

Power & equity in undergraduate environmental education:

“Loving Critique” at the Colorado College TREE Semester

Juan Miguel Arias & Howard Drossman
Colorado College Education Department

For the past six years, undergraduates in the *Teaching and Research in Environmental Education (TREE) Semester* at Colorado College have successfully cultivated their K-12 experiential and environmental teaching skills. For several reasons, this year we restructured the core theory class of the semester, “Foundations of Environmental and Sustainability Education,” to explicitly focus on Power and Equity as they apply to environmental history and contemporary educational practice. We reflect below on our motivations for the restructuring, describe the criti-

cal frame guiding our curricular decisions, and offer recommendations for other educators hoping to authentically incorporate justice, equity, power, diversity, and inclusion in their environmental pedagogy.

Specifically, we draw from Paris and Alim (2014) and Moore (2020) in suggesting *loving critique* as a pedagogically appropriate and ethical way of introducing both canonical and historically marginalized environmental authors in the context of contemporary practice. Approaching canonical authors and ideas through a loving critique frame allows us to authentically integrate Power and Equity considerations into all material rather than simply adding additional content.

The Context

The Colorado College TREE Semester is a 16-week residential undergraduate environmental leadership program for pre-service environmental educators. The program has run each fall semester for six years, and more than 90% of participating students achieve *environmental educator certification* or *master-level certification* through the Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education (CAEE). This certification requires a professional portfolio closely aligned with the NAAEE (2019) *Guidelines for the Professional Preparation of Environmental Educators*. At TREE, students enroll in three required environmental education classes—[Theoretical] Foundations, Teaching Practicum, and Curriculum Development—and one environmental science class—either Ecosystem Ecology or Environmental Inquiry. Much of the learning is experiential,



with undergraduates gaining ~100 hours of hands-on experience teaching their curricula and participating in classroom and field observations.

Some degree of Power and Equity topics have certainly been a part of the TREE Semester since its inception. Prior iterations of the *Foundations of Environmental and Sustainability Education* theory course incorporated 2-3 lessons relating to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and multicultural environmental education, and the TREE Semester has always included 8-10 hours of experience teaching racially and linguistically minoritized high school students (Harness & Drossman, 2011). This year, however, we restructured the *Foundations* course to explicitly center issues of Power and Equity in environmental education and concurrently revised the course title to *Critical Foundations of Environmental Education*.

In addition to being an essential change for curricular equity in the EE field, restructuring the TREE Semester *Foundations* course also allows students to meet department and all-college requirements. The Colorado College Education Department requires one *Power and Equity* course for any of the three tracks in the Education Major (critical social inquiry, environmental education, or teaching & learning). Additionally, the college recently implemented a general education requirement that all students complete two *Power and Equity* courses for their degree. Implementing an all-college requirement for at least two courses designated as *Power and Equity*—as well as the connected faculty training required for *Power and Equity* course designations—are positive reflections of authentic institutional support for these topics and issues across all of higher education. Appropriately, the new TREE *Critical Foundations* class will satisfy one *Power and Equity* requirement and reflect and amplify the importance of these topics at the departmental and institutional levels.

A Loving Critique

Like Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) considerations, *Power and Equity* put justice and equity as priorities. We believe the most appropriate way to integrate JEDI issues into existing curricula is not by checking boxes for topics added but by integrating new readings with purposeful critiques of canonical texts in a uniformly power-focused curricular structure (Banks, 2009). We realize, however, that these curricular changes require mindful and critical approaches—acknowledging the nuances and dialectics of historical and contemporary environmentalism—to facilitate student understanding of and integration into a field they can transform, rather than being *solely* supportive or critical. In other words, the need for subjective approaches to training and professional socialization—such as the mindful, context-aware critique of any canonical authors we discuss—lead us to a sensitizing approach we identify as a “loving critique” (Paris & Alim, 2014; Moore, 2020); that is, critical and thoughtful evaluation and contestation of authors, content, knowledge, and values done

Colorado College’s Teaching and Research in Environmental Education (TREE) Semester is now one of only eight accredited environmental education programs in North America and one of only two undergraduate programs in the country to receive this distinction.

in a way to *encourage* (rather than diminish) students’ appreciation and understanding of those authors in order to engage with them dynamically, rather than statically “support” or “reject” any particular author or perspective.

Throughout our planning of course content, explanation of material to students, and framing of authors and ideas, we use *loving critique* as a critical focus in our approach to the historical and contemporary environmental events and content that students

learn. In this way, we are authentic in our transformation of the *Foundations* course to a curriculum-wide restructuring.

Moving beyond the “additive” level mentioned by Banks (2009), we will neither ignore nor discount the contributions

of historically canonical authors and content—but in de-centering them, our attention to those works will be more nuanced than simple introduction (or even introduction solely for the sake of discrediting or ‘moving beyond’ those authors to the present day). Any work included in our curriculum will receive the same degree of scrutiny historically given to authors of color or non-academic works; in this way, any piece of “canonical” work will not be accepted simply as canon but instead discussed in the context of why it is canon and what we will do with the work moving forward.

Addressing issues of power and equity allow for anti-racist teaching. Kishimoto (2018) suggests that implementing anti-racist pedagogy requires: “(1) incorporating the topics of race and inequality into course content, (2) teaching from an anti-racist pedagogical approach, and (3) anti-racist organizing within the campus and linking our efforts to the surrounding community” (540). We illustrate our integrated, *loving critique* approaches with three examples using Kishimoto’s framework.

Course Content

James Banks (2009) suggests four approaches to multicultural curriculum reform, from the most straightforward but less impactful “contributions” and “additive” approaches (e.g., focusing only on the politically neutral heroes and holidays relevant to marginalized communities) to more integrative transformation and, especially, social action approaches. The transformation approach requires changes in the curriculum’s *structure* “to enable students to view [all] concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups” (233).

In restructuring our course, for instance, we moved some of the learning, pedagogy, and assess-

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ment topics into our Practicum class to better integrate equity-focused theory papers in the *Foundations* theory course and equity-focused educational practice papers in the Practicum course. In both of these courses, the idea is for *Power and Equity* to be guiding frameworks rather than topical additions through changes to course material and content. Though there are numerous changes in our readings, one example from our new Critical Foundations class is how we treat historical figures, such as challenging recent calls to “cancel” John Muir (Nijhuis 2021) or using Aldo Leopold’s *Land Ethic* to teach about the history of environmental education.

While Leopold’s *Land Ethic* is considered a seminal paper and a turning point in US environmental ethics through his development of an ecocentric philosophical ethic (DesJardins 2012), ecocentric ethics have existed for many years as Indigenous ways of knowing. Thus, we now supplement Leopold’s work with Lauret Savoy’s (2015) essay on the *Alien Land Ethic* and readings from Doug Good Feather (2021) on thinking indigenously. Such inclusions provide Black and Indigenous perspectives to frame Leopold’s work that allows students to appreciate his contributions (loving) while allowing for timescales and perspectives that frame Leopold’s contributions differently than without such additional readings (critique).

Pedagogical Approach

Another vital topic in our Foundations class is teaching students about the ethics of environmental teaching. We continue to use the somewhat dated but provoking *Two Hats* essay, in which John Hug (1977) argues against wearing an environmental educator and environmental activist “hat” simultaneously when teaching environmental education. For several years, we have supplemented Hug’s article with a more nuanced look at environmental ethics by Bob Jickling (1983), and we consider arguments advanced by Christopher Scholttmann (2012) about the difference between teaching for advocacy and autonomy.

In prior versions of this class, we used a debate structure to have students consider the different advocacy approaches, which was an effective pedagogical strategy. However, an anti-racist approach suggests teaching differently, from a collaborative dialogical approach rather than a competitive approach focused on explicit or implicit “winners.” Even without a winner, a pedagogical approach of “rational/argumentative discussion” (typical of debates), as Senge (1990, p.240) suggests, comes from the same root word as percussion and concussion, which insinuates clashing ideas rather than integrating ideas among students. Thus, as we reframe the class pedagogy away from argument-posing discussions and toward dialogue, we hope students will gain clearer insight than they might from a debate format. Of course, the students have no way to know that we make such changes unless we tell them. Thus, a meta lesson on the choice of pedagogical



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technique will frame an essential part of this pedagogy lesson.

Though this is only one example, we are similarly shifting activities and discussions to “flatten the hierarchy” as much as possible in ways that reflect Power and Equity considerations beyond topics and content. That is, we want to commit to building the pedagogical agency of our students and do so explicitly. We communicate to them that if we cannot provide any apparent reason—or if they cannot verbalize—for why a reading or activity is directly relevant to our shared goals as environmental educators, then we remove it and re-evaluate what to include. Suppose we cannot explain how a course topic best applies to their efficacy as environmental educators in a contemporary context, theoretical understanding, pedagogical ability, or students’ environmental and social lives. In that case, it does not belong in its current form in this Critical Foundations course; we would alter or remove it and explicitly communicate to the students that we did so according to their feedback.

Community Linking

Banks’ (2009) social action approach requires that “students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them” (233). This approach follows closely with Kishimoto’s (2018) third principle of anti-racist teaching and our emphasis on hands-on experiential learning for the entire TREE Semester. While our weekly, five-hour fifth-grade teaching sessions focus more on scientific inquiry and open-ended ecologically-oriented projects that should have local community relevance, their connection to community issues is not always evident, primarily when projects focus more on ecological principles than social-environmental values.

In contrast, the TREE students’ planning and teaching of their 10-hour high school curriculum allows for greater freedom of topics and exploring more complex issues. With our enhanced reading of critical theorists like bell hooks and Paulo Freire earlier in our curriculum, we hope to inspire our students to use these critical dialogs in their curriculum planning and teaching. While much has been debated about teaching critical race theories in

schools, there should be little debate about the necessity of teaching students skills required to take critical actions. Such lessons can allow students to help their communities, inspire their self-efficacy, and promote an internal locus of control, aspects linked to environmental action (Hungerford & Volk 1990). One example project might build upon our prior work (Harness & Drossman 2011), where students devised, created, and posted short videos on recycling and water conservation. As we noted in this prior work, one missing pedagogy was promoting students' work to the public. Adding such promotional pieces may help provide students with action skills that motivate a sense of power by witnessing the successful results of their actions.

Conclusion

The use of loving critique provides a balanced approach to make the study of critical theories truly critical, an approach often ignored in a "cancel" culture. In other words, often in undergraduate courses, critical theory focuses on criticizing the status quo. This critique is valuable and valid. However, because many actors, ideas, and movements about which we talk and focus were indeed attempting to shift away from a problematic status quo in their time, we do not want to figuratively throw out the baby with the bathwater. We hope that a loving critique, which recognizes the contexts and contributions of works and authors we are critiquing, is indeed the most critical form of critical thinking, in which we question assumptions, biases, and actions yet do so with rigor and evaluative depth rather than as blanket cancellations. In this way, we can better acknowledge the contentious and multifaceted history of environmentalism, environmental movements, and education in general while moving forward with expansive and deeply complex ideas about what environmentalism can look like in the future.

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Juan Miguel Arias is a Riley Postdoctoral Scholar-in-Residence at Colorado College teaching Environmental Education and Educational Psychology.



Howard Drossman is a Professor of Environmental Education at Colorado College and Director of the TREE Semester.

