Case study
Poetry and sustainability

Background / Context

The field trip is part of a level 3 undergraduate module entitled ‘Reinventing Nature: Contemporary Poetry and the Environment’. The aim of the module is to develop students’ awareness of the ways in which texts construct and deconstruct various attitudes to nature with particular reference to poetry and its ability to take us beyond instrumental and anthropocentric assumptions. The title, ‘Reinventing Nature’, stems from the fact that ideas about nature are reinvented all the time and that poets are also reinventors of these ideas themselves. Wordsworth, for example, changed our view of the Lake District forever. In exploring the variety of ways in which a number of contemporary poets engage with nature as a subject, students have to engage with and critique different social constructions of nature that are current at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

While English Studies has, over the last thirty years, engaged with issues of race, class and gender, until recently it has had little to say about environmental crisis. However, an increasing number of writers are dealing with the environment in their work. Living as we do in an age of unprecedented environmental change, it seems vital that we engage our students with writing which deals with issues such as pollution, global warming and population growth. A critical understanding of the ways such issues are negotiated in literature can help provide students with the tools necessary to understand the increasingly ‘heated’ debates surrounding, for example, global warming. Ultimately, students will carry such ideas with them when they graduate and will be able to engage more effectively in debates about what a socially and environmentally sustainable society might look like. The module also aims to make interdisciplinary connections, particularly with science. Our education system’s tendency towards specialisation means that most English undergraduates have only a limited understanding of scientific concepts such as evolution and climate change. Students are required to engage with a variety of scientific ideas through the poetry studied.

My motivation for organising the field trip was to engage students with an actual environment. After I finished my first degree, I worked for the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers as a schools officer. My brief was to engage children with a hands-on experience of the natural world. During this time I became aware not only of environmental issues, but also of the effects of direct sensuous experiences of nature. One aim of the field trip was therefore to give students an embodied experience of a natural environment. In addition to this, the field trip was intended to inculcate an understanding of basic ecological concepts related to one specific environment as well as raising awareness of the interdependence of the human and the natural.
Activities / Practice

Before embarking on the field trip, the students engaged with the work of a number of contemporary poets writing about nature, as well as interrogating concepts such as ‘Nature’, ‘Pastoral’ ‘Ecology’ and ‘Environmentalism’. The expectation was that by encountering and learning about a real environment, they would be able to begin to grasp how ecological concepts can inform our understanding of a nature, as well as seeing how we culturally construct many of our ideas about nature. Kingley Vale Nature Reserve is situated on the South Downs close to Chichester. The reserve is managed by Natural England and we were shown round by the local warden. The reserve contains a number of different habitats, including extensive yew woods as well as downland turf. However, Kingley Vale is not a natural landscape. It has been shaped by millennia of human activity. For example, there are three Bronze Age burial mounds on the summit of the hill. Remains of Neolithic field systems can also be seen in on the valley slopes. The areas of downland turf would quickly disappear under scrub if it were not for systematic grazing. The warden gave the students an account of the human as well as the natural history of the reserve, emphasising the ways in which humans have a hand in managing the natural processes that we saw around us.

Conclusions

The field trip was rated by many students as a highlight of the module. Comments suggested that it gave them a deeper understanding of the interrelationships between the natural and the human in a local environment. This increased understanding fed through into the seminar room, where student discussions of the work of specific poets often reflected the experience of the field trip. For example, on a number of occasions students referred specifically to the field trip when looking at the work of a poet who wrote about a particular landscape. It is of course very hard to quantify the overall effect of the field trip, or the module as whole for that matter, on students’ environmental awareness as such shifts in attitudes are often incremental and take may take place over long periods of time. However, I did ask students to fill in a questionnaire at the end of the module about whether their attitudes had changed because of the module. I began the questionnaire by asking students if they had had any experience of environmental issues at school and whether they thought this had affected their attitudes in any way. This interested me in particular because when I worked as a schools officer with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers in the nineteen eighties, the environment was high on the agenda in primary schools. The answers to these questions suggested that about half of the students had had some teaching about environmental issues at school. Bearing in mind that a few of the students were quite mature, I was surprised that more of the younger ones didn’t have some experience of the issues. Of those that did, most said it had made them more aware of their own impact on the planet. Asked about the impact of the current module, most students said that it had made them more aware of the issues. However, when asked whether their behaviour might change because of what they had learnt, the answers were more mixed. A number had clearly taken the module because they were already interested in environmental issues. Their answers tended to suggest they would carry on as before. A number did say they would consider issues such as driving and flying less and recycling more. However, a number gave answers that suggested that they saw the whole issue as so vast and removed from their own lives that any action would be futile.
This last response raises an important issue for Education for Sustainable Development. How do we raise students’ awareness of environmental issues without making the whole issue seem so overwhelming that personal action seems pointless? In fact I am careful in the module not to present environmental issues as intractable, but this is a perception that many may already bring to the course. However, I do think it is vital that education gives students some sense of agency.

**Bibliographical References**


Natural England, *Kingley Vale website*. 