



Why Nature? Noticing and Writing in the Wild

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Introduction

For one moment, imagine the senses that are typically engaged for my students as they walk to school. Walking to Twain, you will see rows of single family homes and apartment buildings crowded into city blocks, streets choked by traffic and hundreds of other children that are making the same daily pilgrimage to school. You will hear noise. Horns honking as you cross either Central, Cicero or Archer Avenues, busy streets that are filled with cars making their morning or evening commutes. You will hear the sounds of planes taking off from nearby Midway Airport or might hear the sound of truck engines from the industrial park that is a few blocks away from the school to the north. You might smell the faint odor of chemicals, burgers being grilled at Burger King, or the sewage damp from the canal that is part of Chicago's water treatment plant that is less than a mile away. You will feel the rhythm of urban life, how the neighborhood that my school is situated in slowly comes to life each day, everyone coming and going in their own direction with intention and urgency. This is not the place where individuals typically pause and wax poetic about the environment or feel connected to nature.

Mark Twain Elementary School is a Chicago Public School on the Southwest Side of Chicago. It is situated in a dense, urban environment. The student population consists of 906 students, of which 76.9% are considered low income. The population is also roughly 90% Latinx and 8% white with a small population of Polish speaking students. Students that receive special education services account for roughly 15% percent of the student population, and students that receive bilingual services account for another 21.7% of the student population.^[1] This unit is designed for roughly 100 sixth grade general education students.

This unit complements the work that is expected of students in other units throughout the school year. I have recently engaged in a teacher inquiry project around the idea of noticing. This has been specifically focused in the areas of teaching and writing poetry. Through my interaction with both students and teaching colleagues, I have learned that it is critical to get students to notice the craft choices that authors make in order for them to consider their own lives and be able to employ some of the same techniques to write about their own experiences and perceptions of the wider world.

In my current practice, we start by reading and unpacking poems together through the process of close reading. We discuss the choices that writers make in order to organize their ideas, express abstract ideas, and respond to the things that they notice about themselves and the wider world. I have extended this practice

into using accordion books where students can write their own poems using poetic frames from other poets, (literally) draw connections between ideas through creating imagery, and play with language. I have also curated song lyrics and short stories to get students noticing in the wider world.

This unit seeks to carry the work of noticing even further into nature. This is particularly relevant for my students given that the community that my school is situated in is surrounded by an airport, factories, an expressway and dense blocks of housing.

The unit will get students to consider what they can learn from nature by learning about how others have engaged with nature and benefitted from it in the past. Students will recognize that there is a long history of people turning to nature in order to be mindful and present. Just as Thoreau set up shop near Walden Pond or Carson gazed at the ocean, we will step away from the classroom on “Spirit Walks” to see what we might notice.

Content Objectives

Why Nature?

It struck me that this might be an important argument to make, especially as many principals may wonder why students are coming out of the classroom and engaging in close observation of the natural world in which the school is situated. There are a number of reasons why students need regular exposure and immersion in the natural world. These reasons include improved well-being, strengthened observation skills, developing a sense of wonderment, and improved writing skills.

Students who spend regular intervals in nature have a better sense of well-being. In an article that we read for seminar titled “Ecopsychology: How Immersion in Nature Benefits Your Health,” research from a study of 20,000 individuals found that 120 minutes a week in nature was an important threshold in order to achieve wellness.² Besides giving a number to help achieve wellness from nature, the article grounded some other interesting terms and ideas such as Nature Deficit Disorder, drawing the conclusion that “nature is not only nice to have, but it’s a have-to-have for physical health and cognitive functioning.”³ These studies have pointed to a variety of benefits including lower blood pressure and stress hormones, improved immunity, increased feelings of sense of self and worthiness, improved moods and lessened states of aggression. Individuals reported feeling more connected and calm while in nature; researchers believe this is directly tied to the “effortful attention” that is required in stressful environments created by urban environments and that people tend to pay attention in “more broadly and in a less effortful way” in nature.⁴ This improvement in well-being is critical given increased challenges anchoring students to school and to each other after the pandemic.

Students who are in nature often strengthen their observation skills through habitual practice. In *On Time and Water*, Andri Snaer Magnason shares an anecdote about a trivia show that appeared on Icelandic television that had educated college students compete to identify four different common fish: haddock, catfish, cod and perch. Most of the college students could not identify the type of fish because, even though they are common and consumed widely, people only see them filleted. The author notes that besides not seeing the fish intact, many young people also aren’t actively introduced to the folktale that might familiarize them in another way.⁵

Students need practice observing elements of their own ecosystems to understand something as basic as where their food comes from.

This act of noticing goes beyond just knowing where dinner comes from. It is important for other applications such as students pursuing STEM type work. Some things that can be incorporated into nature journaling that could build observational skills include having students identify the context, written observations, drawings and reflections.⁶ See the activities and teacher resource section for practical considerations about how I plan to use scientific observation for each area. It is important for students to spend part of their time while working in this unit as a scientist might approach a novel environment because of the complexity of the problems that the world's scientific community will face in the near future. The world will need great scientific minds to solve vast problems. For example, we read about how the ocean is absorbing almost 90 percent of the heat that comes from global warming; the author of the reading painted that stat in very stark terms by comparing the current trends in ocean warming to "the denotation of four Hiroshima bombs per second."⁷ These problems will be addressed by the children in our classrooms; teachers are powerful agents to introduce children to the challenges and opportunities within the natural world.

Students also develop a sense of wonderment from nature. Much like the Romantic poets that we read for seminar who recollect images of nature, students only have the chance to develop a sense of wonder about nature if they have regular access to nature. This unit seeks not only to meet that need but also to help students understand why being in nature is a need in the first place. Rachel Carson makes the following observation in the text *The Sense of Wonder*:

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.⁸

Students cannot experience the wonderment that might lead to writing creatively like a poet or become an advocate or activist to help preserve nature if they have no connection to it. Carson's advocacy grew out of passion that was inculcated in her from her youth. Teachers have a responsibility to be the adult in the lives of children that offers that first chance for children to have exposure they may not otherwise have to nature, especially in environments that are densely urban like the community in which my school is situated.

Students that spend significant time in nature making observations become stronger at describing what they see; this description is a hallmark of effective writing. Consider the following passage from *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navajo Boy*:

A little boy was born as the wind blew against the Hogan with bitter colds and the stars were disappearing into the heavens. The little puff of smoke was gradually floating skyward. The floor of the earth was hard as ever with a few stripes of white snow still frozen to the grey colored ground. With a queer squeaking, the baby awakes. His eyes were as dark as the colors of the ashes. His face is pink.⁹

A key aspect of getting my middle school students to become effective writers involves teaching them how to structure details that readers can use to recreate an image in their mind. If a reader cannot picture characters

or settings that are central to a story or poem, a lot of the richness of the text is not fully developed. Many of the texts that we read in seminar were similar to the passage above. The setting becomes a tool to establish mood and requires recollection or careful observation in order to establish. Consider a different example from N. Scott Momaday from the text, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*:

A single knoll rises out of the plain in Oklahoma, north and west of the Wichita Range. For my people, the Kiowas, it is an old landmark, and they gave it the name Rainy Mountain. The hardest weather in the world is there. Winter brings blizzards, hot tornadic winds arise in the spring, and in the summer the prairie is an anvil's edge.¹⁰

Strong, clear images situate readers in particular places for particular reasons. Achieving strong images is a challenge for my students to accomplish through their writing. Writing about observations we do together may make it easier. It is also important to think about how an item, much like humans, is affected by the seasons. As Dillard suggests in the *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, "nature is very much a now-you-see-it, now you don't affair"¹¹ Students need to understand this intentionality and see examples like the ones above to fully appreciate that effective writing often requires articulating visual observations in granular detail. This intense focus on articulating close visual observation will also be further explored later in the unit with the reading "The Turtle" by John Steinbeck and thinking about what can be described in granular detail from our own natural world and observations.

In Nature: Three Approaches

In the "Writing About Nature" Seminar, Jill Campbell facilitated conversations with Fellows around a wide range of texts that focused on writing about nature. A number of these different readings raised valid questions about the role that nature plays in the modern world. Some of these questions include wondering how nature could be turned to for spiritual renewal, introspection, wonderment, and physical well-being. We thought deeply about how different groups responded to these questions. We also thought about how some groups have been actively excluded from the benefits of nature, and how we share a collective responsibility to correct historical wrongs such as racism and environmental injustice while also supporting efforts to combat climate change. The works associated with three very different types of nature writing serve to deepen my student's understanding of nature. From learning about the concerns of these nature writings and writers, my students will be positioned to think about the challenges and opportunities that are associated with nature.

My thinking about nature started with wanting to dive deeply into the world of the Transcendentalists. My original unit proposal was narrowly focused on the Transcendental Movement; Transcendentalism was my introduction as a teenager to the promise and possibilities of nature. In many ways, the cabin that I own in northern Michigan and even my becoming an English teacher can be partially connected to my sophomore English teacher, Mrs. Joyce Biel. Her passion for American Literature made texts come alive for me, *Walden* being one of them. However, as we dug into our seminar readings, it became readily apparent that if I focused on just the Transcendental Movement, I would miss out on a number of rich and varied voices that my students also need to hear in their journeys in connecting with nature. I therefore broadened my thinking a bit to pull in other concerns of figures like Rachel Carson and J Drew Lanham to illuminate that people have

different preoccupations and purposes when it comes to writing about nature.

The Transcendental Movement

Slowing down and being present in nature is not a recent invention. Even during the 1800's, there was a group of individuals in the Northeastern United States that felt that advances in modern living weren't necessarily improving the quality of life of individuals. Rather than participate further in society that was increasingly complex, this group of individuals looked for ways that they could be deliberate with their thoughts and actions. The Transcendental Movement of the early to mid-1800's encouraged deep reflection and consideration of an individual's relationship with the universe.¹² The movement had a few core beliefs that drove key figures to engage in social experiments such as living in a cabin by Walden Pond (Thoreau) or forming utopian communities like Brook Farm. Among these core values are the importance of the individual, the importance of imagination and creativity, and the divinity of nature. These beliefs were a radical departure from societal norms before the 1830's. The notion that humanity was innately good and that society corrupts individuals was a stark contrast to dogmatic thinking of the late 1700's and early 1800's that only organized religion could act as an agent of redemption for a fallen world and humanity.¹³ In a society that increasingly valued logic and reason, Transcendentalists saw the need for guidance from intuition, that there was a guiding force that resides in each individual and that it is innately good.

This intuition is best represented in the symbolic "transparent eyeball" that Emerson used to explain the approach to make it possible to commune with nature. In this metaphor, Emerson notes that it is important to take all of nature in without bias to connect with nature. According to this thinking, communing with nature can be a divine experience likened to the awakening that many people often experience participating in organized religion; all one would need to do is be in nature in order to encounter the divine spirit.¹⁴ Nature was holy in the eyes of Transcendentalists. These values resonated with many at that time period, but they transcend the time period and are relevant to life in society today.

The world has changed a lot since the height of Transcendentalism in the mid-1800s. Despite the difference in times, there are ideas that are relevant in the modern world. In *Walden*, Thoreau articulates a number of arguments and principles. He felt that Americans were leading lives of quiet desperation, or sleeping through life; he wanted to bring people's attention to focusing on the essentials, intentionally crowing like a rooster to "wake my [Thoreau's] neighbors up."¹⁵ When something of substance happened, he felt that people should be compelled to act in ways that were moral and just, but too many individuals were consumed with trivial news or reading low quality writing, much as people today often scroll mindlessly through social media posts.¹⁶ By exploring these ideas with students, they may feel a deeper connection to the natural world by noticing things that they might not otherwise notice without being given the time and space.

The first value that may have modern application is the concept that nature is accessible and that access to it should be democratic. The movement may not have to be as dramatic as removing oneself from the world like Thoreau, but individuals may gain a lot by means of looking around their lived environment in order to uncover and recover a connection to the natural world. Students will compare this with an episode of *This Old House* with Bob Villa, who goes to the site of Walden Pond and interacts with a Thoreau impersonator. The Thoreau impersonator gives a tour of the cabin "he" built and answers Villa's questions with passages shaped by what Thoreau wrote in *Walden*.¹⁷ Students will see that the idea of reconnecting with nature has influenced many and that some have gone to great extremes to be at one with nature.

Thoreau believed in fairness and justice. In his work "Civil Disobedience," he makes the following observation

about slavery: "I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also."¹⁸ He was willing to not pay taxes to avoid supporting such systems and was jailed for an evening as a result. Given the time period that he was writing in, Thoreau's views were markedly progressive. His beliefs point to a larger observation about the legacy of race and equity of in America. The natural world has often not been equitably accessed by everyone, especially by racial minorities living in America, and that environmental justice has a legacy that still negatively impacts African Americans in America today. My students will think about this by considering some of the experiences of J Drew Lanham, an African American naturalist.

Another Transcendental value that may have modern applications is the concept of an inner authority that each person has, that people have to trust they have something significant to say and need to share their voice and talents with the wider world. Emerson writes the following in the poem "Fable," "Talents differ; all is well and wisely put/If I cannot carry forests on my back/Neither can you crack a nut."¹⁹ In this poem, Emerson creates an imaginary conversation between a mountain and a squirrel. In this conversation, Emerson plays with the idea of size and how a mountain could easily disregard something as small as a squirrel. The squirrel in this poem, in true underdog fashion, demonstrates pluck, noting how a mountain makes a "pretty squirrel track."²⁰ The lesson of the fable is that everyone has talents and that they take different forms. This poem could be useful in a number of ways. During the course of a "spirit walk," students could notice an element in nature and think about the conversations that it might have. Students could also ruminate on the theme of the poem, thinking specifically about what it means to have different talents and why that is significant. It is a ripe text for teaching and imagining in nature.

Rachel Carson: Reclaiming Wonder and Excitement within Nature

Rachel Carson lived an interesting life. She was born in Springdale, Pennsylvania on May 27, 1907. By the age of 11, she wrote a prize-winning story that was published in a magazine. By 1925, she decided to attend Pennsylvania College for Women in 1925 in order to major in English, but by 1927 she decided to switch her major from English to biology. She decided to pursue graduate study at Johns Hopkins University in 1929, earning a Master of Arts degree in marine zoology in 1932 while teaching at University of Maryland. In 1936, she took the civil service exam, scoring higher than all of the other examinees, and was appointed to be a junior aquatic biologist at the Fish and Wildlife Service. The following year, her sister died and Carson took in her sister's two daughters while writing for the *Atlantic Monthly*. She led a successful career at the Fish and Wildlife Service for 15 years while raising kids and writing, finally resigning in 1952 to devote her full attention to writing and to care for Roger, her grandnephew, whom she adopted in 1957. She wrote the article "Help Your Child to Wonder" in 1956 which was published posthumously as a book in 1965 after Carson had been recognized for her groundbreaking work, *Silent Spring*.²¹ Carson's biography is remarkable; she was a college-educated working adoptive-mother and writer that made an extraordinary contribution towards raising environmental awareness when women were often marginalized in society. She broke a glass ceiling in advocating for nature.

In the book *The Sense of Wonder*, Carson makes note of the importance of reclaiming the sense of wonder that adults have felt at one point in their lives towards the natural world. In reading correspondence from the Rachel Carson collection of papers housed at Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale, I was surprised to read some of the language that she used to describe nature in her private correspondence. Consider the portion of a letter that Carson writes to a contemporary:

It is a preoccupation that has yielded a rich store of memories—mental pictures of wild swans adrift on a mountain lake, repeating in their plumage the snowy white of the peaks beyond of salmon leaping in the frothy water of a mountain stream high in the dripping forests of the Cascades—of the beauty of the voory’s song in the green dusk of a wooded valley...In the darker hours of life I have often drawn upon such memories for deep and never-failing comfort, or I have gone out to replenish my store and find again the refreshment of the natural world. For in the words of Keats: ‘some shape of beauty moves away the pall from our dark spirits.’²²

Going back to the question of “why nature?” particularly in the context of an English Language Arts classroom, Carson’s views of nature are poetic. She is clearly moved by nature in ways that are echoed in poetry, even quoting a British Romantic poet in her own writing. Wordsworth expresses similar sentiments in “Tintern Abbey”:

Though absent long
These forms of beauty have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration... [23]

Carson understood in both the poetic and scientific sense that being in nature is restorative and meaningful, her lofty language about nature closely mirrors that of Wordsworth. While poets waxed poetic about nature, she took practical action. As we discussed in seminar, Carson makes the observation that adults often neglect the powers of being present in nature. She emphasized how children need to actively practice what it means to be engaged in the natural world in the text *The Sense of Wonder*.²⁴ Carson appreciated nature and advocated for the need to be in nature, ultimately as a means to advocate for change that would preserve nature as a trained biologist.

The start of Carson’s nature advocacy was rooted in her capacity from a young age to express herself in writing with the support of her mother. Recalling her youth, Carson wrote that there was no time that she could recall in which she “didn’t assume I [Carson] was going to be a writer...I can remember no time when I wasn’t interested in the out-of-doors and the whole world of nature.”²⁵ Her mother helped to inculcate a shared passion of the ocean, and one key early memory that townspeople recall of her was when she found a fossil on her family’s property. While her home was situated on over sixty acres that included an orchard and small farm, the town of Springdale where she grew up was a growing industrial town until the panic of 1907;

factories sprung up and the smell of the glue factory was evident as train passengers would disembark into town. Carson's mother was also an educated woman who took great interest in educating her children and sharing her passion for natural history, particularly bird-watching, a hobby that was popularized from the 1870's until World War I as a means to "put children in sympathy with nature."²⁶ Rachel's mother would take her for long walks around their property using Comstock books. Anna Comstock developed books that contained lessons that suggested ways for nature-study. These lessons were intended to cultivate the child's appreciation and love of nature and their imagination, and to build connection with nature in order for children to recognize the divinity of nature. Comstock books emphasized that nature was created by a Creator (notice with a capital C); and therefore conservation was an obligation that must be conducted with great care and zeal.²⁷ This is clearly evident in the life work of Carson.

The influence of nature and poetry inducing individuals to advocate for scientific change was not unique to just Rachel Carson. Consider a figure like Charles Darwin. Charles Lansley, *author of Charles Darwin's Debt to the Romantics: How Alexander von Humboldt, Goethe and Wordsworth Helped Shape Darwin's View of Nature*, makes the following observation:

Darwin's strain of Romanticism was a different way of seeing and interpreting the world, from Darwin the naturalist in the field noting his empirical experiences to Darwin the 'scientist' reflecting on those experiences, drawing up theories based on his perceptions and the perceptions of other naturalists, reflecting on those theories, and then going back to experiencing Nature again through the filters of those theories.²⁸

Darwin would go into the field and observe, just as I expect my own students to observe. He would reflect on those observations, just as I expect my students to reflect on their experiences. He learned to sympathize with the common beetle and felt "sublime ecstasy" from germinating seeds from bird droppings.²⁹ It is evident that getting students into nature and having them engage in the action of nature writing may potentially induce them to connect with nature on a deeper and more scientific level later.

J Drew Lanham: Nature is a Place for All

Students of communities that have been historically marginalized may not have regular or equitable access to the natural world. In the text *The Home Place*, our seminar considered the importance of having equitable access to elements of nature. The author of the text is an African American birdwatcher who often conducts field work in regions of America that have a history of being openly hostile and racist towards African Americans. In recounting some anecdotes from his experience in the field, he raises some issues that pertain to instructional decision-making for teachers. Lanham centers his identity in nature, tracing back his connectedness to enslaved ancestors and their orientation and connection to the land.³⁰ The same skills that he employed in birding are the same skills that his ancestors used to survive extreme deprivation. I am certain that there are many students of color could have found agency and voice in nature if given the same access and privilege as Thoreau, Emerson, Carson or Darwin. It is the role of the classroom teacher to help provide this access and create equitable opportunities for all children to get their time in nature.

From this legacy, Lanham sees himself as an activist and advocate, arguing that action needs to occur to ensure that African Americans that have been denied the opportunity to engage in wildlife biology one day have the opportunity to engage in the field. He recounts that some of these roadblocks still exist, that he has

been followed by “hillbillies” going to a birding site in a remote region and encountered another birding station that had been defiled by the KKK. His white colleague, normally an astute and careful observer, had no concept of the range of emotions that Lanham felt when put into these situations that were shaped by “bad memories, misinformation, and ignorance.”³¹ It is incumbent on teachers to have a sense of what previous experiences students have had to remove this blindness. Teachers must reflect on ways to create opportunities for students who have been marginalized in the past so they might have the access and resources they need to be connected to the land as well. In order to have my students think about their relationship with nature and the collective need for action, I have suggested reading several excerpts from the text *Nature’s Best Hope: How You Can Save the World in You Own Yard* as a way to explore concrete actions that they could take to help improve the environment that are logical for middle school students.

Spirit Walks: Writing about Nature in Urban Environments

There have been many challenges to navigate returning to in-person instruction after the pandemic. Many students have struggled to express their thinking and seem very introverted; they spend a lot of time in their heads. Many schools, including my school Twain, have had to make social emotional learning a key component of engaging and acclimating students to the learning environment. Rather than make it more of a separate entity, one instructional goal I have is to incorporate tenets of social emotional learning (SEL) into content area instruction.

Given the nature of this seminar’s content, it will be important to get students into nature in some fashion. In thinking about the best way to manage this, I came across one writer’s approach to engaging with nature that she refers to as taking a “Spirit Walk.” The key components of a Spirit Walk involve an individual going out into the closest natural environment, finding a spot to situate oneself, and listing what our five senses (not just sight) observe about the natural world in the immediate area.³² After a period of sitting in one place, the individual should get up and walk for a bit, stop and pick up something that can be handled like a rock or leaf and write about that item in paragraph form, listing all the details that can be noticed from the senses including how one’s body feels while observing the item. For the next part of the Spirit Walk, an individual is encouraged to “walk with awareness of your senses, your body, of the wildness around you and the emotions you experience in it.” The goal is to get the participant feeling fully present and aware of his or her emotions until the individual recalls a memory or feels emotions or has thoughts connected with the past. Individuals are encouraged to write these stories down once they enter the participant’s consciousness.

I was drawn to this process for a couple of reasons. The first reason connects back to my concern about addressing SEL in an authentic way. This process is very similar to body scans that I will often use with students to help them regulate their emotions. A body scan is a mindfulness exercise in which an individual helps another person or group of people to “bring the mind to rest in the present” by getting individuals to sense a “progression of attention over the body... releasing emotions and judgment.” Students engaging in Spirit Walks would be similarly in tune with their surroundings and feelings as they think about their own emotions and perceptions as their awareness is heightened during the exercise.

It is also relevant because it leads to stronger writing skills. Many students believe that they have to have a life full of adventure and excitement in order to have stories that are worth writing about. The written work that students do in response to their Spirit Walks or other more scientific observations would make writing feel much more accessible, encouraging students to “move away from broader experiences of life, to deeper experiences of life... [and] strive to create more concentrated perspectives of the world, views of life that are exquisitely depicted, original and authentic.”³³ This is evident in a particular piece of writing that I would have

my students read during the unit, “The Turtle.”

Even though it is not Transcendentalist, one text I would have students read while teaching the unit is “The Turtle” which is an excerpt from *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. One of the key lessons that I teach my students about narrative writing is that you have to give the readers enough visual details to recreate the setting in the reader’s mind. This particular text serves as an excellent model of what it means to establish an item in its natural environment. Steinbeck uses metaphor in the excerpt to compare the plight of the Joad family being at the mercy of larger forces like the turtle in the excerpt. In the text, Steinbeck describes the turtle with such exact detail that the reader can picture it struggling to cross the highway and think about how that symbolizes the forces that push and pull on the Joad family.³⁴ Elements of the natural world can be described in great detail to make a larger symbolic point. Spirit Walks allow students to practice this through intense noticing and thinking about how it feels to notice and be present with the natural world and our deeper thoughts.

Teaching Strategies

Accordion Books

An accordion book is a unique space that operates outside of single assignments or the Writer’s Notebooks that students keep and write in daily. See the resource section for a helpful website that contains suggestions for how to set them up with students. The accordion books would be a place where I could have students do a lot of their draft thinking during our outdoor observations.

Close Reading

This is a procedure in which students engage in multiple readings of a text or part of a text in order to pay attention to key sections and improve comprehension of what they read. For many prose and poetry texts, we will do an initial read of the text and use questions that I have curated in order to get students to revisit parts of the text that are significant and merit closer attention. I would curate a list of questions for us to unpack both “The Turtle” and “Blackbird.”

Journaling

This is a term that can have different meanings, so it important to spell out in specific terms what I mean in the context of this unit when using the term journaling. For the purposes of this unit, I will have students journaling in very different ways. My main goal when students journal is to get kids outside and noticing using different prompts for students to organize their thinking. As you can see from the various activities, they will be asked to look for different things in different ways while outside. Part of my curiosity in teaching the unit for the first time will be seeing what they respond to and what they do not to refine the unit for future years.

Classroom Activities

In considering what I learned in seminar and through the process of writing to discover, there seems to be a progression of goals when considering what nature might teach us as adults and what it may teach our students. Thoreau went into nature in part to see what it might teach him, to be very deliberate in his actions and observations. Carson not only engaged in similar impassioned observations as Thoreau, but she recognized the importance of science and the need for advocacy to protect the world. Finally, Lanham notes that everyone has historically not felt safe in nature or has accessibility to it in the same ways. I have to recognize this year real concern for my students. They are urban kids who may not have the access that others have; that doesn't change the fact they will have the very real burden of addressing climate change within their lifetime. This progression from noticing to appreciating to valuing and finally advocating for nature is reflected in the classroom activities I propose below. The implementation of this unit will entail three phases with a subset of activities that each address big questions. I imagine the first two phases to take about a week to a week and a half. The last phase would take about two weeks to do the readings I propose and write an essay about conservation.

Phase One: How do people engage in nature?

I want students to think about how individuals have figured out their pathways and engagement to nature. This will involve considering what other individuals seek in nature. Transcendentalists like Thoreau sought solitude, meditation, and the opportunity to critique society. Carson hoped to cultivate a sense of wonder so individuals not only appreciate nature but also see the necessity in being good stewards of the natural world. Latham and Christian Cooper extend Carson's call to action by sharing the need for all individuals to not only find their own connection to the natural world but also act as agents of change to protect the natural world.

Activity One: Considering Aphorisms from the Transcendentalism

Students will read short biographies of both Emerson and Thoreau. There are a number that are readily available online; you'll want to introduce students to these individuals with text that are appropriate for their reading levels.

I would introduce students to the concept of an aphorism. Aphorisms are life lessons to live by. I would have students select one and explain what truth they think that Emerson was trying to communicate.

--"But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars.... If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile" (From "Nature")

--"In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth." (From "Nature")

--"Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." (From "Nature").

--"Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for

you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.” (From “Self-Reliance”).

--“Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.” (From “Self-Reliance”).

--“Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood...” (From “Self-Reliance”).

Activity Two: Reflect on Thoreau’s Experience in Nature

If you go to YouTube and search “Henry David Thoreau Tour with Bob Villa,” you will get a video of Bob Villa (from the PBS *This Old House* show) interacting with a teacher who impersonates Thoreau inside of a replica cabin.

Students will be asked to reflect on what they viewed. What do they think about Thoreau’s decision to go and live in the cabin removed from society for nearly two years? Is that necessary? If Thoreau were alive in America now, what would he think about the state of affairs in America today?

Activity Three: Exploration of Rachel Carson’s Legacy

Students will read a short biography on Rachel Carson. Again, there are a number of resources available; you will want to find one that is at an appropriate reading level for your students. If you search American Experience, Rachel Carson, you will encounter chapter one of a longer documentary that aired on PBS; it runs just short of nine minutes. I would show this short documentary in class and have students consider why she was important? What were her hopes for spending time in nature? What were her hopes for others related to nature?

Activity Four: Read about Christian Cooper/excerpt of The Home Place

Students will read/listen to the first section of the NPR article “Central Park birder Christian Cooper on being ‘a Black man in the natural world’: NPR” and have students reflect on the experience (easily found online with the title). I would talk a bit about the format of the text--it is an interview--before having students reflect on why is it hard for some people to feel connected to nature.

We will also read an excerpt from *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man’s Love Affair with Nature* by J. Drew Lanham titled “Birding While Black,” which is on pages 151-158. We’ll talk about his experiences and how they parallel those of Christian Cooper.

Phase Two: How will my students engage in nature?

In the “Writing about Nature” Seminar, we had the opportunity to go out into nature and write and draw reflectively. We spent time looking at the trees and sharing our reflections. With students, our time spent in nature needs to be a bit more directed and focused. I also want each experience to be slightly different so that engagement is sustained throughout our time outdoors. Before all of our experiences outdoors, I would engage in the practices that I outlined while writing about Spirit Walks before conducting any of the observations listed below. I will also read the picture book *Noticing* by Kobi Yamada to my students; this book, which eloquently speaks to my interest in the activity of noticing, was generously supplied by my colleagues to me from our seminar group.³⁵

Activity Five: Nature Reading—Animals and Symbols

We will read “The Turtle” by John Steinbeck. In this piece, I will give a brief overview of the Joad family and what the text *The Grapes of Wrath* is trying to depict about migrants and life during the Great Depression and living in the Dust Bowl. “The Turtle” is a chapter in the *The Grapes of Wrath* that functions as a symbol. In the text, the turtle is crossing a highway. It is described with such great detail that the reader cannot help but visualize the turtle trudging along attempting to cross the road. It is then purposely hit by a truck that swerves to make contact with the turtle. It is symbolic of all of the obstacles that migrants encountered as they moved from Oklahoma to California in search of better conditions.³⁶ We’ll discuss the power of description and how animals can be thought of in symbolic terms. This will set up the first of our nature observations. If we had to think deeply about what an animal or plant could represent, what sort of symbolic connections could we make in our own writing?

We will also listen to and annotate the song “Blackbird” by the Beatles. In the song, McCartney is reflecting on the Civil Rights Movement and encouraging African Americans to continue fighting for equality.³⁷ We’ll use our close reading of this text to think about an animal that we see. What could it potentially represent? What are some deeper issues in the world that could be compared to the animals that we see actively in front of us?

For this activity, students will be encouraged to make use of animal cameras. There are a number of websites with live feeds of animals. In my research, I found one website with a list of 19 live feeds of different zoos and other places:

Joyner, Lisa. “19 Live Animal Webcams to Get You through Lockdown.” *Country Living*, March 20, 2023. <https://www.countryliving.com/uk/wildlife/countryside/g31784857/live-animal-webcam-zoo/>.

It may be a helpful resource if you are considering having your students do something similar.

Activity Six: Landscape Observations

We will read two sections from N. Scott Momaday’s *Earth Keeper: Reflections on the American Land*. One aspect that is important to strong narrative writing is the ability to create a scene in the reader’s mind. There are two passages that I would like to direct student’s attention towards:

Near cornfields I saw a hawk. At first it was nothing but a speck, almost still in the sky. But as I watched, it swung diagonally down until it took shape against a dark ridge, and I could see the sheen of its hackles and the pale underside of its wings. Its motion seemed slow as it leveled off and sailed in a straight line. I caught my breath and waited to see what I thought would be its steep ascent away from the land. But instead it dived down in a blur, a vertical streak like a bolt of lightning, to the ground. It struck down in a creosote bush. After a long moment in which there was a burst of commotion, the great bird beat upward, bearing the limp body of a rabbit in its talons. And it was again a mote that receded into nothing. I had seen a wild performance, I thought, something of the earth that inspired wonder and fear. I hold tight to this vision.³⁸

As we did in seminar, I would read this passage with students and have them look for something from the nature world that inspires wonder and fear and describe it in a way that they could use this text as a model to help shape student thinking and writing. We would look at another section of Momaday’s text in another trip

outside.

In winter on the northern prairie I came upon a scene of ineffable beauty. There were vast sloping snowfields, and everywhere there were shrubs crusted with ice. In the January light they shone with a crystalline brilliance that glittered like shards broken from the sun. On a blue-white hillside there appeared a bull elk moving diagonally down to a dense wood and out of sight. The elk and the wilderness belonged to each other, I thought, and in the spectrum of evolution I was estranged from both. The next morning I heard the whine of chainsaws in the distance.³⁹

With this section, I would have students consider how the author's choices and descriptions could be used to create mood. Momaday sets this passage in winter, incorporates cold and uses words like shards and broken that have strong connotations, but still creates a scene of immense beauty. The last line where it is all wiped out is a punch. I want students to do a quick write where they describe a scene in front of them trying to create a specific mood. They will create the mood through word choice and the details they include.

Activity Seven: Observing a Tree Together

For this activity, we would go outside and look at a large tree that we have on our school property. In the past, we have read a poem that I found in the book *Naming the World* by Nancie Atwell that is full of poems for students to read as mentor texts called "Seasons of the School Oak Tree."⁴⁰ We would read the poem that a student wrote where he thinks about how the tree changes with each of the seasons. I will point out that the poet uses each season as a frame for a four stanza poem. Students will draft a poem and share while we are seated around the tree.

Activity Eight: Observing in a Scientific Way

For this activity, I would like students to treat their observation like a scientist might. This is a way to gather information adopted from Patricia Bricker and her research on science journaling in nature.⁴¹

Context (Date, Time, Place, Weather, Temperature, Cloud Cover, Precipitation, Wind, Humidity)	
Written Observations (Qualitative-See, Hear, Smell, Touch, Taste and Quantitative-Count, Measure)	
Drawings (Accuracy is important! Be detailed. Use color, Include a big-picture view and a close-up, magnified view, Include labels.)	
Reflections (What is something I discovered for the first time or something surprising? How do I feel?, What am I reminded of?, What am I wondering now?)	

This type of activity helps to hone the type of observational skills that students need in the STEM fields and represents a different form of observing than a number of the other activities that I have in mind for our work together. For this activity, students would be provided with magnifying glasses to use while they quantify what

they see.

Phase Three: What can we do to help conserve nature?

Activity Nine: Read the poem “Whale Song”

In bringing closure to the unit, I would like to read the poem “Whale Song” by Mary Goose and have students consider the act of noticing in a more nuanced way. We would do a close read of the poem, unpacking what it means to notice versus seeing things in a superficial way like the joggers in matching suits commenting on the beauty of the sunset.⁴² This would set up the reading for students to be more active in thinking about their role in impacting the environment.

Activities Ten-Fifteen: Read portions of Nature’s Best Hope

In thinking about the spirit of Rachel Carson’s efforts as well as the concerns of many regarding global warming and climate change, I want to leave my students with ways that they can make small changes in the face of massive challenges that the world will face in the coming years due to the changing climate. I encountered a text called *Nature’s Best Hope: How You Can Save the World in Your Own Yard*. I plan on reading the following chapters from the book with my students: Chapter Five: What’s a Lawn for?; Chapter Seven: Which Plants are Best?; Chapter Eight: Good Plants, Bad Plants; Chapter Ten: Bring Back Bees; and Chapter Eleven: Weeds are our Friends.

I would use the table below with each one of the chapters to unpack the argument that the author is making within the chapter. I would go at the pace of one chapter per class period; each of my class periods are about an hour long.

<i>Nature’s Best Hope: How You Can Save the World in Your Own Yard</i> Nonfiction Common Core Skills Classwork Chapter: _____ Topic: _____
What is the author’s point of view (what the author thinks) of the topic in this section?
What are two details that helped you figure out the author’s point of view? Include a citation with the author’s last name and page number. a. b.
Highlight the words in the text evidence above that have a strong connotation that helped you figure out the author’s point of view. How did those words help you figure out the author’s attitude/tone?
What text structure does the author use in this section? How do you know? Did you see any signal words that helped you figure out the text structure? If so, what were they?
What are some changes that someone could do based on the information presented in this section? How is the information applicable in the real world?

Once we work our way through the five chapters that we will read together, I will have students use these sheets to write an essay about things they could do to engage in conservation. Each one of the sheets would be used to organize one paragraph in their essay. There essays would have an introduction, five body paragraphs, and a conclusion. This would serve as the summative assessment of the unit.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Suggested Instructional Sequence

For each of the activities above I envision being completed during one sixty minute instructional period. There are 15 activities listed above, so I imagine roughly three weeks of work to understand consider nature while working through the activities. The fourth week of the unit would be reserved for writing an essay in which students draw from their reading and unpacking of *Nature's Best Hope: How You Can Save the World in Your Own Yards* to explain ways that they can act as stewards of the natural world.

Common Core Standards Addressed

There are a number of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) at the heart of instructional planning for this unit. In the first part of the unit, there is a heavy emphasis on improving aspects of narration. CCSS W.6.3 states, "Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences."⁴³ This standard is addressed because we will look at how professional writers use sensory details in order to create imagery in the reader's mind. We will explore these pieces so that students have exemplars to produce their own writing from the observations they make while outside.

In the third phase of the unit, students will write read significant chunks of rigorous nonfiction text from the text *Nature's Best Hope: How You Can Save the World in Your Own Yards*. Each one of the questions I will use contained within the chart aligns to a nonfiction Common Core State Standard (CCSS). In question one about the author's POV that ties to CCSS R.I 6.6 in which students need to show mastery in determining an author's POV or purpose in a text. The second question ties to R.I. 6.1 in which students need to cite textual evidence to justify their answers. The third question has students question the author's use of word choice; this directly connects to R.I 6.4 in which students need to determine the meaning of words including the connotative and technical meanings of words. The fourth question has students consider the structure the author uses to construct the arguments; this ties to R.I 6.3 in which students must determine how a key individual, event or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text. Students will show mastery of that by identifying nonfiction text structures employed by the author to organize ideas. The last question has students reflect on relevance and application of what they have learned. This ties to R.I 6.10; students need to read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the 6-8 text complexity band proficiently. The last standard is very important because I want my students not only to understand what is going on with climate; my hope is that they are also inspired enough to do something and apply what they learn to start address our collective impacts on the environment.⁴⁴

All of this careful reading work is done to build student capacity as writers. The same worksheets that we use to unpack each chapter can be used to build their essays in which they explain what they can do to help improve climate change. This directly aligns with W.6.2 which calls for students to be able to write informative or explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas.⁴⁵ This unit covers a number of other standards, but I wanted the connections to be clear for the strongest articulation across the standards being addressed.

Resources

Teacher Resources

Accordion Book Project. Accessed July 12, 2023. <https://accordionbookproject.com/>.

This is a useful resource if you are interested in learning more about the accordion book process, including potential benefits, ways to incorporate the practice, and practical suggestions for building the books with students. It includes videos on how to construct them with samples of books made by students as well as adults.

Bricker, Patricia. "Reinvigorating Science Journals: Nature Books Sharpen Children's Scientific Observation Skills and Put the Spark Back into Science Journaling." *Science and Children* (2007): 24. *Gale General OneFile* (accessed July 18, 2023).

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This article was tremendously helpful in spelling out specific criteria for students to look for in the following areas: context, written observations, drawings and reflections.

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