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A Writing Center without Walls: Community Gardens as a Site for Teaching English Language Learning

*by **Elizabeth K. Rodacker**, Union College*, and ***Kay Siebler**, Buena Vista University*

Two ELL scholars bring ecofeminist principles to bear on community garden work.

About the Community Gardens in Lincoln

Pedagogically astute English teachers will understand the necessity of writing centers without walls--mobile writing centers. Writing centers need to travel when necessary. They must teach when and where there is a need; communities, both tutors and learners, benefit most when writing centers look to non-traditional venues. Non-traditional writing centers may even grow vegetables. This is the story of one such writing center.

In Lincoln, Nebraska, the community gardens became a non-traditional site for writing instruction.

As of June 2005 there were four community gardens in Lincoln. Lincoln, with a population of approximately 225,000, is a politically progressive town for the Midwest. A social-activist sensibility permeates the community; many churches sponsor refugees and immigrants.

The population that works in this garden includes people who are locked into low-paying jobs, unable to read fluently and to write English, and not registered to vote (although able to register)—individuals disengaged in their new American home. Because of their limited English skills, they are unable to fully participate in our American democracy and are therefore unable to transform their communities and lives.

Elizabeth K. Rodacker

This population desperately needs improved reading and writing skills so that they can make improvements in their lives and communities. How can these gardeners/students obtain these necessary language skills when many refugees/immigrants have inflexible work schedules and take non-credit evening ESL classes? Because these students didn't have a writing center at their disposal, they needed the writing center to come to them.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, for its size Lincoln is "one of the largest refugee resettlement areas in the country, with refugees bringing new culture and languages to the city" (Lange-Kubick 2). The U.S. Language Foundation reports that Lincoln residents use 48 different languages when they speak at home. Indeed, Lincoln, Nebraska, is a culturally and linguistically diverse community.

The community gardens grew out the desires of various nonprofit organizations in Lincoln to provide a public space where refugees, immigrants, and people of low socio-economic backgrounds could grow fruits and vegetables during the summer months.

The philosophy of the community gardens resists corporate farming (capitalist endeavors that rely on toxins to produce genetically modified crops) by sharing land and resources to produce healthy food, free of chemicals. In an "ownership" society, community gardens resist the dominant culture by bringing people together to work the land and produce food, as opposed to distancing people from the land and food production. With a community garden, people share land and resources to produce food that they then share with their families, friends, and the community. "Can communities survive and sustain their own cultures and ecosystems in the face of an ever expanding global economy?" (Berry et. al. 1) With community gardens, the answer is "yes."

Kay Siebler

The project reflected in this publication relates specifically to the immigrant and refugee populations who use the gardens and how and why the gardens became a site for teaching English Language Learners (ELL).

Herstory

Teaching ELL in the community gardens began with the idea of serving those who needed English language skills. As an associate professor of ESL, I (Elizabeth) often have summers off and enjoy gardening during that time. When community gardens first started up in Lincoln, I began gardening and teaching the refugees English, specifically reading and writing skills. The gardens have since evolved to include other gardens and other teachers/volunteers trained in ELL pedagogy. Through our work and connections with other ELL teachers, the project has grown from informal conversations to include a network of teachers who communicate with each other about their goals and pedagogical strategies for ELL.

In 2004, we began connecting ELL with the community gardens. While working on our own garden plot, we talked to the immigrants/refugees about their planting, weeding and harvesting. We offered advice to the farmers who were often working with plants, soil conditions, and weather conditions which were often very different from those in their home country.

Because we strove to establish a mutually respectful connection with the immigrant/refugee farmers, we identified ourselves as teachers when introducing ourselves. In most African, Middle Eastern, and South American countries, teachers are highly

regarded, and in identifying ourselves as teachers, we not only solidified our ethos with some of the men from cultures where females are considered inferior, but also created the opportunity to help the immigrants with their English skills.

Once the immigrants/refugee farmers saw that we not only knew about gardening and crops but also about language learning, they would seek us out whenever we came to the gardens.

The questions they asked ranged from how much water the tomato plants needed to how to fill out a green card application.

We started to hold classes at the gardens every Sunday evening at 5:30 for anyone who wanted to improve their English. It was at this point that the informal conversations became more pointed lessons in ELL.

I should note, however, that an ELL instructor cannot just walk into a garden and expect to "teach." As with any aid/development work, the instructor must first work alongside the other gardeners in order to show expertise, establish credibility, and earn their respect. Only through this "work alongside" approach will the instructors be able to eventually establish themselves as members of the community and work with the ELL populations at the garden. The ELL instructors typically had formal education in ELL teaching strategies, although there were also student instructors who were learning ELL informally by watching and co-teaching with instructors who held ELL degrees and other necessary certification.

Population / Students

Because the farmer/student populations varied both ethnically and in level of language proficiency, ELL teachers needed to approach each lesson with an open mind, allowing the farmers/students present to direct the lesson objectives.

With each of the community gardens in Lincoln, the population of immigrants/refugees is a bit different. Each population often has different needs and issues relating to ELL; each population has different cultural barriers or concerns that the instructor needs to be sensitive to or aware of; some populations of refugees/immigrants have deep seated biases toward, bigotries about, or tangible fears of other groups that they may be working alongside in the garden. In order to be most effective, it is critical that the instructor be aware of these issues as he/she teaches.

Ecofeminism: How It Relates to ELL in the Community Gardens

Ecofeminism is the connection between ecology (concern for the world's natural resources) and feminism (the belief that systems of oppression, regardless of what form they take, need to be abolished). Ecofeminists believe that there is a strong connection between the status of women (and other traditionally marginalized groups) and the care of and concern for preserving natural resources.

The ecofeminist philosophy works well with ELL at the community gardens because issues of social equity for women and respect for the earth are an integral part of the approach taken in both the gardens and in the ELL lessons at the garden. Environmental ethics as well as concern for issues of gender equity are primary concerns to the ELL teachers at the community gardens. "Ecofeminism is a feminist approach to environmental ethics. Feminist theorists ask the question, 'What is the source of the oppression of women, and how do we get rid of it?' Ecofeminists believe there are interconnections between the oppression of women (sexism), the oppression of other human Others (racism, classism, ageism, colonialism, etc.) and the domination of nature (naturism)" (Ecofeminism). This philosophy helped the ELL teachers create a healthy connection between the work of the garden and the web of life, i.e. how to prevent systems of nature from being corrupted by individuals or patriarchal systems of power.

Both the ideals of ecofeminism and the strong influence of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian theorist of progressive education, helped to shape the curriculum design. The inextricable links between education, civic engagement, and social justice must permeate all English classrooms and writing centers. For what reason do writing centers exist?

Read the curriculum below to see these embedded values.

Writing and language instruction must include a pedagogy that challenges inequality, oppression, and fundamentalism.

Our approach to designing the curriculum employed student-driven strategies coupled with feminist pedagogy. A feminist pedagogical approach asks that the instructor be aware of and sensitive to the material realities of each student and take into consideration his/her individual needs. Feminist pedagogy also asks that teachers keep a keen eye to dynamics of race, class, gender, sexuality and other identity issues as they play out both among students and between the instructor and the students. Working with the refugee/immigrants, a feminist pedagogical approach would include paying sharp attention to how different cultural practices and belief systems can act as barriers to learning or how different cultural practices and belief systems can be used to enhance learning and lessons.

Another key tenet of feminist pedagogy is the instructor's rigorous self-critique of what is working and isn't working both for the group and for individual students. Part of this effort involves the instructors talking with each other about what they observe or struggles they have with their student groups, and part of it involves the instructors' commitment to being self-critical about how biases or assumptions they might have about given populations of students played out in the lessons or student/teacher interactions.

Coupling feminist pedagogical principles with student-driven teaching meant that the curriculum and goals for each lesson were defined by the students present. Teachers would often begin each gathering by asking, "What do you want to talk about today?" Or teachers would bring a local newspaper and ask students if there was an article they wanted to read and discuss. Feminist teachers pay close attention to students' silences and work to engage all students in the lesson, even if that means creating various sub-groups based on interest or language skill.

The problem of having various language learners at radically different levels in the same group can be both a blessing and a curse.

. The students with higher language levels can easily monopolize the lessons and, with this student-driven approach, define the lesson content. It is up to the teacher to be vigilant and draw all students into the lesson at the level at which they can and are willing to participate. It is also imperative that the instructor use teaching strategies that open the space for those who are less assertive.

Given our feminist pedagogical, student-driven approach, it was largely the students who defined the curriculum, which primarily consisted of strategies of conversation, immersion, and reading comprehension of real world texts (newspapers, magazine articles, green card or job applications). The following is a list of topics that were used in the curriculum, followed by a description of the person who added that topic to the curriculum:

• Q&A regarding social services available in the community (initiated by a woman who asked about domestic violence shelters and help available to women in violent relationships)
• Reading, writing and discussion of an article in the local paper about job training opportunities at meat packing plants (brought by an instructor because several of the farmers/students were employed at a local meat packing plant)
• Discussions of organic farming and pest control that did not include chemicals (created by an instructor by way of explaining the products that were available in the community garden shed for collective use and the chicken coop on the garden plot)
• Education on different planting and irrigation methods (initiated by both farmers and instructors based on the various approaches being used in the garden and why those approaches were being used)

With each of these items in the curriculum, there was an open exchange where any and all (farmers/instructors) could offer expertise, advice, and knowledge. The curriculum emphasizes that the instructors are not "all knowing" teachers, but are instead a resource within the group to facilitate learning.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

ESP is a pedagogical approach used with ELL that focuses on incorporating themes into the planned lessons. The ESP approach used by the instructors at the gardens included subsistent and organic gardening. In order to emphasize these two discourse communities or knowledge areas, the instructors worked to include lessons on these topics as a way to expand the farmers'/students' knowledge of agriculture, gardening, organic farming, and use of non-genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the garden.

The philosophy of ESP is that students need specific language skills to succeed in a professional arena. Typically, ESP pedagogy is related to job training; e.g., veterinary students would need ESP in order to be able to read and comprehend journals and other professional publications within their field, or a cook would need ESP lessons related to food measurements, prices, and culinary vocabulary in order to work in a restaurant. In the context of the community gardens, the ESP philosophy allowed the gardeners/farmers to have a common language base for the work they were doing in the gardens. It also allowed them to converse about their approach to gardening both with the merchants who sold them seeds or plants at the local farmers' market and with each other as they shared successes and strategies.

Language Learning

With shifting U.S. demographics, astute and engaged writing practitioners will observe that more "generation 1.5" students are entering colleges and universities. This generation of students has probably been born in the U.S., and is therefore made up of U.S. citizens, but they nevertheless communicate in languages other than English at home and may be classified as ESL/ELL students when they arrive in college.

Note also that the number of international students studying in American colleges and universities has been on the rise. In fact, international students studying in the U.S. have an enormous effect on the U.S. economy; the **Institute of International Education** ranks these students' presence as having the fifth greatest impact on our economy.

Look around your writing centers. Who visits them? What types of students seek help from the writing center on your campus? Chances are that a significant percentage of the students who frequent writing centers are linguistically and culturally diverse.

Across ethnic populations, the primary objective many of the students/gardeners had for attending the English lessons was to build vocabulary skills and improve reading and writing skills. Because students were at various levels in their fluency, more proficient students were able to help those with less fluency. This was especially true when there was more than one person from an ethnic/cultural group present. If a struggling or emerging language learner was searching for a word or the way to say something, they could turn to the more proficient speaker within their cultural group and ask in their shared language, "How do you say . . .?" Although this practice of "translation" would be frowned upon in a more formal ELL classroom, within the context of the student-driven garden lessons, it allowed the less proficient student to learn more and it increased the self-esteem of the student who was "translating."

Although there is a lot more to learning a language than simply having vocabulary skills, the farmers/students had personal and specific needs for building their vocabulary in certain areas. Some needed to learn the words that would let them ask for directions, ask questions at social service agencies or public places, or communicate with co-workers or bosses. Others needed more advanced conversation skills in order to talk about their produce to potential customers, make conversation at social events with fellow Americans, or communicate more complex health- or living-related problems, such as securing a new apartment or home.

The primary motivation for most, if not all, of the refugees/immigrants for coming to the community garden ELL lessons is to improve their overall communication skills. They want to be able to better communicate with Americans in the hope of improving workplace and community relationships.

Certainly learning vocabulary and internalizing English grammar patterns is part of learning a language, but oral communication skills move beyond these basics to include things like body language, tone of voice, and context awareness (when to use vernacular – and what vernacular is considered appropriate for which contexts; how body language, tone, and volume are used differently within different contexts or discourse communities; and what constitutes formal and informal language practices). Because various language norms exist in any culture, people who are learning to adapt to a new culture (in this case the culture of midwestern North America) have to learn that the body language, tonality, volume, and personal space that were considered appropriate in their culture of origin may be perceived differently in a new cultural context.

Things such as appropriate personal space, appropriate touch, interpersonal greetings, eye contact, and other non-verbals were easily modeled by the instructors. All of these non-verbals are part of effective oral communication skills. Gender differences (how men and women interact in North American culture) were also modeled. Some of the Middle Eastern and Bosnian men had a difficult time seeing females as people who held bodies of knowledge. Even beyond that, it was difficult for them to interact with females as equals (making eye contact, shaking hands, and working alongside them in the fields). What is seen as appropriate or considerate in their own culture can sometimes be seen as inappropriate in North American culture, e.g., males not making

The context of interacting with people (both ELL and the teachers) at the garden allowed the students/gardeners to learn about informal language practices.

eye contact with females or not shaking hands with females. Through their interactions at the garden, these men came to a better understanding of how to interact appropriately with North American females.

In addition to working on these non-verbal skills, the group also focused on communication skills such as speaking without halting and being comfortable speaking to native English speakers. All these skills increase general fluency. Many ELL students feel intimidated or shy when speaking English to native speakers, but the garden provided a non-threatening and encouraging atmosphere where ELL students felt more comfortable taking risks in practicing their English, asking questions, and learning from other ELL students as well as from the instructors. Because the gardeners/students were sharing expertise (about the crops, pest control, irrigation and planting strategies) a dynamic developed where everyone had something of value to share; even if a student/gardener was weak in English, he/she could contribute in other ways, offering skills and knowledge that others could learn from while at the same time increasing his/her oral communication skills.

The objective of language immersion when teaching ELL is to speak to the students only in English, using very simple sentences, props, gestures, mime, and facial expression when needed with early ELL. Because the instructors in the garden did not speak all of the various languages represented, the immersion strategy was not really one of choice. Because there were typically two or more people of the same culture working in the garden, they would often speak their common language to each other, but then have to switch to English to communicate with other gardeners or the instructors.

Although in a strict model of language immersion ELL pedagogy these moments of switching and translation are not encouraged, in the garden they seemed a natural extension of the learning environment since every student was at a different level. The language switching allowed the less fluent English learners to build a more sophisticated vocabulary by turning to a friend and saying, "How do you say X in English?"

Philosophy of How Community Gardens Relate to ELL

The community gardens and ELL are related in the context of an immigrant's/refugee's reality because the gardens allow the individual to provide for themselves and their family, thereby achieving a great sense of empowerment and pride. Additionally, growing one's own food and speaking English more fluently allow the refugee/immigrant to offer valuable resources to the community, thereby becoming an involved, trusted community member.

Recall Henry Giroux's quote when describing an active citizen as someone "who has the capacity not only to understand and engage the world but to transform it when necessary, and to believe that he or she can do that." A mobile writing center can be the turning point for many of these citizens.

Purpose

The purpose of connecting ELL lessons with the community garden is to allow the gardeners to build community across cultures. Engaging in the ELL classes lifts language and cultural barriers so that gardeners not only feel more comfortable talking with each other, but they also know each others' names, create trusting relationships, and share knowledge. The shared knowledge and trusting relationships create a dynamic where the gardeners are able to grow more and better crops. They share seeds, plants, and vegetables, in addition to insight about issues that are not a part of the garden (job opportunities, community services, and friendships).

Benefits

Creating connections between ELL and the community garden yields tangible benefits such as better crops (by sharing knowledge on pest control, irrigation, and growing conditions, crop yields are higher). There are intangible benefits as well, such as when an immigrant/refugee makes a friend outside of his/her cultural community or feels less isolated because they belong to something that is bigger than their own ethnic community. Benefits also include saving money on food because the gardeners grow part of what they need to feed their family. Some gardeners are also able to sell some of their produce and thereby gain income. For some, the skills they learn at the community garden (both English skills and farming skills) will allow them to engage in larger farming endeavors where they can earn a living by farming.

Cost Analysis

There is no cost to participate in the community garden apart from the cost of buying seeds or plants. The garden cooperative volunteers provide the tools needed for basic gardening at no charge to the gardeners. The cooperative acquires seeds, plants and tools with grant money or from community donations**[1]**. The English lessons are also provided free of charge. Therefore, any crops that are consumed or sold by the gardener are 100 percent profit (minus whatever he/she invests in seeds or plants).

ELL at the community garden provided a perfect opportunity to educate gardeners on the organic philosophy behind the community gardens--organic gardening practices and healthy planting, nurturing, and harvesting methods. By using ELL as a spring board to teach organic practices, gardening and farming practices change as the way people talk about their gardening/farming practices change.

The role of women in the immigrant/refugee communities

The role of women in each immigrant/refugee community differs. As such, working with the immigrants requires that the gender dynamics of each culture be taken into account even as the immigrants and refugees learn about the status of women in North American culture. Because the ELL courses were taught by three women, immigrants/refugees coming from cultures where women are not seen as men's equals often had more difficultly seeing the teachers as sources of valuable knowledge. Even if they understood that the teachers were knowledgeable about the English language (because the teachers were native speakers), they often resisted the idea that the female teachers could offer males sound advice or have any knowledge about farming practices.

Regardless of the community/culture, women tend to be the people who plan and prepare meals for the family. Their role as the family nutritionist creates a connection between the way food is grown and prepared and their family's overall health.

Within the community garden, the Sudanese women seemed to be the only group that was wholly responsible not only for preparing the food, but for growing it as well. These women were knowledgeable farmers who modeled the centrality of women's role in cultivation for groups that excluded women from the garden because it was seen as a public sphere. (Traditionally, Muslim women – in this case Iraqi and Bosnian women – are not allowed into the public sphere unless it is absolutely necessary.)

The Hispanic/Latina women worked alongside the men in the garden, while the Iraqi and Bosnian men always came to the garden

in male-only groups to do the work and harvest the crops.

Women as family nutritionists, dieticians, and wage earners

Traditionally, women around the world are responsible for their family's nutrition and become the persons responsible for preparing and serving healthy and nutritious food, if this foods is available. In some cultures the men traditionally grow and harvest the food; however, there are cultures, especially in Africa, where the women are responsible for growing and harvesting the food as well. The ecofeminist philosophy sees the importance of women planting and harvesting the food their family consumes. The rationale is that women will take better care of the land and the crops, making sure the food is not integrated with harmful chemicals or GMOs, because they see a direct connection between the farming and the health and well-being of their family.

Both ecofeminists and progressive English/writing teachers might argue that the reason many countries, cultures, and continents are facing contaminated ground water, soil that is unable to produce food without chemical fertilizers, and the over-use of toxic herbicides and pesticides is because males have been responsible for food production. Because males are not responsible for feeding their family (preparing food and keeping nutrition at the forefront of food preparation), they are not as likely to see the connection between how the land is worked and how the produce affects the lives and health of the people who consume it. From the moment a baby is born, a breastfeeding mother has a physical connection to the nutrition and health of her child. A mother concerns herself with the feeding and nutrition of her children in a way that fathers are not often called upon to do.

Therefore, in working in the community garden, lessons regarding organic farming practices were directed towards the females whenever possible. That is not to say that the males were neglected, but that a direct connection exists between women growers and awareness of family nutrition. In addition, when women are taught sound farming practices, they can use their knowledge to become wage earners for the family, selling produce at the local farmers' market or roadside stands. In becoming wage earners, or supplementing the wages they receive from other jobs, the immigrant and refugee women build familial and cultural capital, thus raising their status within the community and their families. Attaining a higher status within their families and within the immigrant/refugee community allowed women from stridently patriarchal cultures to wield a bit of power for the first time in their lives.

Women as sustenance farmers and world ecologists

When women hold knowledge that is valuable to the culture and the family, their status is raised. When women begin to feel empowered through that knowledge, their lives and the lives of their children improve. When women of various cultures learn how to successfully become sustenance farmers through ELL, they begin to see their connection to the earth and their power in the world. Through ELL, they learn of organic farming practices and how to articulate their role in the world's ecology.

Jeanette, a Sudanese refugee, talks with another farmer while planting her crops.

In one community garden, women from a local long-term shelter (typically women who are in shelter as a result of domestic violence or because they are making the transition from prison to community living) worked a plot in the garden. Although these women did not participate in the ELL classes, learning how to grow food through community gardening was another step towards strength and empowerment. Many of the women from the shelter first came to the garden not knowing gardening basics, e.g. how to plant seeds or seedlings or how to harvest plants. When it came time to harvest some lettuce from their plot, they pulled out the entire lettuce plant instead of just pulling off the leaves. With guidance, however, these women quickly learned the basics and became sources of knowledge for other community gardeners. The skills they learned at the community garden (from how to plant, to harvesting, to healthy food preparation) allowed them to carry this new knowledge into their "new" lives. There is a strong connection between feeling empowered by planting, harvesting, and cooking one's own food and feeling empowered in other areas of one's life.

Once women know how to plant and harvest healthy food, how to treat the soil organically, and how to farm free of toxins, using water conservation practices, they become world ecologists.

Concluding Remarks

The community gardens were a writing center without walls, i.e., a place of learning, tolerance and peace. Teaching and learning in our post post-modern global world are indeed challenging tasks. Students today are globally astute, with knowledge of many issues and facts at the touch of an "Enter" key on any computer keyboard. The job for English and writing teachers is to continue to confer skills that will be forever necessary and demanded--the ability to speak, write, and otherwise communicate fluently--to global students so they can be active, contributing members of the world. Perhaps then the students whose lives we touch will help to create not only writing centers without walls that are places of learning, tolerance and peace, but a planet that is such.

Notes

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Elizabeth K. Rodacker holds a M.A. in English and is an Associate Professor at **Union College** in Lincoln. She is also a committed community activist, working for feminist causes, on behalf of animals, and helping the community become a more welcoming place for all.

Kay Siebler holds a Ph.D. in composition and rhetoric. She is currently an Associate Professor at **Buena Vista University** in Storm Lake, Iowa, from September to May, but considers Lincoln her home. She began teaching ELL as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco during the late 1980s. She is a feminist activist and a gardener and combines those two passions in a local activist group of gardeners, The Guerilla Gardeners. Gardening for social change is the motto of that group and is a manifestation of ecofeminism on the local level.

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