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Good Reads for Teaching about Sustainability

A. G. RUD

I teach in a doctoral program in cultural studies and social thought in education at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. I am a New England native and was raised there through college, before graduate school in the Midwest, followed by jobs in New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Indiana. Thus, my home in the Pacific Northwest is new to me, as are the issues here in the West surrounding sustainability and environmental challenges. I live in one of the richest agricultural areas of the world, the Palouse, near the southeastern border of Washington and Idaho. There is a strong sense of place here and a pride in the fertile farmland. We are impacted by world economic and environmental issues in immediate ways that I couldn't have imagined before moving here. Around 80 percent of the wheat grown here is shipped by barge on the Columbia River to Portland, Oregon, and out to Asia for noodles. I never thought about the scarcity of water or about wolf populations when I lived east of the Mississippi, but I do now. I also see the impact of climate change here and know that wheat, lentil, and chickpea farmers here realize the importance of this issue, but I read about its even stronger effects occurring now in other parts of the world.

I realize that my teaching position is privileged. I work with a very diverse group of mostly doctoral students from around the world and other parts of the United States. Not only are the ethnic and racial backgrounds of my students diverse, but so are their career aspirations. Some aim to be professors of education at research universities, working to explore how broad cultural forces and the academic disciplines

of history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology impact teachers and administrators in schools as well as educational policy in various government agencies. Others intend to work as administrators in schools anywhere from preschool through twelfth grade or in higher education, or in an educational capacity in government, museums, or social service agencies. I enjoy seeing ways in which my teaching and advising graduate students can bring about change in consciousness about and support of sustainability and environmentalism. My students help me to discover insights in these I could not have imagined.

The books I have chosen here as good reads for teaching about sustainability include favorites I have reread often as well as some new selections that I have barely come to appreciate. What ties them together is how I use them in my teaching, either for inspiration to keep me focused on topics in sustainability and the environment or in their explicit pedagogical usefulness in getting students to learn about and grapple with a particular topic or worldview. Since my students are so diverse, I want to hear voices that not only speak to them but challenge me to look through and past the dominant culture to which I belong as we seek to understand other ideas and images of sustainability and the environment. I am committed to teaching for inclusion of many voices from which we may all learn.

I have provided citations to the editions I own, mostly for purposes of identification so readers can look them up and perhaps use them in their own teaching or research. There are other editions and publishers of some of these books.

Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)

I return often to Bekoff's work, sometimes daily, and appreciate his interest in my own work. He urges us all to consider how we are human animals and that nonhuman animals have many of the attributes we think are distinctly human, such as emotion. Bekoff shows the continuum of emotions in animals including humans. I have used this book's insights to inform my teaching of ethics, especially to highlight the roots of ethical reasoning. From reading him over the years and collaborating on projects, I am reminded to see ourselves as part of a whole, rather than in dominion over that which is not human, in order to work with rather than against the earth and its other inhabitants.

Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe NM: Clear Light Publishers, 2000)

I teach a class about ways of knowing and their educational applications, titled Epistemology, Representation, and Inquiry, with the specific goal to highlight ways of knowing that complement or challenge the dominant mode of Western rationality. I have found the work of Gregory Cajete useful in talking to my students about the interconnections of Native ways of knowing with other, less dominant Western modes of thinking, such as that of Albert Schweitzer and John Dewey. Cajete's work shows how inquiry done within a Native scientific framework shows the connection of life in all its manifestations. This insight is important and complements Kathleen Dean Moore's book cited below.

Dave Foreman, *Rewilding North America: A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century* (Washington DC: Island Press, 2004)

I have turned recently to the new concept in conservation biology called "rewilding" for further inspiration in my teaching and research for how to live sustainably and restore habitats, particularly for top roaming carnivores that require large expanses in which to roam. I take this scientific idea of rewilding and apply it to education, where teaching and learning about nature would place humans as part of nature, not superior to it. Rewilded humans would be aware of being dependent on others in nature, the way we were prior to massive changes brought about by our encroaching human population.

Paul Gruchow, *The Necessity of Empty Places* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1999)

I have long admired Gruchow's work and was grieved to learn of his suicide. I met him once in North Carolina, where I worked at a teacher renewal center; and he had come with some folks from Minnesota to observe, as they considered a similar venture for that state. Gruchow appreciated what we were trying to do when we brought teachers to a mountain retreat where they could focus on a new topic and have the time to think and reflect in a hospitable atmosphere. When I think of sustainability, I think, too, of empty places that are not cultivated, mined, inhabited, or otherwise "humanized." These empty places are

real, and for him they were in the upper Midwest of Minnesota and the Dakotas. But there is also an interior emptiness, room where we don't put instrumentalities or banal things, an emptiness that can be sustaining and enable one to appreciate where you are and what is around you.

Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*
(New York: Random House, 2006)

I recently reread this book, which drew widespread attention to climate change when it was first published in the 1980s. McKibben talks about how we have unalterably changed nature so that we may now be at "the end of nature." If that is the case, and it appears to be so, I ask my students to discuss how we are to live. The only answer I can see is to live with sustainability in mind, if only to honor what may have been lost forever. However, this answer has prompted students to consider what may be important here and now and possibly even to trust that we will think and act our way out of this crisis. I don't agree with this viewpoint, and I think it is important to take McKibben's claim seriously and to think through what it means to be at the end of nature.

Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1995)

This book is a compilation of essays by a well-known environmental historian that specifically discusses the historical interaction of women and nature. The role of women in any cultural endeavor is important not only for my thinking but for the way that I teach. As a white middle-class male "of a certain age," I was not initially exposed to sustainability and environmental thinking through women's ways of knowing. Eco-feminism enlarges my field of study and shows a different history and way to envision environmental activism than I had considered. This in itself is pedagogically useful as members of the dominant culture in academia can then listen to and incorporate into their teaching other voices that have been marginalized in the past and that continue to be contested today.

William Least-Heat Moon, *PrairyErth: (A Deep Map)*
(New York: Mariner Books, 1999)

I read the author's well-known *Blue Highways* when it first came out but had not read this book until I participated in a place-based educational workshop here in the Palouse, where we sought to develop a multidisciplinary course on our very region. *PrairyErth* is a classic that aids reflection about sense of place and place-based thinking. I have not been to the rolling hills of central Kansas, but that does not matter, as this book encourages us all to think about where we live and how we interact with the earth around us over long periods of time and about how historical layers of activity and natural change in that place inform the present. This helps me consider how to teach about the significance of this particular place on the Washington-Idaho border to my students, most of whom come from elsewhere.

Kathleen Dean Moore, *The Pine Island Paradox:
Making Connections in a Disconnected World*
(Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2005)

The island of the title is small, the author tells us, "no bigger than a K-Mart parking lot" (6). Yet it and other land masses surrounded and defined by water sustain this author and prompt her to ask, "What is the place of human beings in the harmony of the whole, and what does that tell us about how we ought to act in the world?" (6). Harmony is sustainable, and yet we may need to fall out of harmony to appreciate how it is an achievement, how it is something we must work at. Moore looks to overcome the analytic separations of Western philosophy, of human versus nature, near versus far, and sacred versus mundane. These separations objectify and cut apart that which is whole. Moore is a philosopher, and I find that her use of nature to illustrate the analytic separations of Western philosophy is helpful to my own thinking as I teach about the holistic naturalism of John Dewey. Her thought also can be used to help think through the divisions we experience in education, evident in an age where curriculum and pedagogy often are aimed solely at enabling students to excel on external and top-down accountability and testing measures.

S. K. Robisch, *Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2009)

Last holiday season, I read news reports of an annual massacre of wolves and coyotes held as sport with prizes, the rationale simply being that it is legal hunting and, besides, we must rid the area of livestock predators. The Liam Neeson film *The Grey* (2011) portrayed wolves as bloodthirsty killers of humans, a demonized view supported by the recent Animal Planet documentary *Man-Eating Super Wolves*. The students I teach, though they may be from afar, are aware of and think about wolves and coyotes as they are here all around us. Robisch's book looks beyond the sensationalism we humans have attributed to wolves, to how they have been portrayed in literature, and reminds us of the majesty and connectedness we have with wolves in our imagination. Because they are so widely hunted and feared, wolves serve as a reminder of how we often violate and discard the nature to which we are part and how we imperil the earth with abandon for our human gain and supremacy. I am looking forward to using this book in my teaching because of how it links the wolf we all know and hear about in our region with the wolf of art and the imagination.

Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009)

Schweitzer is a complex figure who is not well-known today. The ethical insight that informed his life, what he called "Reverence for Life," helps me to think more closely about sustainability as I worked with a Schweitzer-inspired educational institute in Florida and wrote a book on Schweitzer and education. Schweitzer came to this thought after a struggle to ground ethics on a bedrock principle. He saw this clearly on a trip on the Ogooué River in present day Gabon, as a herd of hippos appeared. But the German word for reverence, *Ehrfurcht*, connotes awe, wonder, and fear, as one would have before a tornado; and these words describe a stance toward nature that is respectful and accepting, which I would like my students to ponder and appreciate.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (New York: Signet Classics, 2012)

I grew up in Massachusetts and read Thoreau early in high school. I later went back to study *Walden*, accompanied by Stanley Cavell's *The*

Senses of Walden. Finally, I read and taught Thoreau as someone prescient about what was happening in nineteenth-century America and what now continues to happen in our world, especially how we view nature and ourselves within it. *Walden* is a well-known classic and can be excavated anew for insights into sustainability. Thoreau did not implore others to join him in his cabin by Walden Pond but saw it as a life experiment to live simply and deliberately, to focus the mind and learn anew how to live. This reflection on how one lives is at the core of sustainability and how we can teach sustainability, and it may be necessary to visit this reflection repeatedly to begin to recover from unsustainable ways of inhabiting the earth.

Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)

The bedrock for sustainability is thought about the place of human animals in this world. If we acknowledge our own limitations and weaknesses, then we realize that there is much we do not comprehend. This attitude is reverence, recognized as a virtue in ancient cultures and now mostly forgotten or treated only as religious feeling or pious behavior. For me, sustainability is supported by awe and wonder at the natural world, and this feeling is part of that forgotten virtue of reverence. I return to this brief and elegant book again and again in my teaching and research as I think about sustainability, for I believe we see reverence in ideas of sustainability, in letting things be what they are and getting from them only what we need to live simply and generatively. The book's discussion of teaching and learning enables a wider discussion of the role and place of the forgotten virtue of reverence in our schools.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. G. Rud is a distinguished professor in the College of Education at Washington State University. His research focuses on the cultural foundations of education, with particular emphasis on the moral dimensions of teacher education, preschool through twelfth-grade educational leadership, and higher education. He is author of *Albert Schweitzer's Legacy for Education: Reverence for Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). He coedited *Teaching with Reverence: Reviving an Ancient Virtue for Today's Schools* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and *John Dewey at 150: Reflections for a New Century* (West Lafayette IN: Purdue University Press, 2009). He has published articles on human-animal interaction studies with Alan Beck in both *Kappan* and *Anthrozoös*.