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## PRACTICE

# Reading In and Through Nature: An Outdoor Pedagogy for Reading Literature

RICHARD NOVACK

**A**s a high school English teacher who sometimes takes his students outside, I have come to appreciate the locations in which my students engage in literacy activities. I utilize locations in open-air outdoor settings as pedagogical resources for reading instruction. When I bring outdoor locations into my class activities, I offer opportunities for students not only to enhance their acquisition of verbal literacies but also “to observe nature with insight, a merger of landscape and mindscape” (Orr, 1992, p. 86). In what follows, I would like to suggest that English educators can both read in nature and read through nature to not only foster an “ecological literacy” (Orr, 1992, p. 86) in our students, but also to support students’ verbal literacies.

To read in nature, I move the classroom outdoors. My students and I will hastily retreat from the enclosure of cinder blocks and florescent lighting to the expansive openness of fresh air and sunshine. There are several types of reading activities that occupy such class sessions. After the winter’s first snow, we might scurry outside to read Frost’s “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening,” witnessing, touching, and inhaling the crisp excitement of new snow. On a bright and refreshing spring day when the smell of freshly cut grass is pungent, we might “loafe” on the lawn and read cantos 5 and 6 from Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” On the last day of school when the evenings radiate with energy, I sometimes inaugurate the summer with an outdoor reading of Agee’s “Knoxville: Summer of 1915” and a session of cloud-watching. Such reading experiences are more than just fun class activities; they are semiotic (Kress, 2003), embodied experiences. The body reacts to the environment as much as if not more than the written word.

When reading through nature, a reader’s past experiences engage in the reading process (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995; Rosenblatt, 1981; Iser, 1974) of both literature and landscape. When readers approach a text as when they approach a textured landscape, they bring with them their sociocultural

background. Emerson writes, “At the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish. The knapsack of custom falls off his back with the first step he makes into these precincts” (Emerson, 1876). However, from a perspective of sociocultural literacy (Gee, 2001), we cannot just drop our “knapsack of custom.” As when a backpacker carries with her the weight of her past adventures, so too reading is a journey through text in which the reader’s baggage of experience and ideology are part of the process of meaning making. When asking students to read through nature, I consider how outdoor experiences both affect and resemble the reading process. I ask students to unpack the process of both reading literature and reading the book of nature in order to foster an awareness of their reading habits.

English educators can engage students in outdoor activities in nature as part of reading instruction. As I explain below, reading in nature offers unique affordances, while reading through nature can deepen students’ close reading practices.

### Reading In Nature: Pedagogy and Process

There are two pedagogical considerations when reading in nature as an approach to reading literature. First, students can read literature to allow for an imagined movement into a natural setting. Even though students may not actually be outdoors, a piece of literature has transformative capabilities when students engage their imaginations with the author’s text. Second, students can literally read in natural settings, surrounded by trees, mountains, rocks, stone walls, bugs, frogs and all other organic and non-organic entities to enhance a literary interpretation. The preposition *in* is meant to convey spatiality and location. English teachers can facilitate the movement into nature as both an imagined and physical location of literacy.

Geography plays a part in the instructional considerations of English teachers. In the United States, American

literature is a key fixture in high school English programs because of our cultural and historic ties to a very large place called the United States. An American literature class will call upon students' knowledge of U.S. history, geography, and culture as a part of the process of literary analysis. For example, through a reading of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, teachers engender in their classrooms a vision of the Mississippi River as well as the institution of slavery.

In an English classroom, the reading of environmental literature offers readers an opportunity to travel great distances. Students can come to know monuments of natural history when reading the creative non-fiction of well-known authors. For example, the reader might traverse space and time to experience a forgotten vision of the now flooded valley of Hetch Hetchy in Yosemite National Park as described by Muir in the 19th Century. To make this journey, the reader's mind must revisit her own memories of past outdoor experiences. She must take what she knows about natural settings and put those thoughts, images, and beliefs in conversation with the author's vision of nature.

Even texts outside the genre of environmental literature can transport our imagination and engage previous outdoor experiences. For example, when J.R.R. Tolkien describes the tree-like characters he called Ents in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, he depicts very specific images that are easily understood to readers familiar with trees. Tolkien (1965) invites the reader to imagine how the Ents of his fantasy world, these supernatural arboreal creatures, tear through stone: "Their fingers, and their toes just freeze onto rocks; and they tear it up like bread-crust. It was like watching the work of great tree-roots in a hundred years, all packed into a few moments" (p. 219).

When I read this, my previous outdoor experiences influence my reading. In my travels through woodlands, I sometimes notice how the roots of trees strangle rocks and break apart huge chunks of stone. I recognize that this growth occurs over the course of decades and centuries. The feats of Tolkien's fantastic creatures seem less surreal to anyone who has imagined such calamitous events while observing trees when walking in a woodland. Even a city dweller has likely seen a sidewalk buckling from the slow growth of a tree's underground root system and understands Tolkien's passage through this remembered vision. For an interpretation that more nearly approaches Tolkien's vision, a reader must have such arboreal encounters. In reading Tolkien, a reader vicariously shares outdoor experiences with an author who witnessed spectacles in nature. As such, there is a kind of intermingling and creation of various threads of meaning.

Kress's (2003) notions of semiotics and signs are applicable here. For Kress, semiotics is the creation of a sign whereby the sign delivers meaning from one person to another. There are two types of signs, outward signs and inward signs. An inward sign is made from what a person takes in as meaning. Reading is the creation of an inward sign. An outward sign is created when a person expresses outwardly what she has come to know through inward meaning making. "The sign made outwardly . . . is based on the sign made before, inwardly, as the result of the 'reading' made" (Kress, 2003, p. 145). We write outwardly what we have come to know and take in. Tolkien likely created an inward sign when he encountered gnarled tree roots crushing rocks during an outdoor experience. He then created the words on the page, an outward sign, which inspire the meaning made by the reader, her separate inward sign.

In this moment of meaning making, the reader's outdoor experience with nature aids in her formation of meaning from the words on the page. At some point, the actual natural entities, the rocks and the trees, evoke in both the author and the reader a separate reaction that impresses upon their minds lasting images and meaning prior to their literacy event. The meaning created from the words on the page connects with two unique meanings generated outside the words on the page. Outside the page different landscapes evoked two separate readings of nature by the author and the reader, yet these two readings of nature share a similar interpretation.

Nature writers often echo a trope comparing the text of nature to the written text of the word. In "The Art of Seeing Things," John Burroughs (1908/2008) notes, "One seldom takes a walk without encountering some of this fine print on nature's page" (p. 155). Burroughs calls on the reader to consider the way in which a careful observer of nature looks thoughtfully, as in a kind of close-reading exercise, to derive meaning from the "book of nature." Both Emerson and Thoreau discuss the metaphor, comparing nature to text. As nature writers, these authors are experienced in both literary studies and outdoor experiences. Such a common metaphorical link between reading text and reading nature undoubtedly stems from a common background in outdoor settings.

Texts of books and texts of nature are socially constructed through language. For humans, natural settings are part of social worlds because humans understand the natural world through language:

All reality, including nature, is discursively constructed. The environment is an idea that is created

through discourse. We argue not that mountains, rivers, oceans, and the like do not actually exist, but that our only access to such things is through discourse, and that it is through language that we give these things or places particular meanings. (Dobrin and Weisser, 2002, p. 11)

When we read texts that evoke an image of a natural setting or natural objects like trees or rocks, we unconsciously reference past experiences with nature and the language that we use to describe those encounters. A text elicits in readers a search for previous associations. And while past experiences may come from physical encounters with a landscape, they may also come from an experience with another text. Regardless, all these experiences are known discursively, through the language acquired to describe and understand those natural entities.

The difference between meaning found on a page and meaning found in an outdoor setting in some ways resembles the differences among media formats in the sense that there are unique affordances (Kress, 2003) in the semiotic experiences of each media format. Like the computer screen, outdoor settings engage the visual modes of meaning making. However, unlike the screen, the outdoors also offer a reader the opportunity to engage the auditory, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile senses in the meaning making process. In outdoor settings, multiple modes (Myers, 1996; Kress, 2003) of communication are engaged. Kress (2003) discusses many modes of communication, including audible modes of sound, speech, and music; visual modes of image and light; and kinesthetic modes of action and gesture. Here, students can engage several modes including the kinesthetic mode, which has been called the mode that is “least understood, almost never used in schools, and yet critically important for understanding . . . the body knowledge of the action sign system of direct experience” (Myers, 1996, p. 181). For example, the texture of a shagbark hickory tree is uniquely understood by touching its bark. Its name is only an approximate representation of this texture. Verbal text is simply one mode by which meaning is conveyed and interpreted.

The interpretive process of reading as conducted by humans resembles a kind of reading that occurs among other creatures. Non-human organisms engage in non-verbal communication in a process of “biosemiotics” (Wheeler, 2014). Organisms communicate with each other in complex ways and this communication resembles verbal communication. “All living things are in a constant creative semiotic interaction with their environments: each makes the other in

a continual process” (Wheeler, 2014, p. 122). By reading in nature, English teachers afford students more opportunities to discover and create meaning in ways that are similar to the biosemiotic communication of many life forms.

Outdoor activities offer embodied experiences, whereby the natural setting spurs meaning. Students sensually observe something that moves them. There is a mingling of new meaning with previous meaning, and their imagination sparks new ideas. When I interview students about school-sponsored outdoor experiences and collect their writing, they speak of how readily they can spot what is unfamiliar or anomalous in the outdoors. Specific observations about the natural surroundings lead to meaningful discoveries. For example, one student notices, “that all leaves are different in how they change and grow,” and then in an essay he metaphorically likens the diversity of trees to the diversity of people in society. As students sit in an outdoor space, meaning is made by observing what is new and rectifying that new meaning with previous meaning.

When teachers take students into a natural setting and they read in that setting, there is an immediate convergence of three types of meaning making: the meaning making occurring in reading the literary text, the meaning making occurring in reading the landscape, and the meaning making that occurred in prior experience. I once interviewed a student in the woods as part of a research project when, serendipitously, we came upon a white tailed deer. As soon as the student saw the deer, she immediately launched into a story of a previous encounter in which she “saw a big momma deer or doe with three baby deer behind her.” As in the reading process, immediate encounters with texts of nature spur associations with previous experiences in nature. “The reader, drawing on past linguistic and life experience, links the signs on the page with certain words, certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people actions, scenes” (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. 30). A reader of verbal and natural texts sometimes travels time and space to make connections to previous experiences.

However, the distance of time and space can be shortened when reading in nature. Meaning in a poem featuring snow becomes more vivid when read besides a snowy landscape. The meaning in the text is enhanced by the physical setting directly before the reader. Of course, the reader’s previous encounters with snow, both through firsthand experience and through secondhand discursive or photographic experience, are also present. But the immediately experienced snow amplifies epistemic meaning in combina-

tion with the meanings formed from visual, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory observation, from past experiences, and from the text of the poem.

One example of a rigorous outdoor reading experience occurs in my class when I take students on an overnight backpacking trip. The rigor here is not due to text complexity, but due to the rough terrain of alpine hiking in the Taconic Mountains on the New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts border. After five miles of backpacking with thirty pounds of gear on their backs and hours of camp set-up, students sit around the campfire and read a section of *Walden* containing the words, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately” (Thoreau, 2008, p. 65). I ask them, what does it mean to live deliberately? On such field trips we climb 1000 ft. mountains with deliberate footsteps. We cook deliberately, so as to avoid a long trek to the stream for water. When asked to discuss what Thoreau might have meant when he wished to “live deliberately,” students around that campfire seem to implicitly reference the toils of their day.

For example, after a laborious episode of wilderness cooking, one student views his deliberate dinner preparation in light of Thoreau’s value for simplicity. He states, “I think [Thoreau] means for us to say let’s not live thinking of all the daily encumbrances of just numbers and grades, doing this getting that. Just live for the sake of living. Get food so you can eat.” Another student captures Thoreau’s call to “suck out the marrow of life” when he writes in his journal, “Thoreau means going into the wild is about taking new adventures . . . this trip has inspired me to take new adventures and go on new hikes.” Students share with Thoreau a similar understanding of experiences in a natural setting that require refocused attention and a willingness for undiscovered actions.

In addition to reading besides a campfire, there are many ways of reading in nature with students. Outdoor experiences can bring value to a literary critique of a text. John Eldar contends that teachers should bring their students outdoors when reading literature in order to enhance their literary criticism of a text. Eldar takes his students out to mow a field by hand in order to experience the “whispering” sounds in the motions of the act of cutting down grass with a scythe, featured in Frost’s poem, “Mowing.” “Such an experience must be rare for most of Frost’s readers today” (Eldar, 1999, p. 653). Eldar urges critics of literature to engage in such experiences in order to squeeze the meaning out of the text. “To be alert and receptive readers of [Frost’s] poetry, we too need to venture out under the sky, into rain and sun. We need

to hear the specific calls of the specific birds, to startle and be startled by snakes appearing at our feet” (p. 658). In other words, a serious critic of Frost should spend time in the poet’s environment. Lack of such experiences creates a deficit in interpretation. Louise Rosenblatt (1938/1995) notes that readers who spend more time in an urban landscape may be challenged to respond to such a pastoral poem: “This inadequacy of experience may take the form of the city child’s inability to respond fully to country imagery” (p. 100). Both literary scholars suggest that a reader’s outdoor experience can enhance her interpretation of a literary text.

A common activity I use to engage students in both reading literature and reading nature is to ask them to focus on what they find curious in a literary text and in a landscape. In my classrooms, I ask my students to answer the question “what do you find curious in the literature” at some point in all of our reading endeavors. The value for what’s curious, for what’s confusing, and for what’s interesting puts students on alert and allows them to find key passages in the literature (Rex and McEachen, 1999). When I complement this reading exercise with a similar activity in the outdoors, students likely sharpen their observation skills. “Literature will help the reader sharpen further his alertness to the sensuousness quality of experience” (Rosenblatt 1938/1995, p. 48).

I also ask students to read specific features in specific landscapes (Wessels, 1997) and read literature that references those same features. Each locality, each region, each place has its own character and its own history. English teachers can use such geographic idiosyncrasies to their advantage. An English teacher in New England can sit on a stone wall with a class and read Frost’s “A Star in a Stoneboat” to discover meaning in the poem. In Michigan, a student can read Jerry Dennis describe a trip to Grand Traverse Bay (Dennis, 2013) or canoe down a Michigan river, and then the teacher take her students to these places to enhance the meaning found in the text and the meaning found in the river.

Of course, some of the most important texts to be read in any English class are the texts written by the students themselves. I always ask students to read the nature writing of their peers. Such activities offer students the chance to see themselves creating literature alongside published authors like Annie Dillard or Rachel Carson. In addition, students who share common outdoor experiences can write about familiar landscapes that have been read together during class sponsored outdoor experiences. In a communal sharing of student nature writing and reading, students generate a communal discourse (Blau, 2006) that values natural settings.

## Reading Through Nature: Mediating Place and Process

The preposition *through* conveys a sense of motion and mediation. It is with this sense of the word that I want to bring this article to a discussion of how reading through nature occurs. On one level, students physically negotiate their environment when reading through nature. However, on another level students negotiate a socioculturally constructed environment. Whether verbal text or textured landscapes, we read through our lenses of experience, ideology, and culture. Furthermore, reading is a process of thinking. There is mo-

understanding of the world. “Meaning in language is tied to people’s experiences of situated action in the material world and social world” (Gee, 2001, p. 715). The outdoors are part of a student’s “material world,” and whether urban or rural, these spaces are present in the process of verbal literacy.

When outdoor locations are part of pedagogy, the classroom uses all of a location’s situated meaning. Place-based education (Orr, 1992; Sobel, 2004; Gruenewald, 2003) seeks to incorporate local spaces in pedagogical practice and capitalize on the resources afforded by a place:

Place-based education is the process of using local community and environment as a starting point



Lake Superior, May 2014

*Photo by Lisa Eckert*

tion of thought as we make meaning when our eyes graze the words of a page. Outdoor experiences in nature compliment the socioculturally situated reading process and can help students to understand their own reading processes as well.

The living flora, the prowling fauna, the geological artifacts, the rolling landscape, the textured surfaces, the wafting fragrances, the whispering air, the crashing waters all compose a location’s essence. Such attributes of place influence a reader’s interaction with a text. Gee (2001) says that such specific aspects of a location influence a reader, contribute to a person’s sense of the “situated action” that informs his

to teach concepts in language arts . . . Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. (Sobel, 2004, p. 7)

For English educators, place is a fantastic “starting point to teach concepts in language arts” because place is teeming with meaning. The pedagogy I advocate in this article

represents one vision of place-based education in the field of English education.

Theorists who study the process of reading have incorporated metaphors in their writing that compare the observation of nature to the process of reading in order to help describe what happens when readers read. For example, Iser (1974) seeks to explain how different readers will create different interpretations only within the limits imposed by the written as opposed to the unwritten text. In the same way, two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The ‘stars’ in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable (p. 442). For Iser, the reader’s interpretation of literary text is limited by what’s on the page in the same way a stargazer’s imagined vision is limited by the stars available. Imagining a story in the stars is much like imaging a story in literature.

Rosenblatt observes similarities in reading the text and reading the experienced world as well. By describing how “there are similarities between literary experience and direct observation through field trips” ( p. 229), Rosenblatt (1938/1995) likens the process of reading language to the process of observing the physical and social world.

I ask students in my environmental literature course, who both read with me and hike with me through the outdoors, to consider how the process of reading is similar to the process of observing nature. The guiding question of this metacognitive work is “how does one successfully read literature and nature?” To answer the question, my students and I collaborate in creating the list of answers. The list describes in part what a successful reader of nature and literature does (Blau, 2003b). Each item on the list begins with a verb to express the action in the reading process. Below is a representation of that list produced over the course of several class sessions:

- investigate further
- reread to understand
- use contextual clues
- compare your thoughts with others
- interpret a story
- make predictions about how things came to be there
- break down what you’re seeing
- annotate text
- break apart things to make more manageable
- use a resource for more information (e.g. dictionary or field guide)

- analyze the literature and the landscape
- expand an interpretation by writing about it
- keep a journal

In this list, there are common patterns that reflect my students’ understanding of the reading process. By engaging in this metacognitive activity, students are taking part in a kind of “performative literacy” whereby they

recognizes that reading, like writing, is a process of text construction—a process through which meaning is made in the head of the reader (and later reconstructed and made more visible, perhaps, through writing) through the reader’s encounter or transactions with words on a page and in the course of conversations with other readers. (Blau, 2006, p. 21)

By comparing the process of verbal reading with the process of natural reading, students are afforded an understanding of the reading process that is communicated to them multi-modally (Kress, 2003).

In generating this list, students express a tacit reflection on their career as readers. For example, the aforementioned act of “analyzing” or “breaking down what you’re seeing,” might have derived from the memories of writing essays about literature in previous English courses. English teachers in my department often engage students in acts of literacy whereby students find literary devices, plot structures, or character development and explain or evaluate those literary elements in writing.

Students relate these common literacy activities to our outdoor activities in which analysis turns toward natural entities. In the outdoors they discover newts hidden under rocks. They analyze the parts of a tree in the process of identifying the species. Analysis of a landscape resembles the analysis of literature.

Students noted that they “make predictions” when reading literature and observing nature. In natural settings, students find new and interesting sights, such as a soaring turkey vulture, and they share their findings with peers. In such instances, students try to imagine the turkey vulture’s origin and predict its future movement. This activity of observation is similar to what happens in the reading process. Student will summarize the events of characters’ journeys through a piece of literature and often predict what will happen in future chapters of a book.

Reading through nature asks students to thoughtfully consider the place and the process of reading. To read through nature with competence, students must be vigilant

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observers of the word and the world. Reading nature and literature requires awareness and alertness. Students who roam the foothills of a local wood may never experience anything noteworthy if they don't look closely at their surroundings. Likewise, readers of literature must employ close and careful observation. They may need to reread the texts of literature (Blau, 2003a) and nature. Readers need to stop and observe passages they find "interesting," "odd" (Rex and McEachen, 1999), or curious. So too, nature observers seek to make interesting discoveries in their travels. The close reading of literature is similar to the close reading of place (Sobel, 2004; Gruenewald, 2003).

Beyond the list generated by my students, I've noticed other similarities between the process of reading literary text and the process of reading nature. When reading literature as when reading nature, there often arises a need to fill in the gaps of a story. I witness this outdoors, when students come across the skeleton of a deer lying in the woods. Immediately, the story of the deer's death becomes a topic of speculation. A rib bone found a hundred yards away from the main trunk of a skeleton leads students to imagine a carnivorous encounter with a coyote who stole away with a piece of carrion. A reader is also asked to make such leaps of imagination when there is information missing in a text, when inference is required. "Whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling the gaps left by the text itself" (Iser, 1974, p. 440). Students are filling in the gaps of their interpretations when reading both nature and literature.

### Moving Reading Toward Ecological Literacy

While I understand that not every English classroom can be conducted in the outside, I do want to encourage English educators to consider their natural nearby locations as a valuable pedagogical asset. Of course, not every student eagerly embraces outdoor activities. And of course, not every student enjoys the literature they read in an English class. But, in my experience, when students are asked to create semiotic connections with the natural world, many discover something positive in nature, as when one student who at first found an outdoor activity "annoying" later admitted, "I like the outdoors."

The locations of our classrooms are not merely physical spaces, or pin drops on a Google Map of day-to-day routines. They are rich with meaning. As in the reading of literature,

one goal of an outdoor pedagogy is to help students make meaning of the world. English teachers would do well to allow their classrooms to branch off into the outdoors in order to enrich the reading experiences of their students and aid in global efforts to foster "ecological literacies" (Orr, 1992).

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