

A9. Language and ecology: Three student perspectives
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Three students write about their learning on the module *Language and Ecology* and how it has challenged and changed their perspectives on sustainability.

Michelle Gargan

My feelings towards Education for Sustainability are relatively new. Before starting at the University of Gloucestershire, I was genuinely unaware of the huge problems facing our society. I am an undergraduate student studying single honours English Literature and chose the *Language and Ecology* module because it looked interesting and different. I had never considered the role that our language plays in how we view our surroundings so therefore found the notion, to begin with, quite difficult to grasp. However, after the first few sessions and some deep thought, I started to see the connections.

The module itself consists of several topics which look in detail at destructive and alternative discourses concerning language and ecology. The module lecturer presented the module in an engaging and knowledgeable way: to be taught by someone who is conducting their own unique research into their topic, is inspiring. The lectures used visual images to enhance study, and express insights that could not be conveyed using words alone, as well as props to use and consider in relation to the idea being discussed. In a particularly original workshop on the origin of language, we each had a piece of tree or shrub to name, based on its appearance by using onomatopoeic representations: this effectively showed how words can be correlated with, and spring from, nature, as well as creating and naming abstractions which are far removed from nature. As well as the ecological history of language we also examined language in lifestyle magazines, economic discourses, texts which contribute to forming the relationship between humans and animals, *haiku* and nature writing.

I now particularly recognise the advertising techniques used to make me purchase a product that I do not necessarily need which may also harm the environment. This became extremely important to me when thinking about the second assignment, researching texts that either influence people to harm the environment or protect it. I decided to focus on how perfume is advertised and the effects that perfume manufacture has on not only the environment, but also on our health. The brilliant aspect of the module is that the assignments seem worthwhile; the research I conducted was unique. In some modules it feels as if you are writing an essay that has been written thousands of times before, therefore it is inspiring to do a piece of work that is new and potentially contributes to the research community. I found it particularly rewarding when my two articles were published in the *Language and Ecology Research Forum*, one of them later appearing in the online journal *Language and Ecology*. Below is a short extract from my article titled *Magic Romance: on Perfume, Language and the Environment* which shows how words are used to persuade people to buy a product which is not only an environmentally damaging toxin, but also potentially harmful to human health:

The following is a summary of the key words/phrases found in the perfume advertisements analysed:

<i>Hypnotizing</i>	<i>Secret</i>	<i>Bright</i>
<i>Potion</i>	<i>Magic romance</i>	<i>Delicious</i>
<i>Celeb's attitude</i>	<i>Cherish</i>	<i>Temptation</i>
<i>Fragrance of love</i>	<i>Intimately</i>	<i>Sexy</i>
<i>Journey of love</i>	<i>Angel</i>	<i>Lovely</i>
<i>Your rules</i>	<i>Intensity</i>	<i>Magical</i>
<i>Delirium</i>	<i>Inspiration</i>	<i>Romance</i>

Within this set there are several clearly defined lexical sub-sets. The first relates to love: fragrance of love, journey of love, magic romance, romance, cherish, darling and love. A second set relates to attractiveness and sex: intimately, intensity, inspiration, delicious, temptation, sexy, lovely, feminine. These words are tapping into fundamental human needs to be sexually attractive and find love, things which are ultimately beyond purchase. The aim of such cleverly chosen words seems to be to make the reader think that buying and wearing this fragrance is a shortcut to satisfying their deepest needs and desires. If, as the

advertisements suggest, all it takes to be attractive and find the ideal partner is a quick spray of perfume, then the perfume would have to have an almost magical effect. Indeed, the perfume is explicitly marketed as being magical with another lexical set: potion, magic (romance), hypnotizing, magical, and secret. Some advertisements even beyond magic to words with religious connotations: angel, and eternity.

My current view on the problems regarding the environment, which has developed during the module, is that we have become a nation obsessed with money and material goods. People no longer appreciate, or perhaps do not have time to appreciate, nature and the amazing world around us. I think it is really important that people are educated about living in a sustainable society: ignorance is no longer acceptable. We all share the same Earth so therefore must work together to keep it healthy. My personal aim is to become an English teacher in secondary schools, and the module has shown by example how I could incorporate sustainability into my teaching. I have discovered that there are many written works that truly appreciate nature and show the important role nature plays in human wellbeing. These works suggest effective ways to fulfil human needs which do not require endless consumption. I have recently been studying William Wordsworth poetry in another module: the beautiful description Wordsworth uses immediately makes the reader appreciate what is around them. For me, the following verse from *I wandered lonely as a Cloud*, completely presents how seeing a simple yet amazing natural image, can bring fulfilment:

*'For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the Daffodils.'*

The fulfilment arises without need for purchase or environmental destruction. For a bright future, I think it is essential that enjoying and protecting the environment is woven into people's everyday lives; through work, university and school. Enrolling on the *Language and Ecology* module has been the best decision I have made since joining the University. Not only have I enjoyed it and had a chance to contribute to

the international research community, I have also learnt something inspiring and worthwhile for my future.

Paul Slater

Before beginning my degree, I would not have described myself as an 'eco-warrior' in any sense, though I was aware of some of the environmental issues facing everyone. My stance before starting university could perhaps have been described as 'casual observer', and I tended to have a fatalistic view that there was very little I could do to help the environment other than a little bit of recycling. I understood that others would be tasked with finding solutions or alternatives to ecological destruction, and that it would all magically sort itself out. My contributions to the resolution of the problem would probably have ended at buying (yet still driving) a slightly more economical car. The world's problems were not my problems, they were rather a *fait accompli* created by other people and corporations, and it would be their responsibility to clean up their own act. I would just follow suit when the eventual solutions arrived.

When I began my studies and was choosing modules, I was puzzled by the inclusion of a module titled *Language and Ecology*. I could not imagine how ecology and ecological issues could be impacted by language in any substantial way. If I had been studying geography for instance, I would not have been surprised to find modules relating to climate change or other environmental aspects, but to find one in the field of English Language was quite baffling to begin with. It soon became apparent though, as lectures progressed, that the use of language can and does influence people's decisions in very marked ways that are either detrimental or sometimes beneficial to some aspects of the environment.

The lectures were very interesting from the outset, particularly when learning about the way that language is used to construct a false reality in the advertising of many consumer products. Hamburgers are promoted as part of a healthy diet with little regard to either the health of the consumers, the welfare of the farm animals or the health of ecosystems. Magazines that appear to be promoting a more wholesome lifestyle actually contain articles about fast food and environmentally un-friendly cars. Advertisements for loans promote debt as a way to a supposedly happier

lifestyle and are often produced in the same visual style as a shop might use to promote a January sale. The language used in many of the examples was often found to contain imperative statements and other devices to compel the reader to purchase products. There were many examples where true nature was sidelined, and ecologically damaging alternatives (artificial grass lawns, for instance) were presented as viable and better replacements. Beauty products in particular were being marketed as items that could improve your lifestyle and often bring you 'closer' to nature, with scant regard to the manufacturing processes or chemicals being used.

The module has encouraged me to have a much more critical view of how language is used, and of the language of advertising in particular. This really helped when I was writing my final assignment about consumer electronic devices and how they are presented in magazines. Before starting the course I was completely unaware of the far-reaching ecological impact that these devices have, or of the language tactics used to encourage consumers to continually replace or upgrade them. Researching and writing the assignment changed my attitude entirely and my view of both magazine publishers and of the manufacturers who support them through advertising is much more critically aware.

For example, the language used to describe electronic gadgets in *Stuff* magazine frequently contains superlatives: 'one of the most exciting phones to come out this year', 'this is the best phone Motorola has ever made', or defines the quality of devices in terms of the number of features, 'loaded with features to make a masculine gadgeteer sweat with excitement'. This last phrase creates a new noun 'gadgeteer', and by using it in the noun-phrase 'masculine gadgeteer' serves further to encourage men to define their identity, and their masculinity, by the gadgets that they own (Slater 2007).

I am much less willing now to spend money on unnecessary items that offer very little added value to my life, preferring instead to spend more time with friends and family, more time exercising in the fresh air, and less time wondering whether my mobile phone or MP3 player are fashionable enough. I'm also happy to know now that I will not be wasting so much money on these kinds of things in the future. Money and debt, after all, are important matters to most students.

Having completed the module, I find I am a lot more informed about the issues that we covered. I cannot now watch television or read a magazine without spotting examples of language being used in a negative ecological way. This extends beyond environmental issues into other areas such as animal welfare, sexual discrimination and other social injustices. At the time of writing, for instance, thousands of turkeys are being 'destroyed' or 'culled' in an attempt to contain an outbreak of bird flu. Before studying *Language and Ecology*, I would not have been as aware of the very subtle distinction (mentally as well as phonologically) between culling animals and killing them, and of the ways in which the public are desensitised to the lives of the animals concerned in this way.

I have already made changes to my lifestyle since starting the module and realising that changes are possible in everyone's life. I consume far less electricity than I used to; I walk everywhere that is reasonably possible; I eat virtually no takeaway food compared to when I started college, and I regularly encourage and inform others around me of the unseen damage they are wreaking and of the ways and means they have available to avoid it. The module has not entirely changed my life – I have not become vegetarian for instance – but it has given me the insights to be much more conscious of the decisions I take, and of their consequences, especially the less obvious ones.

Rachel Williams

Since my arrival at the University of Gloucestershire, it has been clear that Education for Sustainable Development is an integral part of the pedagogy in my degree programme, Animal Biology. Our study skills module, *Skills for Sustainability*, for example, provides a guideline for study skills in higher education while offering a basic introduction to the notion of sustainability. However, sustainability does not only concern environmental or biological sciences; it is a complex notion which includes protecting the environment while providing social justice and a stable economic future for people worldwide. It is therefore relevant to *all* courses across the University.

Before taking the *Language and Ecology* module, I had not really imagined the extent to which language constructs society and influences people to harm, or protect, the environment. I had known for a long time, though,

that I wanted to contribute to the protection of the environment by using language to help people understand its importance. Through authors like David Abram (1996), we learnt that originally, language sprang from the local environment, with words closely attuned to understanding and surviving within the local bioregion. With increasing abstraction and written forms of language, language started to be used not only to describe reality, but to construct new social realities - nations, institutions, money, political systems, notions of 'economic growth', consumerism etc - and spread them on a global scale. When promoted globally through the media, some of those social constructions have a devastating effect on ecosystems by encouraging unsustainable behaviour. The discursive constructions encourage people to consume more and more things that they do not need, making the poor poorer and rich richer, while not satisfying the fundamental needs of either. To illustrate the persuasive power of language and the possible impact on the environment, here is an extract from my second essay (later published in the online journal *Language and Ecology*) which analyses the language used in an advertisement in a French magazine:

In France, advertising companies often use the image of nature or happiness to convince people to buy their product, even though it will not really bring the purchaser closer to nature or make them happy. An advertisement for fabric softener in a women's magazine uses the image of nature's qualities to sell a product which is far from really being natural. A page-sized photograph of a beautiful green valley with a stream running through is very appealing, however it is thwarted by a large shirt in the foreground: the sleeve of the shirt forms the stream and its colour is the same as that of the product (milky blue). The company wants to imply that washing clothes with their product can bring you into nature. If one thought closely about this idea, it may subtly bring to mind a dark irony: the fabric conditioner will undoubtedly really end up in streams once the washing cycle is complete. Nothing is mentioned about the harm caused by cleaning agents in the liquid; in fact, the paragraph below describes it as a 'harmonious combination of soap powder, a natural softener and essential minerals' ['La combinaison harmonieuse d'une lessive, d'un adoucissant naturel et de minéraux essentiels']. Now we may ask ourselves: how 'natural' are soap powder and fabric softener? And also, in what way do clothes benefit from 'essential minerals'?

The language used is indeed appetising and the presence of essential minerals makes it sound almost as healthy for you as a glass of mineral water. After this small print, a slogan in large, wavy letters adds to the dreamy combination of image and language and states, 'let yourself be touched by nature' ['Laissez-vous toucher par la nature']. This extremely misleading sentence suggests that pouring some fabric softener in your washing machine will bring you closer to nature, almost as if you were walking in the beautiful scenery shown in the picture. In fact, rather than being 'touched by nature', you are touching nature in a rather more sordid way.

(Williams 2007)

The active learning in the module made it interesting, lively and inspiring. We discovered links between ecology and language in many different sources, such as popular magazines, the food industry and literature from across the world. The diversity was amazing; every week, a new façade of our own culture and of cultures worldwide was revealed. We met guest lecturers from English and American Literature who showed us that, throughout time and across the continents, the urge to appreciate and protect the environment has always been present. Today, now that this need is so much stronger, it is vital that we continue to find even more ways of promoting sustainability through language.

The structure of the module was also diverse and flexible. As well as lectures and carefully illustrated case studies, we had considerable structured discussion time, allowing us to discover many different viewpoints and develop our communication skills. In workshops, we analysed magazines, popular books, ancient literature, and poetry, looking at the relationship between the language used and behaviour which damages, or protects ecosystems. We worked in small groups, writing down our ideas using mind maps and visual aids later to share them with the rest of the class. Moving around the room to examine other groups' work made us move physically towards new ideas, and that is always more captivating than sitting in a chair! The teaching materials used in class were as sustainable as possible - handouts were minimised and printed on the reverse of scrap paper, and the materials that we used for active learning were torn out of old magazines, newspapers and redundant books rather than being photocopied. This inspired us to make our essays less

environmentally damaging by printing on both sides of paper and reducing the margins as much as possible. I apply this in other modules too and I think it should be required in every subject.

As a biology student, it was very motivating for me to observe an interest in ecology coming from the students around me who were studying very different subjects to me. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that not only scientists are interested in ecology. I wanted to show my enthusiasm for this inter-disciplinary approach to sustainability, so contributed to a staff development workshop organised by the lecturer of the module. The workshop brought heads of subject areas together to discuss ways of incorporating education for sustainability across the curriculum. I found it surprising that most of the lecturers present were not from the environmental science area but from others. For me, the fantastic outcome of this module was concluded nicely by this workshop, as I was able to express my keen interest in sustainability and ecology, and the importance of incorporating it at the heart of education. As a result of my involvement in the *Language and Ecology* module, it is going to be added to the biology field map next year so that other students can see that there is more to sustainability than just environmental science.

References

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