developing critical awareness language skills for sustainability: A transdisciplinary approach

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In the transdisciplinary module *Language and Ecology*, which has been developed as part of the BA (Hons) English Language but adopted by other disciplines, the approach taken to sustainability issues is one where students build up their own ecological framework for sustainability which evolves continuously as they interrogate constructions of the society around them and interact directly with natural systems. They are exposed to one particular framework during class contact time, but only as an example of a possible framework that they can adapt for their own purposes. In a sentence, this framework supports searches for social and cultural changes which simultaneously increase people's wellbeing, and contribute to the flourishing of the ecosystems which support all forms of life.

Aims

The module seeks to develop in students an awareness of how the texts which surround them in everyday life contribute to their constructions of society, which can have a negative or positive impact on ecosystems. Relevant examples include advertisements which encourage dissatisfaction and unnecessary purchases, banks encouraging borrowing to buy unnecessary items, economic news reports containing assumptions about the economy which contradict the principles of sustainable development, and lyrical science writers who inform people about the state of the natural world in ways which encourage people to care and act.

Rationale

With global ecosystems deteriorating and governments poised to take tough action, employers are placing more emphasis on sustainability skills, and science and engineering departments across the country are stepping forward to provide those skills. However, a fundamental skill - literacy for sustainability - is being neglected. What has been lost sight of is that business, science and engineering are all carried out through the medium of language. This can be illustrated by considering three scenarios:

- a) A business uses the discourse of economics so narrowly that it ends up damaging the environment with no tangible benefit to workers, the community or the long-term interests of shareholders.
- b) An agricultural industry uses language to represent animals and plants so mechanistically that it fosters an energy-intensive and unsustainable farming system.
- c) An environmental educator uses language which is so technical and divorced from personal experience that it fails to inspire learners to change their values or behaviour.

Whatever career students enter, their job will involve literacy practices, and it is essential for them to be aware of ways of writing which either encourage or undermine the principles of sustainable development. With this awareness, they can both be critical of representations of the world which contradict sustainability, and can work towards creating representations which can help further the goals of sustainability. The critical awareness of language could also help graduates participate more effectively as citizens of democratic countries, voting for politicians and parties which represent the world in ways which work towards sustainability.

The pedagogic approach taken in this module is based on the well-established area of Critical Language Awareness (Ivanic 1993; Janks and Ivanic 1992; Fairclough 1992) which in turn depends on the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1992). Although Critical Discourse Analysis has traditionally focused on socio-cultural transformation in the areas of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, it has also been applied to sustainability issues by Harré *et al.* (1999); Goatly (2000); and more recently Stibbe (2001; 2004a; 2004b; 2006; forthcoming). The online journal *Language and Ecology* also contains a number of papers which apply linguistic analysis to sustainability issues and provide a model for students to follow in their own analyses.

Implementation

First, it is important for students to start to develop their own ecological framework for evaluating texts. The process can be initiated by asking a simple question like 'What is wrong with artificial grass?' The answer might begin with, say, 'it has a negative impact on biodiversity and separates people from nature'. Students then transform these statements into

general principles 'a diversity of life should be allowed to flourish' or 'people need to become closer to nature'. The resulting list of statements form the students' initial ecological framework, or 'ecosophy' to use Naess's (1990) term. They use their initial ecosophy as a basis for evaluating texts, but crucially the results of their analysis, combined with reading the literature of sustainability and their own direct experience of natural and artificial systems, allows them constantly to develop their ecosophy in an iterative process.

The next stage is for students to be exposed through reading and lectures to a variety of ecolinguistic analyses which have been undertaken by researchers and previous students to get an idea of how to go about interrogating texts within an ecological framework. These could include articles such as Stibbe (2001; 2004a; 2004b; 2006; forthcoming), papers from the *Language and Ecology* journal and articles by previous students.

After this preparation, students are ready to start group work analysing a variety of texts, from newspapers, magazines, mail shot advertisements, and economic reports, to nature poetry and literature. A successful approach has been to provide students with a bank of examples in the middle of the room (for example, pages torn from a variety of magazines), ask students to select examples from the bank, analyse them in groups, represent the results of their analyses diagrammatically, and return examples to the bank. On completion, the students present their findings in poster form, walk around viewing the posters of other groups and talk informally with other group members about the results of analysis.

Ultimately, the experience that students gain in reading research papers and analysing texts for themselves in active learning sessions feeds into their module assignment. The assignment involves writing an article similar to the research papers they have read, and using a similar methodology, but applying it to new data that they feel is meaningful and important within their own ecosophy. Extracts from these essays which represent particular insights, or whole essays of a high quality, are published on a special website which is part of the Language and Ecology Research Forum (Ecoling 2007). This allows students to feed the results of their analyses into the wider research community.

Sustainability focus

Students develop an awareness of how texts encourage people to behave in ways which protect or destroy the ecosystems on which life depends. The texts interrogated include ones which represent economic, social and environmental aspects of society, often holistically rather than separately. An example would be men's lifestyle magazines, which often promote images of extreme masculinity in an attempt to compensate for the fact that they are attempting to turn men into consumers of fragrance and fashion, a previously feminised role. In this way these magazines use a social issue for an economic end with the result of unnecessary consumption and environmental damage. Ultimately, the aim of the exercise is for students to develop literacy skills for sustainability. When they take leadership roles in the future they should be able to recognise and criticise texts which represent the world in ways which contribute to injustice or unsustainability, and have the skills to select, or create, texts which can promote sustainability.

Active learning

Although the active learning exercise described above is a classroom one, it would be just as easy for students to cooperate with a business, non-governmental organisation or local community group to analyse the language used, and contribute to creative new ways of using language which contribute to sustainability. For instance, students could help analyse the discourse of biology textbooks in a local school and work with teachers to find additional reading materials which represent the natural world from an holistic perspective.

Feedback

Student feedback on the *Language and Ecology* module, which was built around the activities described above, has been very positive. When asked about the impact of the module on their critical awareness and overall impressions of the module, comments included:

- *Fascinating, made me think more deeply*
- *Definitely changed how I look at things around me*
- *Valuable, enjoyable, relevant to everyday life and my life in the future, changed the way I perceive language*
- *I am now more critical about language*
- *It has changed the way I read, eye-opening*

- *I'll be able to really apply what I've learnt in my job later*
- *I read newspapers differently now*
- *This module has made me realise the power and impact that language can have*
- *I think EVERYONE should take this module*
- *It has made me take notice of the effects on the environment of language' used in a range of discourses that I wouldn't have noticed otherwise*

When asked whether awareness of the relationship between language and ecology would influence their lifestyle, all students responded that it had already or may do so in the future. Some comments were:

- *Yes. I think it may make me more aware of my responsibility to our environment*
- *Yes I will take more care in everything*
- *Very much so. I have begun to shop differently already. I am much more aware of my surroundings*
- *I will continue to recycle and promote/encourage environmentally-friendly behaviour to all people I know!*

Strengths and weaknesses

The feedback from students suggests that the active learning exercises, combined with other aspects of the module such as lectures and interaction with the Language and Ecology Research Forum, has contributed to students' awareness of the ways which texts shape the world around them, as well as potential changes to lifestyle arising from the awareness. A weakness of the approach is that students tended to adopt the ecosophy that the module was based on without creatively adapting it and extending it in line with their own experience and values. They were encouraged to turn the critical lens not only on the texts around them, but also the foundations of the module itself, something which may take them more time to do.

Programmes

Language and Ecology is an optional 12 CATS point module at Level 1 on the BA (Hons) English Language and also the BA/BSc (Hons) Geography and BSc (Hons) Biology programmes .

Key words:

language, ecology, ecolinguistics, ecosophy, ecological literacy.

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