

LIFE WRITING AND SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

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In our rapidly evolving era marked by profound environmental and socio-cultural shifts, the importance of sustainability education has never been more acute. We find ourselves grappling with what some term the Anthropocene—a proposed epoch where human activities have emerged as the main drivers affecting planetary health. This realization brings forth existential questions: Can our planet sustain a burgeoning human population, potentially hitting 10 billion or more? Is it feasible to curb population growth and prevent ecological overshoot? And as we navigate the challenges of the Anthropocene, how can we cultivate innovative, holistic approaches to address the sustainability movement’s multifaceted concerns? I posit that, while it’s imperative to bolster our scientific understanding, it’s equally vital to lean into the humanities for a richer, more comprehensive grasp of sustainability issues.

Reflecting on my eight-year (plus) evolution from a tenure-track faculty member to a tenured professor, I’ve grown increasingly convinced of the need for diverse, interdisciplinary methods to further the sustainability cause. The humanities, as elucidated by Hulme (2018), don’t merely chase empirical knowledge. They seek a heuristic, aiming to “thicken knowledge: adding layers of meaning and significance to our experience and understanding of reality” (Hulme, 2018, p. 334). This thickening of knowledge, especially as articulated through life writing both within and outside academia, proves crucial in propelling the sustainability movement. Life writing serves as a beacon, guiding us through personal narratives and lending invaluable insights into lived experiences. By spotlighting our own journeys and intertwining them with larger environmental and societal issues, life writing illuminates a path forward, allowing us to address sustainability’s wicked problems from a place of depth, empathy, and informed understanding. Also, life writing, a method of inquiry into lived experience “with an emphasis on representing that experience in a narrative form that provides rich detail and context about the life (or lives) in question” (Gough, 2008, p. 484) provides an excellent way to reflect upon and advance one’s sustainability journey.

Thickening knowledge in the humanities and in life writing involves embracing the complexities and depth associated with understanding lived experience. This can involve examining a subject from multiple perspectives, considering a wide range of sources and evidence, and looking at the connections and relationships between different ideas. For example, studying history can help us to better understand the context and background of a particular issue, while literature can provide insight into the emotional and psychological experiences of individuals. Similarly, philosophy can help us to explore the underlying values and beliefs that shape our understanding of the world, while art can provide a visual representation of these ideas. By studying these and other disciplines, we can develop a deep and nuanced understanding of the human experience. Additionally, life writing can help to deepen our understanding of these issues by allowing us to explore our own beliefs, values, and experiences within the broader context of our cultural and social environment. This can provide a valuable perspective on wicked sustainability problems and help us to better understand the role of humanity in addressing these challenges.

In this paper, I discuss the power of personal narrative and life writing in the context of modern sustainability challenges. This discussion will leverage the lenses of sense of self, sense of place, and sense of community. Additionally, I will address the question of how the field of sustainability studies might be further enriched, complicated, and deepened by life writing approaches such as autoethnography. Also, I will use the metaphor of a river to discuss the necessity of embracing the meandering pathways inherent to lived experience and the value of incorporating this into higher education for sustainable development.

MY EXPERIENCES IN THE ACADEMY

The river of my journey in academia has been long and winding. With over 12 years of working in higher education under my belt, I've felt both the exhilaration of discovery and the weight of not knowing. Many times, I've been brought to the humbling realization of how much more there is to learn. Each twist and turn in this journey, much like the bends and oxbows of a river, has offered me new perspectives and deeper understandings. Through the years, I've come to believe that embracing the narratives of lived experiences—the stories we tell, the reflections we pen—is crucial for enriching our approach to sustainability (Hensley, 2020). The diverse range of narratives that comprise the complexities and nuances of sustainability must be embraced. In this paper, I build from a concept that I employed in a recent piece (Hensley, 2023) and extend the idea of a meandering river while examining the human effort to “engineer” straight rivers, as a metaphor for educational experience. The argument in this paper differs from my previous piece (Hensley, 2023) by maintaining that we must create the space for student reflection and educate our students in the discipline of self-study and personal narrative. When students gain skills in reflection, reflexivity, and communication they are better positioned to tackle the complexities, uncertainties, and adventures intrinsic to sustainability studies.

Life writing is a scholarly approach to studying our own lived experiences that forces us to slow down and to be quiet in order to reflect. Also, life writing allows us to be intentional about enhancing our own sense of self within the rapidly evolving industrial complex that makes up our world. The preeminent curriculum theorist, William Pinar's method of life writing, *currere*, involves viewing lived experience and interpretations of lived experience as a journey into curriculum theorizing. According to Pinar, the *currere* method is flexible and should not be viewed as a strict set of procedures but as a process; its content is indeterminate and personalizable (Pinar, 1975) and is an open-ended exploration of oneself and one's place in the world (Giroux et al., 1981). In this paper, I draw from another form of life writing that has been particularly compelling for me, autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a form of inquiry in which the researcher examines her personal experiences and relates them to broader cultural, political, and social contexts to gain deeper understanding. Evocative autoethnography is one of the most common approaches. Hernandez et al. (2022) explain that “evocative autoethnographies invite readers to enter into the experiences of the researchers—to evoke an emotional response from them based on the commonality of Human Experience” (p. 4). The emotionality of lived experience is not easy to communicate and does not fit within the conventional realm of positivistic and empirical research methodologies, thus it is commonly viewed as non-credible or overly subjective. However, it has value that extends beyond the scientific articulation of our ecological crisis. It goes beyond the realm of facts and figures

to communicate marginalized stories. Evocative autoethnography is further defined by Poulos (2017) as “a way of constructing research texts that conjure, arouse, or elicit vivid images, deep meanings, and intense emotions” (n.p.) Evoking emotional responses from one’s readers helps to weave connections between the author and the reader and integrate forms of inquiry that include the human dimensions of our sustainability crisis.

RIVER STRAIGHTENING

Throughout history, humans have felt compelled to control the natural world, with practices like river straightening or channeling as striking illustrations (Inyo, 2001; Surian, 2007). Such interventions, often aiming to enhance navigability and reduce unpredictability in rivers, typify our propensity to prioritize short-term human benefits over ecological balance. Drawing parallels to education, this tendency to control and streamline is evident. Modern educational paradigms, heavily influenced by accountability and assessment pressures, push towards a version of “straightening,” emphasizing efficiency and predictability, often at the expense of a broader, depth-oriented learning (Surian, 2007). This “channelized” approach to education resonates with the shortsightedness witnessed in river straightening. Both might offer immediate, perceivable benefits, but at what deeper, long-term costs? We risk producing learners molded to fit pre-set standards instead of nurturing them to embrace, understand, and shape their diverse learning journeys.

Both river straightening and the emphasis on efficiency in education can be seen as attempts to impose a pre-established sense of authority and reduce risk. However, the cost-benefit ratio leans heavily towards not engineering rivers or education in this way. Guiding our students to find the value of their own stories and to recognize how their lived experiences connect to sustainability is one way to prevent an overemphasis on efficiency-based education.

Furthermore, the idea of channelizing and straightening in education can also be viewed as a form of “curricular imperialism,” a term coined by Aoki (2005). Aoki argues that the imposition of pre-determined outcomes and efficiency-based education can be seen as a form of control, much like how river channeling is an attempt to control the natural flow of water. Aoki suggests that curricular imperialism, like political imperialism, is an attempt to impose one’s own culture, one’s own ways of knowing and valuing, on others (Aoki, 2005, p. 362). Aoki (2005) warns that we must “guard against ... a demand for sameness ... [that] may diminish and extinguish the salience of the lived situation of people in classrooms and communities” (p. 362). This demand for sameness is reflected in the standards and accountability deeply entrenched in most formalized curricula. Therefore, it is important to consider the implications of channelizing and straightening in both river management and education and to recognize the potential harm it can cause to the natural environment and diverse perspectives in education.

USE OF LIFE WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

As educators, one of our most important tasks is to assist students in finding their voices and helping them know that they have important stories to tell. Hall (2019) cogently argues, “You don’t have to be famous or powerful to offer something useful to the public conversation. We can all, with some work, find stories to tell” (p. 43). Finding your unique voice is crucial to telling your story. Lakshmi (in Bowles et al., 2022) tells us that “you don’t need to be a writer to be a storyteller. Your story is enough” (p. xiii). Hall (2019) adds that,

no matter how you get there, you have to write from your deep self. If you stay at the level of your office brain or your academic self and use the jargon of your profession, you will kill your work. (p. 47)

We must transcend our office brain! In sustainability studies, it is crucial to help students learn the power of story. Stories illuminate complexities and allow the reader or listener to grasp new information through evoking memories, emotions, and connections. Stories are resilient, and Bernier (2020) tells us, “It is well researched ... [that] our brains are hardwired to relate to and be engaged by storytelling” (p. 431). This aligns with the fact that audiences are more attentive when a speaker is telling a story versus presenting a fact by itself. Stories activate humans holistically, Cron (2012, as quoted in Bernier, 2020) notes that “regions of the brain that process the sights, sounds, tastes, and movement of real life are activated when we’re engrossed in a compelling narrative” p. 431). Also, CUNY research indicates that “frequent writing in courses has been shown to improve content retention, critical analysis, literacy, and, not surprisingly, writing outcomes” (Pease, 2015, para. 1). Additionally, when students are given a life writing assignment, they are provided both voice and choice in how they want to craft their narratives (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2003). Through life writing, students can gain a more nuanced and complex understanding of their own cultures, and they are better equipped to contribute to broader discussions and debates within a given field of study (Ellis, 2004).

Evocative autoethnography seeks to draw from the writer’s unique voice emerging from their personal experiences to create a compelling and emotional narrative that engages the reader and provokes thought and reflection. Stories and poems are examples of evocative autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For example, when looking at the ocean, autoethnography provides space to explore the “heart of the ocean” (or its aesthetic dimensions) as opposed to the observable physical shape and size of the ocean. Going beyond what can be observed, counted, and mapped, evocative autoethnography is an avenue for interpretive scholarship that can link ways of knowing that were previously fragmented. This is valuable because it creates space for new ways of viewing sustainability issues that include social, historical, philosophical, political, scientific, economic, and ethical perspectives (Ellis, 2004). Weaving together multiple perspectives opens possibilities for the transgressive inquiry and transformative dialogue necessary to transcend untenable and inadequate ways of knowing.

Sustainability is not a fixed or static body of knowledge, but rather a dynamic and evolving concept and practice that is shaped by a wide range of factors (Hensley, 2011). Thus, studying sustainability is a “complicated conversation” that requires fluidity in forms of inquiry. Accordingly, sustainability studies acknowledges the inherent diversity of perspectives present in contemporary sustainability discourse and creates the intellectual space to adapt and adjust to new information as it surfaces and evolves through time. The reflective practice of writing helps students to gain clarity on their values and passions (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2003). Accordingly, life writing can help students hone their senses of self, place, and community.

SENSE OF PLACE

Every time I’ve relocated—and I’ve done it six times in the past 13 years—I’ve felt a deep yearning to connect with my new surroundings. I believe our environment, the places we inhabit, shape our identities profoundly. It’s not merely about geographical coordinates or landmarks but about the memories, emotions, and connections tied to

them. From the fragrances that fill the air to the community stories echoing around, every place has tales to tell and lessons to teach.

When people have a strong sense of place, they are more likely to value and protect the land, native heritage, water, and other natural and cultural resources that are unique to their bioregion. This can lead to more sustainable practices, such as advancing ecological justice, mobilizing responsible resource management, and place-specific conservation efforts.

A sense of place is a vital component of sustainability education and revitalization because it provides a framework for understanding and addressing environmental issues in a way that is grounded in local culture. By recognizing the unique history and cultural traditions of a place and by engaging with local communities and stakeholders, sustainability initiatives can be tailored to the specific needs and values of a particular location. This emphasis on localization can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to environmental problems and can also help to build support and buy-in for sustainability efforts among local communities.

Place also helps to advance sustainability because it allows us to operationalize sustainability principles and theories, making them more tangible and meaningful. By engaging with local communities and stakeholders and tailoring sustainability initiatives to the specific needs and values of a particular location, we can create more effective and sustainable solutions to environmental problems. A sense of place can also foster a sense of community pride and encourage individuals to take active roles in supporting and protecting their communities. It can provide a sense of belonging and identity, helping to build social connections and creating a sense of unity within the community. In this way, a sense of place helps to advance a sense of community and is an important aspect of the common democratic project to advance sustainability through self, place, and community.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

In the grand tapestry of our interconnected narratives, a sense of community emerges not as a luxury but a necessity. Echoing the sentiments of Merton (2005), our survival, both as individuals and as a collective, hinges on the bonds we nurture, the relationships we cherish. As I've journeyed through my academic and personal life, moving and settling, embracing various roles—a scholar, educator, and father—I've come to realize that a sense of community is our tether to a shared destiny.

As Snyder (1990) remarks, nature is not just an entity we visit but our very home. Just as our sense of place roots us, our sense of community binds us. It's about understanding the intricate dance between the individual, the community, and the broader environment. Wendell Berry (2012) captures this sentiment beautifully when he highlights the urgency of expanding our community to encompass the world, understanding the shared nature of our existence, our place, our destiny.

Throughout my professional journey, from leading wilderness expeditions to structured academic settings, I've encountered the profound power of stories. These stories, each a testament to our individual and shared experiences, illuminate the deep interconnectivity inherent to human, ecological, and socio-ecological systems. And central to these stories is our sense of community. It's in these interwoven tales that we see the mirrored reflection of our commitment to sustainability, to stewarding the world we share.

To truly advance in our collective quest for sustainability, we must tap into our community's collective power, recognizing that our shared narrative is the key to

forging a sustainable path forward. It's about crafting, sharing, and living stories of hope, resilience, and collective action—understanding that each thread, each voice, each action weaves into the larger narrative of our shared future.

SENSE OF SELF

Navigating the intricacies of my academic journey, I've often paused, ensnared by Mary Oliver's (2020) haunting words: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" These moments of introspection have become a refuge, especially when life's myriad transitions felt overwhelming, drawing me back into a more profound understanding of my evolving self.

If the academic corridors I've traversed have taught me anything, it's that curriculum often omits the most profound lessons—the introspective journeys we undertake when we're stripped of external validations and reckonings. My own stints as a researcher, educator, and father have invariably circled back to this inner sanctuary. It's in these moments, swathed in solitude, that I've felt an intense kinship with Rilke's poetic reflections on introspection and solitude, finding them more than mere words—they're a lived reality.

The juxtaposition of these intimate, solitary moments with the roaring cacophony of the communal sphere is a dance I've grown familiar with, echoing Merton's (2005) sentiments. In the quietude, I'd often find clarity, only to be thrust back into the bustling reality of community engagements, where my sharpened sense of self would intertwine with broader sustainability narratives.

Lakshmi's (in Bowles et al., 2022) poignant assertion that you "your story is enough" (p. xiii) highlights the power of personal stories and has served as a lodestar, guiding me to view my autoethnographic endeavors not just as personal reflections, but as powerful narratives intertwined with broader socio-cultural paradigms. With every bend and curve in my journey, every story penned, every reflection gleaned, I've realized that our unique experiences, as varied and diverse as they may be, share a common thread—they illuminate the intricate web of interconnections that shape our existence (Hensley, 2020). I've endeavored to enhance the autoethnographic tone while staying true to the original voice and style and incorporated the references from the original text.

RELATIONSHIPS, STORIES, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Through a combination of a sense of place, a sense of self, and a sense of community, we can become our highest selves and best contribute to the sustainability movement. We must move beyond antiquated forms of scholarly inquiry, academic curriculum, and outdated teaching by embracing best practices in higher education for sustainable development. This may include transdisciplinarity and transformative actions. We must move beyond what Wes Jackson (1993) calls an "extractive economy," the traditional model of economic development that relies on the extraction and consumption of natural resources. In the extractive economy, economic growth is measured by the extraction and conversion of natural resources into goods and services, often without regard for the long-term consequences for the environment or the sustainability of the resource base (Vitek & Jackson, 2010). Alternatively, we must embrace our place and look at nature to provide inspiration to address our sustainability issues (Hensley, 2011). We have to focus on regenerative, sustainable, and life-giving modes of scholarship and teaching. In addition to evidence-based science, we must also learn from the intangibles that we can only understand through lived experience. These intangibles include love of the land, wide awakesness, and a sense of mystery and awe for the places that we inhabit.

The stories that we craft about our lived experiences in place illuminate the interconnectivity and interdependence that is inherent to human, ecological, and eco-social systems (Hensley, 2020). For me, the most compelling stories are the ones that emerge from embracing uncertainty and pushing through the fear of the unknown. For example, on a recent solo backpacking trip that I took to North Manitou Island in Lake Michigan (part of Sleepy Bear Dunes), I attempted to take a shortcut through the woods to get to my destination faster. I had no cell phone reception, and the complimentary park visitor map lacked off-trail detail. Inevitably, I ended up a bit turned around (some might call it lost). I had my compass, but the map was woefully inadequate for off-trail navigation. I experienced the disorientation of being lost and not knowing how far I was from the trail. This was both humbling and humiliating, because I am an experienced backpacker who used to work as a wilderness instructor, leading groups through complex terrain. In this situation, I had to work through the complex internal terrain associated with the fear of being lost. Eventually, I found the trail that I had left, and took the “long,” but safe and predictable, way to my destination. This served as a wake-up call for me to not get too arrogant when navigating the backcountry, and it reminded me of the importance of having a firm grasp of the geography when visiting new wilderness locations without an adequate map.

Life writing serves as a map that allows us to reflect on the contours of our lived experiences while making connections to the human and more-than-human world in which we live. When *the patterns that connect* (Bateson, 1985) our experiences to other people’s experiences become more evident, we can see the delicate balance that holds the fragile social and ecological systems together. Also, from the perspective of sustainability studies, we can begin to recognize that the “maps” that we currently have in place to “navigate” the sustainability crises are inadequate because they lack the necessary transdisciplinary complexity to reduce the wickedness of existing sustainability crises.

CONCLUSION

My journey as a professor has evolved from leading wilderness education experiences outside to the formal indoors university classroom setting. I continue to draw from my field-based experiences to inform my scholarship and teaching in higher education. Additionally, I resonate with life writing in the form of autoethnography and *currere* to expand the insight that can be accessed from my experiences past, present, and into the future. The value of understanding where sense of place, sense of community, and sense of self fit into the genre of life writing cannot be overstated. By understanding the complexity and diversity of these relationships, we recognize the importance of maintaining the integrity of the biosphere.

The dawning of the Anthropocene has made sustainability education more important than ever (Sterling, 2010). To adequately address the wicked sustainability problems facing our planet, we must continue to build upon existing scientific knowledge and draw from the arts and humanities. These disciplines can provide valuable insight into the complexities of the human experience and help us to develop a deeper understanding of the social and cultural context of sustainability issues. Life writing is an approach to education and scholarship that promotes deep reflection and integration between the curriculum and lived experience. In this way, life writing is filled with opportunities for transformation and new insight.

Like a river, when we rewild the educational journey, students learn from the texture of their lived experiences, which leads to new forms of insight and expanded

forms of inquiry (Hensley, 2011, 2023). By embracing the meandering pathways of lived experience, we can better understand the role of humanity in addressing these challenges and continue to push the boundaries of inquiry in sustainability studies. In the end, it is through this kind of transgressive, transformative, and innovative scholarship that we can hope to tackle wicked problems and make progress towards a more sustainable future.

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