



Implementing Ecojustice Praxis in Children's Literature Courses

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Abstract

Faculty must do more to include ecojustice pedagogy, including climate change education, in higher education. This article describes how I infused ecojustice pedagogy into my undergraduate children's literature course. I share my experiences on developing an ecojustice praxis over a three-semester period. Using the three prongs of sustainability (ecology, economics, and equity), I provide suggestions for incorporating texts, vocabulary, and heuristics, specific activities and assignments.

Keywords

Ecojustice praxis, children's literature, ecojustice pedagogy

Research demonstrates that faculty should implement environmental justice topics, including climate change education, in higher education courses (Álvarez-García et al., 2015; Coleman & Gould, 2019; [International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021](#)). My research supports these findings. I spent three semesters collecting data about implementing ecojustice topics in undergraduate children's literature courses. [Ecojustice pedagogy](#)—a practical application of [ecojustice education](#)—recognizes the brutality and injustice that historically minoritized peoples and the natural world

experience, as perpetuated through language and social/cultural assumptions, while enabling learners to rectify social-ecological oppression ([Lupinacci et al., 2018](#); [Martusewicz et al., 2021](#)). Ecojustice pedagogy is the intersection of social and ecological justice.

My research demonstrated that students, primarily pre-service teacher candidates, consistently viewed eco literature, environmental topics, and ecojustice pedagogy (teaching methods and content) as essential and craved such a curriculum. Faculty also desired more professional development in these areas. They cited the lack of knowledge as the most significant reason for not including more ecojustice pedagogy in their children's literature courses.

As part of my study, I infused ecojustice pedagogy into my undergraduate children's literature course. I used the three critical Es of sustainability (ecology, economics, and equity) as a framework for incorporating ecojustice pedagogy (Edwards, 2015). Good teaching is continual praxis; hopefully, these ideas invite educators to engage in their own cycle of theory, practice, and critical reflection to create their own repertoires of ecojustice pedagogy.

Ecology

Pillar one, ecology, requires five moves. The first is incorporating sustainability, environmental, and climate texts in course materials. Fleischman's (1997) *Seedfolks*, Gantz's (2022) *Two Degrees*, Henderson's (2018) [Wilderness Wars](#), Klein's (2021) [How to Change Everything](#), Little Badger's (2021) *A Snake Falls to Earth*, and Magnason's (1999) [The Story of the Blue Planet](#) are a few suggestions. See climatelit.org for additional suggestions. My emphasis focused on stories that reimagine relationships with humans and the planet rather than dystopian stories focused on exploitation, fear, and hopelessness ([Damico et al., 2020](#); [Oziewicz, 2023](#)).

Move two is sharing eco justice vocabulary. Children's literature textbooks typically have a chapter defining literary, social and cultural diversity terms. I have begun including ecological and justice vocabulary at the beginning of the semester, along with these other definitions. Some of the terms I highlight include [climate literacy](#), [ecoliteracy](#), [ecocide](#), [ecojustice](#), and [ecofiction](#). Students are also referred to [Climate Lit](#), which houses a growing glossary of climate literature terms.

Move three consists of including an ecocritical lens throughout the course and discussing ways students can infuse [ecocriticism](#) in their own classrooms. Multiple sources offer questions to introduce and develop students' ecoliteracy ([Gaard, 2008](#); Russell, 2019; [Bradfield, 2020](#)). Some questions that could be asked include: What role does the environment play in literature? Does nature have its own agency? What language and literary devices (vocabulary, metaphors, anthropomorphism) are used to describe the environment and animals? How might this language shape readers' understanding of people and the natural world? What is the relationship between humans and nature in the text? Are humans unaware, dismissive, exploiting, "saving," or engaged in reciprocity with the environment? Gaard (2008) emphasizes the need to "analyze EcoJustice problems" holistically and the importance of building connections to nature (p. 20). Her work is foundational for faculty beginning to incorporate ecojustice aspects into their courses.

Finally, move four is exposing students to a variety of ecojustice resources. My research indicated that students' knowledge of environmental and ecojustice topics increased significantly from exposure. What children's literature educators emphasize in their classes helps future educators decide what is valuable. Thus, I emphasize exposure, providing a wealth of climate change, environmental justice topics, and ecojustice pedagogy relating to children's literature. Some materials are appropriate for discussion, others for assignments, and others for reference.

For example, I used an assignment where students responded to an article using critical reflection after being asked: What aspect stood out to you or was especially important when reading this article? Many *Climate Literacy in Education* (CLE) articles are appropriate and effective. I also used two essays: Oziewicz's ([2022](#)) advocacy piece describing children's stories as a tool for social transition and Bradfield's ([2020](#)) short piece about using an ecocritical lens when teaching children's literature. Bradfield relies heavily on Gaard's ([2008, 2009](#)) ideas of ecopedagogy but I found the style and length of Bradfield's article more accessible than Gaard's original for an undergraduate children's literature course. Additionally, short pedagogical articles and stories for undergraduate children's literature classes can be found in [Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene](#) (Oziewicz et al., 2022), while longer pedagogical articles are in [Pedagogy in the Anthropocene: Re-Wilding Education for a New Earth](#) (Paulsen, 2022).

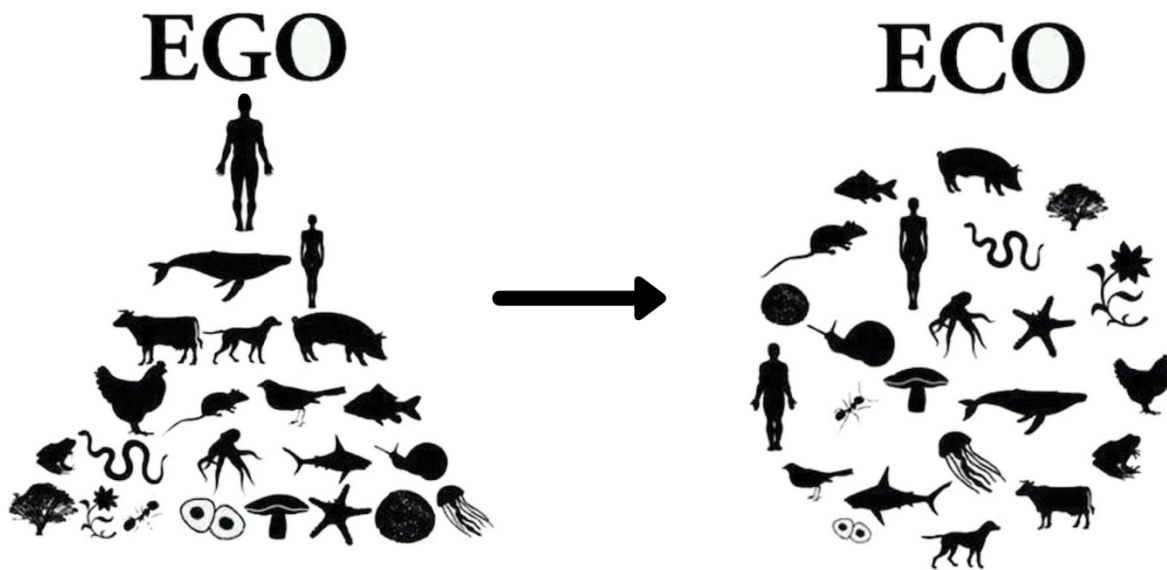
Economics

The other pillar of ecojustice pedagogy is economics: asking students to consider who benefits economically from the particular forms of human relationships to the earth we notice in the stories we read. Questions such as how humans quantify the value of nature, who gains from destruction, who pays for environmental cleanup, and what kind of relationships people have with nature are good starting places. Picturebooks like [The Lorax](#) (Dr. Seuss, 1971) or *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964) allow students to analyze messages about interdependence and responsibility. Students regularly share that they had never considered climate literacy messages picturebooks portray. Gaard (2009) has a helpful discussion about *The Lorax* and other environmental-focused picturebooks, while [artist Topher Payne](#) provides an alternative ending for *The Giving Tree*. By including a close reading of a picturebook examining people's relationship with the earth early in the semester, students may better understand that even popular or well-known books can include problematic messages about humans and the natural world. Such readings, with subsequent discussions, prepare students to be critical readers. González's (2017) [All Around Us](#) and Lindstrom's (2020) [We Are Water Protectors](#) are more earth-centric and ecojustice-focused picturebooks, which I use later in the course as a counterbalance to Dr. Seuss' and Silverstein's classics.

Equity

The third pillar of ecojustice education is equity. Exploring it requires two moves: showcasing the [Kinship, Ecocentric or Ecological Worldview](#) as an alternative to the dominant Anthropocentric Worldview. The latter places "man" on the top of a pyramid of beings with "woman" and larger animals cascading downward until the base layer of smaller plants, animals, and insects, traditionally deemed less important in Western culture. The former worldview emphasizes the interdependences of all creatures. Figure 1 illustrates the two worldviews.

Figure 1
Worldviews



Source: From "Ego vs. Eco" figure credited on the internet to the creative commons. This image is from Eco-Vision Sustainable Learning Center Non-Profit Organization in Delvavan, Wisconsin who developed this image along with the organization Generation Alpha (Martusewicz et al., 2021).

The other move is, logically, a critical discussion of the logic of domination. Students learn to recognize that the subordination of certain groups over others, including humans over the natural world, is perpetuated by cultural assumptions and metaphors and that it causes and sanctions injustices for people and the planet (Martusewicz et al., 2021). There are many ways to discuss how socio-linguistic metaphors sustain and increase social and ecological oppression. One way is to avoid stereotypes about gender, including describing nature as female. Discussion and reflection about why nature is often aligned as female is useful. Questions might include: Does the author provide gendered attributes of nature? Are these positive or negative associations? Why might one align nature with woman/female? What are the benefits and problems with assigning gender to nature? Who profits from such assignments? Who does not? How do these assignments relate to an ecological worldview?

Final Ideas for Engaging in Praxis

Introducing new vocabulary, showcasing images of earth-centric worldviews, reading articles, non-fiction texts, and novels exposes students to ecojustice pedagogy; however, students need to engage in praxis themselves. The following two assignments lend themselves to such engagement.

Have students evaluate representations of environmental inclusion and justice in picturebook portrayals. One assignment has students evaluate three picture books from those loosely grouped into two categories: diversity/social justice and environmental/ecological justice. After reading the three books, students choose one and write an analysis of the book's content and images. The assignment requires students to examine the interaction between text and images and respond to questions relating to previously introduced terms, such as protagonists and bibliotherapy.

Another assignment centers on developing ecojustice criteria that can be applied to children's literature. Children's literature courses usually include a learning outcome related to developing criteria for evaluating children's literature, such as diversity, quality, or genre markers, such as for graphic novels. In my Children's Literature course, students list three to five criteria they would use to evaluate literature based on an ecojustice ethic. Sometimes, I compile the suggestions into one list or have the students comment on each other's suggestions. I also ask students to consider the three components of sustainability, reflecting how ecology, economics, and equity manifest throughout texts and the course.

Higher education faculty must incorporate environmental topics and ecojustice pedagogy into their courses. Similarly, colleges and universities need to provide professional development to help faculty infuse such pedagogy throughout their curriculum. Implementing ecojustice praxis in undergraduate children's literature courses is a significant start. Hopefully, the above ideas can be used as inflection points for children's literature faculty so that they can identify, create, and increase an ecojustice ethic and implement ecojustice praxis in their courses.

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