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Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 1, Number
3, Fall 2014, pp. 42-53 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



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We Don't Need No Education

A Case Study for Situating the Environmental Humanities

JOHAN GÄRDEBO, DANIEL HELSING,
ANNA SVENSSON, AND ADAM BRENTHEL

Introduction

As the environmental humanities (EH) are emerging and establishing themselves as a vital research field,¹ enquiries into the field's educational role are gaining in importance. There are at least two reasons to think that novel pedagogical ideas are needed. Firstly, in EH, questions concerning the relations between theory, practice, outreach, and impact take on special importance.² Secondly, the inherently interdisciplinary nature of EH has fostered collegial dissensus, building the field through ongoing dialogue.³

Before EH can profess a philosophy,⁴ it ought to have its practice; before global causes, there are situated cases. When influencing others outside academia, it becomes more important for *us* to see what is inside it. And pedagogy, we argue, is part of the innovative knowledge production that EH seeks to explore.⁵ To understand how concepts and visions of EH are operationalized, we use education of the field as an indicator. We wish to explore how EH can *make sense* to students.

In this paper, we experiment with how EH achieves outreach through interaction with students, our point of departure being that the field is relevant in terms of outreach only to the extent it can make sense to the uninitiated. We explore this position through discussing a doctoral course in EH where we, the authors, participated as students.

To conceptualize a pedagogy of EH we use the course Situating the Environmental Humanities, held at Lund University, Sweden, with re-

searchers from across the nation.⁶ While caught amid the storm Xaver, which in December 2013 wreaked havoc on southern Scandinavia, participating PhD students practiced situating themselves and their research topics in EH. One such situating practice was a position paper in which students developed common concepts within EH in relation to their own work. Papers were written prior to the start of the course and were discussed subsequently at course dinners and evening activities. One recurring question was what an education program of EH would look like. As a continuation of this ongoing discussion, *Situating the Environmental Humanities* is used here as a case study of how the learning environment of EH is being situated.

We will elaborate the situating practices, reflecting on traditional areas of the humanities. Examples thereof are ways of *writing*, *sensing*, *seeing*, and *shaping* environments.⁷ We have assumed a local stance, placing ourselves in the center and in an environment from which plans for pedagogy may be sketched out.⁸ Regardless of its wider applicability, there is at this stage relevance in starting pedagogical studies from the experiences of students (i.e., ourselves). As lab rats of EH, we are the subject matter of this grand experiment and, at the same time, are trying to make the field into a home of sorts.

Situating the Environmental Humanities encouraged us to explore intellectual common ground among a multitude of related fields and disciplines, though it by and large kept eluding us. There are a variety of definitions of environment and views on the normativity of science. The explorative and experimental condition of tertiary-level education programs has enticed us to respond in kind, keeping the format of a polyphonic discussion, a *polylogue*, to mirror how different ideas evolved.⁹ The authors will reflect on how EH was performed and will seek to situate teachers and students in this learning environment. Although maintaining dissensus, the ambition is to find intellectual common ground, however brittle, and ways forward by jointly addressing what a pedagogy of the environmental humanities is.

Polylogue

Daniel Helsing: I wish to highlight two ways in which the self was brought up and into the course: conceptually and practically. In most disciplines, especially within the humanities and the social sciences,

an awareness of the position of the self of the researcher is important. This holds for the environmental humanities as well, and here another dimension is added: in addition to recognizing gender, ethnicity, and class, the self is also recognized to be that of a (human) animal, sharing the planet on which it finds itself with other (kinds of) animals. This further situatedness, especially in conjunction with the idea of anthropogenic climate change, raises important questions regarding the self and its position.¹⁰

On the conceptual level, two ideas seem to me to be particularly important, and they unsettle the concept of the human from two different directions, so to speak. Firstly, referring to Derrida and deconstructing the human-animal divide, Cary Wolfe asserts the idea that human beings are already nonhuman: “‘We’ are always radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being.”¹¹ Secondly, human beings collectively have acquired an agency of geological magnitude, epitomized in the concept of the “Anthropocene.”¹² In both cases, the idea of human beings as relatively self-enclosed agents, with “the environment” acting as a background, is challenged; essentialist notions about humanity are deconstructed.¹³

But the self was not only challenged on a conceptual level; there was also a practical dimension to the involvement of the self. This happened through writing and narrating exercises, one example being the position paper mentioned in the introduction. In one class, we were asked to give a narrative account of an event or experience that changed our ways of perceiving or conceiving the world.¹⁴ We spent about one hour on this exercise, each participant relating a narrative account followed by a brief discussion. In another workshop, we were asked to contemplate and recount, what is at stake in our own research in relation to the environmental humanities.¹⁵ In yet another workshop, we did creative-writing exercises.¹⁶ One exercise consisted of closing our eyes and listening, absorbing the very local and concrete environment, and then writing about what we had heard. In these workshops, we were forced to think about our own positions, both as human beings in relation to the world and as researchers in relation to the environmental humanities. These exercises were challenging not only intellectually but also emotionally, since they involved us formulating and conveying to others experiences that (potentially) were of great importance to us—such as the narrative account of an event or experience that changed our view of things.

Anna Svensson: One aspect of the situated self is the learner's relation to the group. I would like to reflect on the particular implications of the collective nature of EH—an emerging field that lacks established boundaries—as both a strength and a potential obstacle to a good learning environment in this experiment in the spirit of debate and diversity. At this early stage, EH students all have a previous disciplinary identity, with a particular set of analytical tools, knowledge base, and expectations. With this in mind, the question of how to deal with and indeed accommodate for difference becomes fundamental. I would like to mention two areas that were discussed during the workshop: the role of the sciences in EH and the challenge of clashing ontologies.

To begin with the former, it is important to consider how EH positions itself in relation to the sciences. Are they part of the dialogue? The name environmental *humanities* itself does not suggest working together on equal terms. As there were few workshop participants with a scientific background, the supposed attitudes and practices of the sciences that were invoked were necessarily largely shaped by external views, risking a simplified or incorrect understanding of what is in effect a vast range of disciplines and diverse perspectives. I believe it is essential that students with scientific backgrounds are part of the dialogue, part of the collective, but without any party compromising too much.

As PhD students, we are subject to formal requirements that involve abiding by certain disciplinary rules and conventions. Martin Hultman advised choosing a theoretical and methodological framework that maintains ontological consistency, which makes sense in terms of academic survival. However, this enforces the utopian quality of scholarship as a conflict-free zone, which demands coherence, at least on the ontological level.¹⁷ The obstacles that beset policy making in relation to climate change are part of the world of ontological contradiction in which we live; and if we want to do something about it, we must find more generous frameworks.

In terms of pedagogical approaches, the writing workshop Daniel describes serves as a good example of a simple collective exercise that enacts the situatedness of the learner. For the writing exercises, we were split into small interactive groups, and the diversity of the texts that were produced from the same instructions illustrate both the importance of individual experience and interpretation and the multiplicity of stories—like a polylogue. This brings to mind the reflections of novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on “the danger of a single story.”¹⁸

EH pedagogy should involve crafting and circulating multiple stories, a diversity that is the product of dialogue within a collective.

I believe the humanities have the potential to accommodate multiplicity and contradiction without losing coherence and purpose. The challenge is how to find a common language within a diverse group of students without shutting down the heterogeneity, without ignoring the individual perspectives that are so important in order to uphold a dialogue.

Johan Gärdebo: One of the chosen challenges of EH is to increase outreach of humanist research. This might relate to finding common language, which I think of as frameworks for recognizing and discussing multiple meanings of terminology. Consider what we infer by “environment.” “Environment” has been defined, tossed, and turned and indignantly mustered in favor of both proactionary and precautionary approaches.¹⁹ It is now (re)defined as a social concept in order for the humanities to legitimately interact with and study environments.²⁰ “Environment” has also been imbued with concerns for human relations to the physical world and of describing these circumstances.²¹ As mentioned by Daniel, the question of what is at stake in our research recurred frequently during sessions of *Situating the Environmental Humanities*.²² The commonality is then not necessarily the humanities but the environmental imperative that researchers have rallied behind and are now seeking consortiums to work within.

So having defined “environment,” what did the “outreach” of EH mean in our course? Worth mentioning is that “outreach” as a guiding principle for education and research development is not unique to EH but is proliferating throughout several social sciences.²³ In discussions and literature, “outreach” took on quite different expressions, ranging from influencing policy to performing varying degrees of activism.²⁴

Many lecturers themselves cultivated an activist stance and interacted with policy makers, but how does this guide the field, or a pedagogy, of EH? One such example is the degree to which students are trained to situate themselves in environments and circumstances, which draw on feminist studies discussing *the self* in relation to scientific modes and political stands on scholarship.²⁵ In a similar vein, we as students were asked to situate ourselves in an environment and consider the cultural and material preconditions of education.²⁶ It is this locality that we, as *Homo academicus*, would need to understand and (re)shape adequately, to speak of outreach or shaping others’ environment.

Adam Brenthel: The natural world is changing, as is academia; and I argue that EH is symptomatic of the changes.²⁷ What we are entering goes by different names; “postdisciplinary” is one that was used during the course. Johan Gärdebo writes that we need to understand this new locality, to (re)shape ourselves as *Homo academicus*, in order to speak to others outside academia.²⁸ I am hesitant to fully agree, as Bourdieu’s sociological treatment of academic life states that we need lose self-loving tendencies. Again in the light of Bourdieu, we gain critical distance from EH when considering recurrent appeals to the self; in contemporary society, as within academia, an entrepreneurial character is fostered. EH evolves with the changes of academia, and it is a perfect (post)discipline for a research institute beyond traditional faculty boundaries. I see a breakup of the traditional university, as part of adapting to surrounding society, not necessarily as a good thing. Through a constant interpellation of the self, I interpreted the course Situating the Environmental Humanities as constructing scholars (us) as potential world-saving heroes, what Bourdieu labels as self-indulgent narcissists.²⁹

Consequently, the field of EH will probably be a productive research field in times of change (i.e., societal, environmental, and academic change). But whether the postdisciplinary academic situation is an intellectual response to the changing society and the challenges it faces, or simply a politicoeconomical effect of the same, is another question that could be called ideological. We will have to wait and see whether EH really will have an outreach that makes a difference for anyone beyond the scholars engaged in the field.

Daniel: I wish to elaborate some more on *writing*, concerning Anna’s reference to Adichie and the dangers of a single narrative. Fundamentally, Anna highlights the basic importance of stories in organizing our views of things. As a literary scholar, I often think about how the narratives we perceive and construct shape views of other living beings, the world, and ourselves. And I believe it is nontrivial to point out that writing about something, or giving narrated accounts, changes one’s perception of that thing. Writing about an event in one’s diary, for example, does not just bring order to confused thoughts and feelings that were already there; rather, the act of writing about the event is productive *in itself*, in the sense that it brings forth new aspects that were not there prior to the writing. Of course, not everything is produced in the act of narrativizing, and bringing order to previously existing thoughts

does occur as well. But still, the productive aspect of writing and narrativizing ought not to be forgotten.

For this reason, I believe that the exercises that included narrativizing one's experiences were very valuable, and I believe that exercises of this kind ought to be used more in education. And this holds especially for EH, I would argue, since in narrativizing our experiences we become involved in the narrative in a very concrete way. And if that narrative revolves around changes in one's perception of the environment in some way, then one could really talk about situating oneself in the environment as well as in the environmental humanities.

Anna: Perhaps this productive aspect of writing is often overlooked because writing is already such a central academic activity. We take it for granted. The opposite is true of *sensing*—it is hard to spot as it is usually suppressed. Unlike other situating categories, I couldn't immediately think of any examples of sensing while reflecting on Situating the Environmental Humanities. I believe the absence of sensing to be symptomatic of the privileged position of sight and its relation to objectivity and reason in academia.³⁰ While the situatedness and embodied nature of the self, of the learner, is becoming a commonplace, there is still an anxiety about how to construct knowledge based on other ways of sensing: hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling, which compared to sight are more internalized in the body of the knower, as well as other qualities such as empathy, memory, trust, and hope.³¹

Pedagogy of EH is an opportunity to experiment with ways in which these other ways of knowing can be validated and incorporated. This may also be a clue to activating knowledge and motivating changes in behavior.

Adam: I agree that the scientific ocular centrism is ideologically conditioned and that this explains to some extent the absence of other senses, apart from *seeing*, in pedagogy. Nevertheless, the critique neither is new nor applies specifically to EH. The denigration of vision dates back to Plato and continues into modern time with increased intensity.³² I would say that we see this in the embracement of the multisensory bodily engagement and behavioral change, as discussed by Anna above. But I would say that neither seeing nor multisensory excitation is enough for behavioral change, which more likely comes from a human potential to imagine beyond what can be sensed.³³

Still, there are many good examples of documentaries that convey

a feeling for the world and what is coming. For instance, in the artistic documentary *Chasing Ice*, photographer James Balog cooperated with scientists in telling the story of a changing climate.³⁴ With a stroke of luck, Balog's camera catches the event of huge ice sheets collapsing—imagery capable of mediating to an audience what is happening in the Arctic. The film says more than climate scientists often convey with words.

As with the camera eye, I would say that collaboration between art and science could be a productive way for a pedagogy of EH to do something that transgresses disciplinary boundaries. Open for artists to contribute, this would embrace dissensus even further but also facilitate shaping beyond our own limited academic toolbox, where writing still is our sharpest tool.

Johan: Whether or not to normatively shape environment, students could train by inquiring into ethical complexities to assess civic environmental values.³⁵ Education could identify various types of activism in political, and environmental, movements as well as the mobilization of ecological concepts for populist agendas.³⁶ The Living History Forum, a Swedish public authority, used the Holocaust as a starting point in developing education programs for human rights.³⁷ Beware though, if a hypothetical Living Environment Forum, in a similar vein, highlights singular environmental events and human misconducts, it risks ending as a museum of accidents, lacking the critical communication of self-relation to its visitors.³⁸ Instead, a contribution might be to provide examples of human endeavors and struggles won. Regarding a pedagogy of EH, it ought to hone a student's sense of how humans shape environment and also ourselves, not by intention but while doing *other* things.³⁹

In the learning environment, speaking of shaping is also a means to including the agency of students in shaping that environment. And while the visionary outreach of educational efforts are intriguing, a pedagogy of EH begins with more local efforts—narrating as a form of shaping. In *Situating the Environmental Humanities* we were asked to unfold the education environment and its infrastructure: the air-conditioned seminar room, the reliance on projectors for Power-Point presentations, food served to keep moral high, transports to fetch lecturers nationwide, all parts shaping the course. But so too was the storm Xaver, omnipresent and impeding movement, stopping trains in their tracks, keeping lecturers and students in situ days after the course had finished. The world was shaping the academic environment, sensu-

ally and literally, as we made time to conceptualize why this became an integral part of our pedagogical experience of EH.

Conclusion

In this paper, two experimental elements for a pedagogy of EH stood out: exploring the possibilities of learning as part of a collective through dialogue and situating the self in the environment and in EH. The inclusion of students in reinterpreting traditional practices of the humanities is a means for reinterpreting the *writing, seeing, sensing, and shaping* of environment. But while it situates learning, it also makes students part of crafting new narratives. As part of this experiment, the paper's outline as a polylogue made visible and incorporated the multiplicity of perspectives already present in EH. And lest it become just another brick in the wall, a pedagogy of EH will depend on its ability to situate the learner in a variety of perspectives and environments.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Johan Gärdebo is a PhD candidate in the Division of History of Science, Technology, and Environment at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden. Johan studies how late-twentieth-century technologies allowed and influenced sensing of environments. The remote sensing satellites SPOT and ERS-1 exemplify the production of Earth imagery through overlapping and competing projects.

Daniel Helsing is a PhD student in comparative literature at Lund University. In his PhD project Helsing studies Swedish essay books and popular-science books within natural-science subjects from about 1975 through 2015. He focuses on cosmological and evolutionary narratives, expressions of wonder, and representations of climate change, studying textual aspects (e.g., narrative structures) as well as contextual aspects (e.g., "the two cultures").

Anna Svensson is a PhD candidate in the Division of History of Science, Technology, and Environment at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden. She applies a background in English literature (in which she obtained a degree from Oxford in 2008) and international museum studies (also earning a degree from Oxford in 2012) to studying the role of collections in the history of botany. Her primary focus is on the establishment of the University of Oxford Botanic Garden (founded in 1621), exploring the utopian elements of botanical practice. She is a member of the KTH Environmental Humanities Laboratory.

Adam Brenthel is currently working on the dissertation "The Drowning World," on the use of water figures in climate change visualizations. It will be defended

in September 2015 and shows how the sciences need to use expressions from visual regimes outside their own to visualize the “unpresentable.” Brenthel teaches in the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at Lund University and develops the master’s course *Visual Culture: Environment and Nature* as well as lectures at the Centre of Environmental and Climate Research.

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