

USES OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES: FELIX BIDDER, KATIE RITSON, FABIAN ZIMMER

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Series, Uses of Environmental Humanities

The Uses of Environmental Humanities series explores diverse and creative ways of thinking with Environmental Humanities in responding to socio-environmental challenges. Contributors address the influence of Environmental Humanities and ways in which we might use this field of study, offering insights into the interactions between societies, science, politics, and culture. The series is curated by Samantha Rothbart.

“Learning and Teaching Across Hierarchies and Disciplines”

By **Felix Bidder**, **Katie Ritson**, and **Fabian Zimmer**

In the course “Interactions: Nature and Culture in the North,” designed for BA students who had chosen the minor “Language, Literature, Culture” as part of their humanities degree, the very first act was to address the matter of how to address each other. German universities err on the side of conserving tradition, and so the students who had registered by email were simply adhering to convention by addressing their lecturers using the formal *Sie*; now they were being asked to address them as they would each other, with the less formal and more intimate *du*. It sounds like a small thing, but it makes a difference. Using *Sie* implies both formal distance and hierarchy: schoolchildren are supposed to refer to their teachers as *Sie*, but children are addressed as *du* until they reach about sixteen, after which all parties use the *Sie*-form. *Sie* is written with the initial S capitalized, a mark of respect; *du* is not.

Two of us, a historian and a literary scholar, had designed this course together as an experiment for us both in co-teaching. Our research interests (on Scandinavian environments, and particularly the cultural perceptions of them) dovetailed neatly, and it was interesting seeing how we approached similar issues with different sets of sources.

But in working together, it was quickly clear that there could be no hierarchy, neither based on seniority nor any sense of which discipline might have a potential upper hand. Putting together lesson plans and reading lists required both of us to “give way” to each other. Fabulous poems had to be cast aside to make room for historiographical essays; primary sources were abandoned in favor of gender theory; both of us needed to subscribe to the expertise of the other in order to make common cause. In teaching, we took it in turns to lead and to listen (and sometimes to interrupt, or challenge). Only one of us at a time would be sitting in front of the class, the other somewhere around the seminar room table—demonstrating that we all had something to learn from each other and could contribute to this class in an equal manner.

There’s nothing new in the idea of wanting to revolutionize ossified university structures, but often this is more of a buzzword (or a buzz-idea) than anything else. As a student, what felt different this time was the lack of a grand manifesto for doing away with all hierarchies or toppling the ivory tower. Instead, seemingly simple things, like saying *du*, gave us the opportunity to see ourselves—and our own work—in a different way and gave us space to try out new arguments and lines of thought. Where conventions of speech and manners give us a comfortable sense of distance from people inhabiting particular roles, using *du* challenged us to renegotiate in a more intimate community the markers of respect that are usually provided by the German language. Respect for the expertise of others (despite what traditionalists say, it doesn’t disappear the moment the *Sie*-form does) is enacted through listening, holding back, asking questions, and discussing issues as an equal.

At the end of the day, this is (or should be) the heart of Environmental Humanities: structural change through productive, generous interaction, rather than a destructive drive to bring down older systems. In the face of general suspicion around expertise, we need both new ways of knowing, and also new ways of transmitting what we know. It’s certainly not a case of wanting to topple the expert altogether (and throw the baby out with the bathwater) but of finding new ways to reintegrate expertise into an Academy that is reflective of its own limitations and mindful of the needs of a global, interdisciplinary, and environmentally concerned community of scholars and students.

Environmental Humanities has the potential to challenge the hierarchies the Academy is built on. Co-teaching and interdisciplinary learning in EH is not just about approaching topics in an integrated and multi-disciplinary way; it is about incorporating a new way of working together into our teaching practice in the university and potentially

beyond it. Teaching and learning with one another, in a community that both values expertise and also recognizes the limitations that are always present in any one person or one discipline—this is what EH can deliver. Humility, respect, the ability to lead and to listen, to both step up and also step back. Environmental Humanities has to embody this mode of interaction more than ever if it wants to move us all beyond our established positions and patterns of behaviour in the world.

Over to *du*.

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