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**Writing the Web of Influence:**  
**Connecting Students to Their Cultural Environments Through Ecocomposition**

One of the goals of the University of New Mexico’s WAC initiative is to recognize the discourse communities to which UNM students already belong, and help them to communicate effectively within and between those discourse communities. We want to teach our students how to use writing to effectively cross discourse boundaries. My paper discusses ecocomposition, a relatively new term in the field of composition studies, as a means to our WAC ends.

During my first year as a TA at UNM in the fall of 2004 I read a book edited by Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser called *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches*. The book was a collection of mostly theoretical explorations of ecocomposition; what the term means, what it can do, why it may be useful to composition teachers and scholars, but it did not offer advice for a beginning composition teacher like me on how to implement ecocomposition studies in the classroom.

Then, in 2005, Sidney Dobrin published the book that I was eager for: *Saving Place: An Ecocomposition Reader*. This book not only offers the framework for an ecocomposition course, but it offers a strong definition of ecocomposition, along with a theory about how and why ecocomposition can be effective. As Dobrin offers:

> Ecocomposition is the study of the relationship between environments (and by that we mean natural, constructed, and even imagined places) and discourse (speaking, writing, and thinking). Ecocomposition draws primarily from
disciplines that study discourse (chiefly composition, but also including literary studies, communication, cultural studies, linguistics, and philosophy) and merges the perspectives of them with work in disciplines that examine environment (these include ecology, environmental studies, sociobiology, and other ‘hard’ sciences). As a result, ecocomposition attempts to provide a more holistic, encompassing framework for studies of the relationship between discourse and environment (xiv).

When I read this definition, I was struck by how readily ecocomposition studies cross discourse boundaries. Indeed ecocomposition is designed to enable students to use critical thinking and writing to breach boundaries of place, community, politics, academic subjects, etcetera. Saving Place served as a framework for me to teach a class on ecocomposition. I wrote a proposal, submitted it to the English department, and it was accepted. I taught a 200-level class on ecocomposition in the Fall of 2005.

My goal was to teach my students to use the composition skills they had learned in English 101 and 102, including argumentative writing, as a way to influence their civic and social communities, specifically concerning local environmental issues. As a concrete example I offer the final project that I assigned, which incorporates traditional composition classroom goals, ecocomposition means, and WAC ends.

For their final project, my students were to choose a local community to which they felt they belonged. My students identified a variety of local civic and cultural communities, including the UNM campus, the city of Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, the nearby Isleta and Cochiti Indian Reservations, and the Hispanic, Latino, Mexican-American, and Native American cultural communities, to name but a few. Then, they were to find and research an environmental issue that directly or indirectly impacted that community, write a proposal argument or a rebuttal argument about the issue, and, in
addition, write and send op-ed pieces, letters to the editor, and letters to local government officials in an attempt to influence both the general public and specific decision makers.

With the readings from Saving Place and magazine articles and essays I brought in to class, we discussed environmental issues on a national and global scale throughout the semester, including global warming, alternative energy, air and water pollution, wilderness designations, consumption of natural resources, toxic waste, etc. Now, these students would bring together the discourse of environmental concern and the discourse community in which they felt most comfortable in an attempt, through writing, to influence a known audience to take a specific action.

I was amazed at the response. I have not been teaching composition for very long, but this assignment spurred more research, more conversations about effective rhetorical strategies, and more interest in writing than I had seen before. I think this was because, now, something was at stake. I had one student who wrote about the dangers of indoor air pollution, specifically cigarette smoke in Albuquerque bars, because she worked in a local bar and breathed second-hand smoke every night. Another student wrote a moving essay in which he spoke out against a proposed road extension through the Petroglyph National Monument west of Albuquerque because it was considered a sacred place by his American Indian community. His letter to the editor was published in a local paper. Another student spoke out against urban sprawl to the south and west of Albuquerque, proposing a “green sprawl” solution wherein every new home should be built using “green” architectural technology, including passive solar heating and cooling, recycled building materials, and alternative energy sources. She sent her letter to every developer in Bernalillo County.
As Dobrin states in the introduction to *Saving Place*, “Composition classrooms can be the sites in which students learn not just to think critically about environment and the texts that represent those environments, but specifically about how to produce those texts” (vi-vii). As the WAC initiative outlines, composition classrooms also need to be the sites in which students learn to think critically about their discourse communities, and how to effectively communicate within and between those communities. The project I have described was a success, not because a few letters were published and a few heads were turned, but because the students learned that the process of composition, that writing, matters. Through writing they can breach the boundaries between discourse communities, and they can make a positive difference.