

12-11-2015

Team-based Learning in the Humanities Classroom: “Women’s Environmental Writing” as a Case Study

Roxanne Harde

University of Alberta, rharde@augustana.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea

Recommended Citation

Harde, Roxanne (2015) "Team-based Learning in the Humanities Classroom: “Women’s Environmental Writing” as a Case Study," *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 6: Iss. 3, Article 11.
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea/vol6/iss3/11

Team-based Learning in the Humanities Classroom: “Women’s Environmental Writing” as a Case Study

Abstract

This essay presents the adaptation of Team-Based Learning (TBL) for a course that uses ecofeminist approaches to environmental literature. Developed originally for use in professional programs, TBL’s cornerstones are permanent learning teams, preparation, application, and timely assessment (Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2002). I wanted my students to examine literature about nature and sustainability in a way that would inform their ecological practice in the future. In this essay, I discuss the practice of using TBL in the environmental literature classroom, a strategy that has produced noticeable positive engagement from my students, engendering intellectual engagement with literature, the environment, and ecofeminist theory and criticism. I outline how TBL has proved an effective teaching strategy in the environmental literature classroom, showing the model’s value in a Humanities setting. I begin by detailing the goals of a course on women’s environmental literature and ecofeminist theory. Second, I explain how I applied TBL strategies of student and teacher accountability to the course by using Readiness Assessment Tests (RATs) and assigning permanent teams of five to eight students for regular discussion and peer evaluation. Third, I discuss ways in which a TBL approach to teaching women’s environmental literature encourages collaborative learning among students, and reflects the communal attitude that should be a part of ecofeminist learning and application. I also present students’ assessments of their experiences in the TBL classroom, along with my own evaluation, concluding that although the TBL method is initially labour intensive for both students and teachers, it is an ideal teaching method as it encourages accountability, regular feedback, and practical application of course material.

Cet article présente l’adaptation de l’apprentissage fondé sur l’esprit d’équipe (AFEÉ) pour un cours qui utilise des approches éco-féministes à la documentation environnementale. L’AFEÉ a été initialement développé pour être utilisé dans les programmes professionnels et ses principes fondamentaux sont des équipes d’apprentissage permanentes, la préparation, l’application et l’évaluation ponctuelle (Michaelsen, Knight & Fink, 2002). Je souhaitais que mes étudiants examinent la documentation publiée sur la nature et la durabilité d’une manière qui puisse influencer à l’avenir leurs pratiques écologiques. Dans cet article, je discute la pratique qui consiste à utiliser l’AFEÉ dans une salle de classe où l’on examine la documentation environnementale, une stratégie qui a eu pour résultat un engagement positif notoire parmi mes étudiants et a engendré un engagement intellectuel avec la documentation publiée, l’environnement et la théorie de l’éco-féminisme et de la critique. Je souligne comment l’AFEÉ s’est avéré être une stratégie d’enseignement efficace dans la salle de classe de documentation environnementale et je montre la valeur du modèle dans un cadre d’enseignement des humanités. Je commence par détailler les objectifs du cours sur la documentation environnementale féministe et sur la théorie de l’éco-féminisme. Ensuite, j’explique comment j’ai appliqué au cours les stratégies d’AFEÉ de responsabilité des étudiants et des professeurs en utilisant des tests d’évaluation de la préparation (Readiness Assessment Tests - RAT) et en divisant les étudiants en équipes permanentes de cinq à huit étudiants pour les discussions régulières et l’évaluation par les pairs. Puis je discute des manières dont l’approche de l’AFEÉ pour l’enseignement de la documentation environnementale féministe encourage l’apprentissage collaboratif parmi les étudiants et reflète l’attitude communale qui devrait faire partie de l’apprentissage et de l’application de l’éco-féminisme. Je présente également des évaluations où les étudiants expliquent leur expérience dans la salle de classe où l’on a pratiqué l’AFEÉ, ainsi que ma propre évaluation, et en conclusion, je montre que la méthode d’AFEÉ exige beaucoup de travail au début à la fois pour les

étudiants et pour les enseignants, mais qu'il s'agit d'une méthode d'enseignement idéale car elle encourage la responsabilité, la rétroaction régulière et l'application pratique de la matière du cours.

Keywords

team-based learning, ecofeminism, environmental writing

How might the long-term attitude of our students and other members of our culture toward environmental protection and restoration be affected by the teaching of works in our national and foreign literatures that are devoted to nature and environmental topics? The ideas taught today can become the practice of tomorrow, but only if they are taught today. (Murphy, 2009, p. 4)

In 2006, when I first taught “Women’s Environmental Writing,” a course that studies nature writing by women and ecofeminist theory, I combined a traditional lecture format with activities—such as group work, student and group reports, and notes on the board—to promote engaged learning, and the course received positive evaluations from the students. The students uniformly began the course with interest in the texts and the theoretical approaches, and with concern about environmental issues. Their work in class, and the term papers and projects they produced showed engagement with the literature and understanding of the connections between configurations and oppressions of women and the earth. Overall, they expressed a profound, even life-changing, commitment to environmentalism. I wanted all students in this class to be deeply affected; I wanted to fulfill Murphy’s (2009) mandate that “Those of us engaged in teaching and critiquing literature who intend to encourage social transformation in this direction need to provide models and sources that seem flexibly realizable by many, rather than only a few, of our students” (p. 19). Like Murphy (2009), I know that “assigning a book or teaching an entire course on such literature can, to echo Robert Frost, make all the difference” (p. 186). I wanted to make that difference, to teach all my students literature in a way that would inform their “practice of tomorrow” (p. 4). I decided that I could best fulfill my goals by incorporating the Team-Based Learning (TBL) pedagogical model when I next taught the course, because of the ways in which it enables active and accountable learning. In this essay, I discuss my experiences using TBL in the course “Women’s Environmental Writing.” I detail my educational objectives, the adaptation of a pedagogy used mainly in professional programs, and the Sciences and Social Sciences, my methods and approaches, and the learning outcomes from using TBL in the environmental literature classroom. While what follows mainly reflects on my adaptations, and how and why they worked so well, instructors in any discipline will see how TBL builds on best practices that are developed and studied through the scholarship of teaching and learning, such as principles of active learning and student accountability. Indeed, even instructors learning about teaching through the scholarship of teaching and learning might benefit from TBL. As one example, I led, with Paula Marentette, a TBL workshop at the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STHLE) conference in 2009 (Harde & Marentette, 2009). We successfully used TBL strategies to teach participants its basics, then had them both take and construct readiness assessment tests in their teams. This essay and others that use more quantitative data (see Michaelsen & Sweet, 2012) demonstrate that whenever TBL is incorporated, in whole or in part, the differences in student learning outcomes are remarkable.

Objectives and Foundations

Offered to students with at least second-year standing, “Women’s Environmental Literature” is a popular course at Augustana Faculty, a small liberal arts campus of the University of Alberta. Taught biennially to classes of around 20 (mostly female) students, the course originates in the English program in the department of Humanities, and is cross-listed with the Environmental Studies program in the department of Science. Students also take the

course to fulfill certain requirements of our core curriculum or for credits towards a minor in women's studies, a program offered by the department of Social Sciences. The course was offered when I began teaching at Augustana in 2005, but it was configured loosely enough that I could shape it to serve the learning objectives, as described in my syllabus:

1. To provide students with a well-grounded knowledge of women's environmental literature combined with ecocriticism and ecofeminist criticism as theoretical approaches.
2. To enable students to trace how relationships to nature and the environment alongside differences in gender, sexuality, race, and class have helped to shape women's identities and to consider the ways in which North American women and their experiences are represented in environmental literature.
3. To help students understand how the environmental crisis is both a feminist and ecological issue, and the connection of this potentially catastrophic crisis to patriarchal social structures.
4. To enhance students' reading enjoyment by helping to improve critical thinking skills through collaborative approaches to environmental and ecocritical writing, and to help them improve in oral and written communication.

The course studies the patterns and trends in environmental literature by North American women of Native, African, and European ancestry using readings in ecofeminist theory and literary criticism. Students begin by examining the ways in which western patriarchal imperial culture has explored and exploited the link between women and nature, too often claiming Adam's privilege of naming, owning, and using both the female body and the body of the natural world. Asking what view of non-human nature is represented, this multidisciplinary and comparative course examines a broad range of literary works—personal narrative, poetry, non-fiction, fiction, ecocritical theory and criticism from a variety of schools—by tracing the changing, conflicting, and merging views of nature held by North American women from the last two centuries.

At the heart of this course is my desire, and that of Augustana Faculty, to shape our students into responsible citizens; I aim to give them usable tools, in this case environmentalist tools, to transform their world in positive ways. "An ecologically focused criticism is a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking," Glotfelty (1996) suggests. Like Glotfelty, I want to encourage my students "to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications" (pp. xxiv-xxv). My course focuses the broader concerns of ecocritical thought into the paradigmatic concerns of ecofeminism as my students consider how Nature and women's bodies have been inscribed in the same way in patriarchal discourse, as Legler (1997) puts it, "as passive, interceptive, docile, as mirror and complement" (p. 233). Legler (1997) further contends that "the conceptual links between women and nature suggested by ecofeminists make rewriting one part of rewriting the other" (p. 233), and the course is invested in literature, theory, and criticism that critique and revision understanding of both women and nature. However, I wanted more than academic discussions; I aimed for a learning

experience that engaged students in questions about their own practices, accountability, and commitment to social and environmental justice.

Clearly a course so invested in positive transformation requires an alternative pedagogy, something I found a few years ago when I first used TBL to teach a feminist literary theory course.¹ Featuring permanent learning teams, preparation, application, and timely assessment, TBL provided a sound set of strategies for a theory-heavy course for a number of reasons. First, collaborative learning can be a more effective instructional mode than traditional methods of instruction, which over-emphasize instructor-student relationships (as top-down) while often neglecting the social relationships inherent in thought and learning. With difficult tasks like understanding and learning to apply theory, a team-based setting facilitates necessary collaboration. Second, team-based work reinforces key parts of feminist and environmentalist approaches. TBL works for a number of reasons: it rests on Vygotsky's (1978) foundational work on the zone of proximal development and the effectiveness of collaboration as peers scaffold each other into the desired learning outcomes. Stetsenko (2010) demonstrates how Vygotsky's work connects to and supports activist pedagogies. Vygotsky argued that language mediates thought in a dynamic, interactive way and that social interaction is essential for learning and development. His work on the zone of proximal development and scaffolding both contests and counters hegemonic pedagogies. Noting that "*collaborative purposeful transformation* of the world is the principled grounding for teaching–learning and development," Stetsenko suggests that peer learning is a solid first step towards activist pedagogies that enable students to form and carry out purposeful life agendas aimed at contributing to transformative social practices (p. 6, italics in original).

Given the number of studies that suggest collaborative learning is more successful in promoting achievement than either individualized or competitive learning experiences, "it should be both the concern of and attractive to all educators" (Gerlach, 1994, p. 5). She further points out that "Collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves" (p. 5). Britton (1972) suggests that discussion, a core component of TBL, facilitates learning through "exploration, clarification, shared interpretation, insight into differences of opinion, illustration and anecdote, explanation by gesture, expression of doubt" (p. 29). Britton also points out that the processes of discussion make certain no one is in the background, that all voices are heard. To my mind, an ecofeminist course should not subscribe to an instructor-student relationship that is top-down or neglect the social relationships inherent in thought and learning. I am as dependent upon the natural world as any of my students; I grapple with same environmental issues that I expect them to think about. With difficult tasks like understanding and learning to apply theory, a team-based setting facilitates necessary collaboration and offers alternatives to the traditional, and largely hierarchical, sage-on-the-stage model. Because knowledge acquisition occurs best in relationship, when a subject requires sophisticated efforts to clarify, analyze, and evaluate, that subject can be learned best in a collaborative setting (Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2002; Michaelsen & Sweet, 2012).

If there is one commonality emphasized by the disparate schools of ecofeminist thought, it is that a supportive community should be of primary importance, to feminism and to the world. From what I have observed, as each student makes individual contributions in a collective effort to clarify, analyze, and evaluate these theoretical tools, and then to use them to enrich their understanding of women's texts, they form "communities" that facilitate their learning. Finally,

TBL emphasizes accountability to one's teammates and to the class as a whole, and that often leads to increased commitment to the course concepts and material.

Adaptations and Practice

In his chapter in the foundational TBL text, *Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups in College Teaching* (Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2002), Fink (2002) emphasizes the ability of this pedagogy to transform learning as it turns small groups of students into effective learning teams and thus enhances the quality of student learning. Michaelsen (2002), developer of TBL, lists the following points as the cornerstones of the pedagogy, and they are relatively easy to incorporate in or adapt to the Humanities classroom:

1. Teams must be permanent, properly formed, and managed;
2. Students must be made accountable for their individual and group work;
3. Students must have frequent and timely performance feedback; and,
4. Group assignments must promote learning through application.

While Michaelson (2002) insists that TBL can be successful only if instructors use all its components, he also points out that while disciplines in the Humanities may be more difficult to adapt to TBL, “the answer to whether or not team-based learning is appropriate for the subject matter is an unequivocal ‘yes’” (p. 211). I describe my applications and adaptations of the four TBL cornerstones below.

Teamwork

Group work is often part of active learning strategies and feminist pedagogies. Michaelsen's (2002) first innovation was to form *permanent* teams with five to seven members who work together on tests and practical applications. In the case of the course described in this essay, teams are chosen in the first class, which is also an information session in which I outline the course, and we discuss planned learning outcomes and students' personal goals. I aim for heterogeneous groups and usually sort them so that each team is comprised of students with as many different majors as possible. Because the teams are stable and teamwork determines a good deal of the final grade, students learn very quickly to discourage “social loafing” and to value every voice for what it can bring to the task at hand. The stability of the teams, or learning communities, ensures early and ongoing collaboration and fosters a level of confidence that is palpable in the classroom. “I really like the support you get in TBL,” one student wrote about her cohort in her course evaluation, adding, “it is nice to have a teacher who forces you out of the quiet shell of teacher-student learning.”² Students wrote that their teams worked well: “[group members] all have the readings done and bring things to mind I had not thought about.” Students also appreciated their divergences: “we all feel comfortable sharing even if we disagree with one another. We always have a good sense of the material.” Only one student commented that she did not subscribe to ecofeminist thought, but she also noted that she learned a good deal because

of her team: “This course challenged my views in a safe environment that allowed me to discover where I stood on the issues.”

Accountability

TBL holds students accountable through the Readiness Assurance Process which ensures that a substantial percent of students’ final grades come from team activities, including peer assessment. The frequent Readiness Assessment Tests (RATs) (fifteen in twenty-six classes, three questions on each, one on some aspect of the theoretical reading and the other two asking for application of theory to fiction or poetry) form a major component of the process. However, in order for the practice to work in a literature classroom, I had to develop a plan that accommodated RATs and the application of knowledge they are meant to assess, instead of the yes/no or multiple choice answers and simultaneous reporting that Michaelsen endorses. I developed a series of RATs for the course; I include two examples below (see Table 1). Each RAT has five questions based on the assigned readings for that day. I grouped readings thematically, and they included theoretical essays and short pieces of literature. Themes, for example, included different schools of political thought in which feminism and ecofeminism are invested, questions of animal rights, and the role of spirituality and religion, or race and ethnicity, in ecofeminism and women’s nature writing.

Questions on the RATs first ask students to identify and evaluate the key points and arguments of the theoretical readings, and then ask them to use what they have learned to unpack one of the literary readings. Classes with RATs begin with students taking up to twenty minutes to answer the questions on their own and then they hand in their tests and move into their teams to answer the same questions. One student described them this way:

The RATs were great motivators to ensure that I understood the articles. They also helped us make connections between theory and literature. . . . I came up with ideas that I never had before; ideas that had never occurred to me while reading either work. The RATs made me more critical of the literary source I was reading so that I would be better able to answer the questions as well as to discuss the paper in class.

Table 1
Sample RATs

ENG/ENV 268/368 — RAT #1	ENG/ENV 268/368 — RAT #4
1. What are Birkeland’s criticisms of liberalist approaches to social transformation?	1. What is Sturgeon’s argument about how racism functions in terms of ecofeminism?
2. What are Birkeland’s criticisms of leftist approaches to social transformation?	2. What does Sturgeon say about ecofeminism and Native American women (native vs. natural, having to “battle the environmentalists”)?
3. According to Birkeland, why does ecofeminism offer “the most comprehensive and incisive sociopolitical analysis to guide both self and social transformation”? Do you agree? Why or why not?	3. Sturgeon concludes first that we need to understand how racism operates in multiple arenas and how it is reproduced and maintained. Use this conclusion to unpack an episode of racism in <i>The Antelope Wife</i> .
4. Choose one selection from “Our Kinship with Her” and use Birkeland’s discussion to consider if and how it is ecofeminist literature.	4. Sturgeon concludes second that “we need to use the antiracist theory developed by people of color to examine the ways in which racism constructs white as well as nonwhite subjects.” Use this conclusion to analyze character from <i>The Antelope Wife</i> .
5. What is your definition of ecofeminism?	5. Do you want to add something about race to your definition?

Teams discuss and come to consensus on their answers, which are written down by the team recorder for that day. The whole class then reconvenes to discuss each team’s answers. Students are held accountable because individual and team RATs are graded and, from what I have seen, students want to perform well for and with their peers. One student wrote, “Our team was always ready for all those assessment tests. The RATs provided an opportunity to reflect on the literature studied for each class.” Another student wrote,

The directed questions of the RATs focused my reading and understanding of the texts and engaged me in communicating thoughts and critiques on the literature. The group work involved with the RATs, as well as the class discussion following the individual and group RATs, were valuable in expanding my understanding of the texts further.

Because they held each other accountable and therefore prepared well for class, students found the group work a rich forum for trying out their ideas and enhancing their analyses. In addition, students were allowed to grade their teammates’ performance at the end of the term for a portion of their participation mark and to assign grades for each other’s staged writing assignments (in which students go through multiple drafts that are read, commented on, and evaluated by their peers and/or instructor). Because it works to “assess interpersonal skills, foster insight, and promote professional behavior” (p. 103), Levine (2008) contends, peer assessment is an essential tool for reinforcing individual accountability in TBL: “Students *need* peer review to feel comfortable that their teammates are contributing their fair share of the group work” (p. 110).

This accountability reinforced the non-hierarchical and collaborative aspects of the course. Further, having students assess each other's participation in teamwork allowed me to share responsibility for learning and to model risk taking.

Student comments, from anonymous midterm and term evaluations, and from their term portfolios, consistently described TBL as a positive and valuable experience. Very few students have resisted the use of teamwork, in part, because in the first class I explain why the outcomes expected from teamwork work enhance student learning and that they fit particularly well with the feminist and environmentalist underpinnings of the course as they encourage community and collaboration, and mitigate separatism. Those few that do object, usually on their course evaluations and never more than one student in 30, realize that the course's structure means the team can only improve their learning and final grade. While a few students found the RATs somewhat stressful at midterm, by the end of the term, they uniformly appreciated the ways in which readiness assessment helped guide and focus readings and discussions that were deeper, richer, and more critical. Many others noted that preparing for the RATs helped organize their thoughts and prioritize what they learned, and one student pointed out, with some surprise, that the RATs had made writing the term paper a much more satisfying and rich experience because she felt involved in the theories and ideas in the critical pieces.

Accountability makes TBL effective because members of a group are accountable to the professor as well as to each other. Alongside the RATs, Inksheds (guided freewriting, discussed further below; Sargent, 2005) ask students to take risks and to hold each other accountable in team discussions of what can be a very personal piece of writing. Accountability is more obvious in graded peer evaluations, like the peer review of the term paper drafts. In my TBL courses, 30% of the final grade comes from TBL work: RATs (15%), peer review of term papers (2 x 2.5%), and participation (10%); the rest of the grade comes from short writing assignments (4 x 5%), a term project (20%), and the term paper (30%). In order to ensure accountability, peer review and grading have to reflect the work of team members and make a significant impact on the course grade; my course involves peer review in every aspect of teamwork and in individual writing assignments. Students are accountable but, more importantly, they are engaged with a learning experience that they consistently describe as transformative.

Feedback

Michaelsen (2002) endorses giving students frequent and immediate feedback, and his plan includes short yes/no or multiple choice answers and simultaneous reporting of all teams' answers. Common mechanisms to ensure simultaneous reporting include scratch cards or laminated alphabet cards that teams raise to designate their answers. This is one point at which I revise the usual TBL practice. Instead of simultaneous reporting of brief answers—by holding up numbered or true/false or yes/no cards, or by using Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique (IFAT) scratch cards—I lead the class in a discussion of the answers, which enables their thoroughgoing knowledge of the material. I ask each team, in turn, to answer one of the questions first, and then encourage the other teams to offer their answers or to build upon what has been said already. As we consider the answers, my role is multifarious: first, I work to ensure that every voice is heard and every perspective taken into account. To facilitate the conversation, I ask questions, prompt the quieter students (often by referring to some astute observation they have made on their individual RAT, which I scan as the students settle into their team discussions), or encourage a team to use their answer as a point from which to enter a more in-

depth discussion of the topic. Second, throughout the whole-class discussion, as I see gaps in their knowledge or misunderstandings, I segue into mini-lectures that give students a little more background for the theoretical or primary text under discussion and help them work through potentially challenging theoretical approaches with practical application of theory to text. A few, and not more than five, minutes of explanations and examples clarify the material. These lectures allow me to scaffold students into knowledge formation, because they can locate the gaps in their understanding and listen with purpose. As students give their team answers, I can easily assess if they need additional information or examples to help clarify their thinking. One student commented that s/he “loved hearing [my] criticism and the methods behind [my] analysis of the stories and novels.” As we begin the class discussion during which I incorporate the mini lectures, I invite teams to change recorders and ink colors and to continue to make notes on the Team RAT. Students thus have instant feedback from each other and then from me in the whole-class discussion and make extensive notes as the discussion goes on. I subsequently photocopy those RATs for each team member, grade, and return them with the graded individual RATs the next class.

As one example of how RATs are effective in terms of feedback, individual answers to the questions on RAT #4 (see Table 1) tended to sidestep the issue of how students filtered out questions and issues surrounding race to read texts as women’s experience rather than as Black or Indigenous women’s experience. However, on their team RATs and in the discussion that followed, because of feedback from their teammates and then from me, they went far more deeply into considering how they may have essentialized all women (but especially First Nations women) and their experiences in the natural world. Teams that had First Nations members tended to look to those teammates for guidance in how to read the specifics of Native women’s experiences in *The Antelope Wife*. Another team decided that their own disconnections, as white students, from the racial implications of a text meant that they needed to be extra-diligent in their approaches to a text’s discussions of the environment and of women’s experiences (“suspicion” was one word they used). A third team concluded,

we first read *The Antelope Wife* as the women connected to the natural world and in opposition to the men, rather than looking at the women’s and nature’s experiences as distinct. We have been trained or are used to doing this kind of essentializing, so we need to recognize what we’re doing if we’re going to read First Nations women’s writing and be open to the specifics it teaches about exploitation of women and nature.

In short, after students answer their own RATs, teammates scaffold each other’s learning in the group discussion, and there is a class scaffolding led by me. This is where TBL shows a marked efficiency over traditional instructor-led lecture format. As we move into the whole-class discussion, students have identified what they do not know and what concepts they do not fully understand. I can therefore provide feedback and efficiently address these gaps with the mini-lectures. By the end of a 75-minute class, students have gone over the questions three times, had the more difficult material clarified, and generally come away with a sense of ownership of the theoretical text under discussion. They also demonstrate the ability to use the theory to more fully understand women’s environmental writing and, more generally, all cultural production. As one student noted, “where before I had been a passive reader of most academic articles, I learned how to engage more critically and creatively with what I was reading.”

Application

The final cornerstone of TBL involves developing assignments that facilitate practical application of the concepts learned and that promote team development. Use of TBL necessitates innovation in dividing a course into units with conjoined RATs and assignments. It insists that students gain practical working knowledge of theory and its applications, that this is more than an academic exercise. As students complete quizzes and discuss answers with their teams and then the class, they take ownership of ecofeminist approaches and integrate them into their analysis of the literature; they also begin to integrate them into their worldview. One student moved “from hating ecofeminism to seeing value in it” to understanding “how patriarchal structures get in the way of sustainable living.” He thus moved past understanding the theory and applying it to the texts, to applying it to his other studies and beyond. Another student preferred TBL over “boring memorization,” and enjoyed learning “how to be a better thinker, to question and debate mine and others’ points of view.” Sessions not structured around RATs often focused first on team and then on class discussions of one of the longer works—novels such as Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* or Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, or nonfiction texts such as Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker’s Creek* or Sharon Butala’s *The Perfection of the Morning*—in which students must use those theoretical tools they now have to hand. These discussions enhance students’ ability to think and communicate as ecofeminist literary critics, and often help them focus their ideas for the term paper they will have to write on two of the major texts. Students choose their topics in consultation with me, and then their term papers go through a series of drafts that are read and evaluated for grades by team members. I provide a rubric (see Table 2), for grading and comments, and in their course evaluations and portfolios students note how they appreciate the chance to read and be read by their teammates before handing in their major assignment. Seeing how other students apply the theoretical readings to a given literary text often helps them expand their own analyses and become more comfortable with theory.

The remaining few classes are devoted to inksheds, an exercise in freewriting in which I guide students through a series of writing prompts.³ These low-stakes writing exercises are effective in allowing students to unpack a particular text using a particular theorist, and often give them the beginnings of an essay. I inkshed along with the students, and we have the freedom to choose a theoretical approach and literary text as the subject of our writing. I include two or three of these in the course outline, and guided by Glotfelty (2008), we inkshed in the first few weeks of the course. She recommends including writing assignments early, noting that,

writing creatively draws students out of their shells and into the course. . . . By sharing these pieces in class, mutual interest in one another develops that creates a climate of respect and boldness when we discuss the later literary works and issues they raise. (p. 351)

Table 2
Peer Review Form

ENG/ENV 268/368: Term Paper — Peer Review Form

Title of Paper:

Author of Paper:

Peer Reviewer:

Draft #: _____ Grade: _____ / 2.5

Comment on:

1. Quality of argument: arguable ecofeminist thesis; use of theory and criticism
2. Quality of analysis: in-depth analysis of primary texts; use of evidence
3. Matters of style: clarity of writing; overall organization; paragraphing and topic sentences
4. Matters of correctness: grammatical and technical corrections; correct use of MLA; correct formatting

Students write for about fifty minutes and then, in their teams, exchange inksheds and respond to them on rubric sheets that I provide below (see Table 3). Each student reads and responds to two or three inksheds, and then they read their comments to the team. The rubric asks for them to note the points that surprised or puzzled them, among other things. This is a low-stakes writing assignment, with no grades attached, and my students have been vocal about how they have enjoyed these sessions and learned from them. They create the rich climate of respect and boldness that Glotfelty (2008) describes, and they build teams that are comfortable, confident, and happily collaborative. Student comments on their Inkshed Reports also revealed how TBL transformed their learning. In these responses to major texts from the syllabus, students revealed that they had thought deeply about the course material and their reactions to it.

Moreover, students consistently noted the natural world as part of their developing “community,” and they described themselves as more responsible and responsive to the natural world. They mused on interactions with self, others and nature, and they also focused on how feminism, especially ecofeminism, led to activism. As one wrote in her portfolio, “my team’s support made me comfortable in talking about how I feel about nature as a woman and the class showed me that feminism and my degree in Environmental Science go hand in hand.” TBL clearly brought students into community with each other, and it facilitated the ways in which they began to figure the natural world as part of their community, something several ecofeminists see as a major goal of feminist-environmentalist activism. For example, Donner

(1997) calls for an “appropriate account of the self in ethical and environmental theories and the appropriate relation of self and other—self and intimates, self and community, self and nature” (p. 379). Gruen (1997) similarly suggests that “the feminist articulation of valuing in community can provide insight into building community with nature” (p. 362). The requirements of TBL helped my students find this insight; by the end of the course they began to understand what Birkeland (1993) describes as “the link between the abuse of power on personal and political levels that underlies human oppression and environmental exploitation” (p. 16), and to see as a goal feminist-environmentalist changes in cultural and institutional infrastructures.

Table 3
Inkshed Report Form

ENG/ENV 268/368 — Inkshed Report

Name: _____ Team Name: _____

Date: _____ Text _____

Missing Inksheds:

Most eloquent or humorous sentence(s); copy them here and name the author(s):

Most surprising sentence(s), ideas or connections I had not thought of; copy them here and name the author(s):

Weirdest or most puzzling ideas; copy them here and name the author(s):

A question that should be addressed for class discussion; name the author(s) if it/they came from an inkshed:

Sentences or passages that confused me; copy them here and name the author(s):

Summary, comments, or reflections (inkshed on your team’s inksheds; continue on the back):

Overall, while my adaptations of TBL depart from Michaelsen’s (mainly in that I cannot provide immediate grades for the RATs, though I do offer mini-lectures on the questions/topics that I hear the teams struggling with in their discussions), I think that they fulfill his intent in the ways in which they promote learning. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, they fulfill my learning objectives. Inksheds helped students engage more deeply with the texts and let them apply feminist theory in a space that gave them freedom to see what works and what does not. Team and class discussions that centered on the major texts provided a similar forum where students could bring together the feminist approaches that worked best for them and apply them to both relevant texts and their experiences. Finally, where Michaelsen’s applications focus on

periodic team-based projects, mine are ongoing as I require students to apply ecofeminist concepts and approaches to women's writing during every class. By helping them keep the theoretical readings in their purview, I enable my students to analyze the fiction and poetry in a deliberately feminist and environmentalist fashion.

Evaluations, Outcomes, and Adjustments

As an instructor, I have found TBL to be a profoundly effective approach to teaching, although it is labor intensive in the initial stages. Once the course is designed and the RATs and rubrics are completed, TBL requires a steady amount of work, but no greater an amount than any of my other courses. I grade RATs with checkmarks and brief comments; I put a good deal of time into commenting on the short writing assignments at the beginning of the term, but I fill out only a rubric sheet for the term paper. The learning outcomes are more than worth the small amount of extra work. I have yet to administer a failure in any of the courses I teach with TBL.⁴ One reason for this is that students that habitually skip class still feel accountable to their teams and therefore choose either to withdraw from the course or start attending. If they attend, the TBL structure compels them to engage with the material and participate in the learning process. In comparison with the other senior courses I have taught since 2005, grades are uniformly higher at the lower end of the scale: there are few, if any, Ds. Ds become Cs, Cs become Bs, and there is an increase of grades in the B+ and A- range, but not above. While it seems that TBL will not make an excellent student more so, comments from my students suggest that it gives everyone, including the A student, a richer learning experience.

Even with the positive results from using TBL to teach Women's Environmental Literature, in the interests of greater accountability and enhanced community, with each other and with the natural world, I plan to change the paradigms of the term project. The project is a creative-critical examination of some part of the natural world that holds meaning for the student. Each student is expected to undertake a creative response to, or interpretation of, nature (in the past, they have composed and recorded songs, made short films, and created visual artworks, including sculpture, paintings, collages, and scrapbooks), and to write a short essay that examines and critiques their own "nature writing." I will change the project to include some form of teamwork, likely through consultation, and peer evaluation, in part to help students along in the process and in part to ensure accountability in every aspect of the course.

I certainly recommend incorporating TBL's strategies, in part or in whole, to other instructors for use in their classrooms and to drive their investigations of teaching and learning issues. Simply incorporating permanent learning teams for group work instead of randomly selected and changing groups can enhance the classroom dynamic even as it encourages cohort building and accountability. Regardless of the discipline, having these teams apply what they've learned with each other and giving them timely feedback will enable any instructor to gauge the effectiveness of how course material is being delivered.

Notes

1. I want to thank Dr. Paula Marentette first for mentoring me through my early use of TBL, and then for helping me, with the aid of Piaget and Vygotsky, understand how collaborative learning and TBL work so much better than other pedagogical models.

2. Student comments are used with permission, as are grades and course work, and with University of Alberta Ethics Board approval. I would like to thank the students of English/Environmental Studies 268/368, Winter 2007 and Fall 2009. They were open to change and willing to take risks; they made communities and engaged with the theory, the literature, and each other in ways that astonished me.
3. For the definitive text on inkshed and other writing exercises, see Sargent and Paraskevas, (2005).
4. This claim is also supported by the results from other of the courses I teach with TBL. In particular, I have gone from having 20% of the students in my first-year survey fail the course to having less than 5% fail. Performance on the final exam improved even more dramatically, with 25% of the class achieving perfect scores on the sight-identification section. Before using TBL, 25% or more of the class routinely failed that section. The results of my study using TBL in the first-year English survey appear in *Team-Based Learning in the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2012).

References

- Birkeland, J. (1993). Ecofeminism: Linking theory and practice. In G. Gaard (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature* (pp. 13-59). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Britton, J. (1972), *Language and learning*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Donner, W. (1997). Self and community in environmental ethics. In K. J. Warren (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, culture, nature* (pp. 375-389). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fink, L. D. (2002). Beyond small groups: Harnessing the extraordinary power of learning teams. In L. K. Michaelsen, A. B. Knight, & L. D. Fink (Eds.), *Team-based learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching* (pp. 3-26). Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Gerlach, J. M. (1994). "Is this collaboration?" *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 59, 5-14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/tl.37219945903>
- Glotfelty, C. (1996). Introduction: Literary studies in an age of environmental crisis. In C. Glotfelty & H. Fromm (Eds.), *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology* (pp. xv-xxxvii). Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Glotfelty, C. (2008). Finding home in Nevada? Teaching the literature of place, on location. In L. Christensen, M. C. Long, & F. Waage (Eds.), *Teaching North American environmental literature* (pp. 345-353). New York: MLA.
- Gruen, L. (1997). Revaluing nature. In K. J. Warren (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, culture, nature* (pp. 356-374). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Harde, R., & Marentette, P. (2009). "Using Team-Based Learning in the Social Sciences and Humanities." Pre-Conference Workshop. *Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton.
- Legler, G. T. (1997). Ecofeminist literary criticism. In K. J. Warren (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, culture, nature* (pp. 227-238). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Levine, R. E. (2008). Peer evaluation in team-based learning. In L. K. Michaelsen, D. X. Parmelee, & K. K. McMahon (Eds.), *Team-based learning for health care professionals: A guide to using small groups for improved learning* (pp. 103-116). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

- Michaelsen, L. K., Knight, A. B., & Fink, D. L. (Eds.). (2002). *Team-based learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Michaelsen, L. K., & Sweet, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Team-based learning in the social sciences and humanities: Group work that works to generate critical thinking and engagement*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Murphy, P. D. (2009). *Ecocritical explorations in literary and cultural studies: Fences, boundaries, and fields*. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Sargent, M. E., & Paraskevas, C. C. (2005). *Conversations about writing: Eavesdropping, inkshedding, and joining in*. Toronto, ON: Thomson Nelson.
- Stetsenko, A. (2010). Teaching, learning, and development as activist projects of historical becoming: Expanding Vygotsky's approach to pedagogy. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 5(1), 6-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15544800903406266>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.