



# Creating An Ecopedagogical Teaching Framework

*Karen M. Hindhede, Central Arizona College, Coolidge, AZ, USA*

## **Abstract**

This article demonstrates the author's ecopedagogical teaching model through text and image. I explain how I created a teaching framework based on culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy but felt that the framework fell short in not including an earth-inclusive focus and ecojustice ethic. Through revision and re-envisioning, I arrived at a place-based ecopedagogical model of a saguaro cactus where multiple arms and the base represent eco-inclusive facets of this framework. I encourage other educators to consider how they, too, might create ecopedagogical frameworks for their own teaching.

## **Keywords**

Ecopedagogy, ecojustice, culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy, climate literacy

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Undergraduate teacher education courses typically include discussions and assignments for pre-service teachers to develop their teaching philosophy. Graduate education courses often include similar assignments and may even expand on the idea of students creating their own pedagogical framework, a multi-modal visual, to aid their vision as educators. In a graduate class several years ago, I created my own culturally responsive sustaining pedagogical framework by asking an artistic family member to draw and label a saguaro according to my educational practices. Living in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, I decided the giant saguaro embodied my experiential, place-based educational philosophy.

Creating a visual representation of my eco-pedagogical philosophy cemented my praxis. Engaging in such a reflective approach and then visualizing and committing my strategies through an image conveyed my ideas more intuitively and holistically than any written statement could. I had to hone the essentials of what I wanted to provide students; I had to think organically and in harmony with the environment. The framework now hangs in my office, and I regularly share the intentionality behind it with others who comment on my picture. Additionally, looking at my saguaro reminds me and re-commits me to my daily goals.

### **Initial Framework**

My saguaro framework has six arms emerging from the “Ecojustice Pedagogy & Ethic” base. The base supports all curriculum, inclusive of and adapting to the needs of students and the more-than-human world. These arms include “Welcoming & Supportive Environment”; “Academically Challenging”; “Student Centric, Relevant & Applied Engagement”; “Inclusive, Anti-biased Curriculum”; “Eco Engagement & Curriculum”; and one unlabeled arm. While the original framework was initially focused on my children’s literature course, in time it morphed into my personal commitment to providing all students, no matter the discipline, a holistic and culturally responsive experience of climate literacy education. In an earlier draft, the framework heavily focused on the arm I labeled as “Inclusive, Anti-biased Curriculum.” The teaching goals under this area include incorporating culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, ideas of equity not equality, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to support all students (CAST, 2024; Gay, 2020; hooks, 2003; Kendi, 2019; Ladson-

Billings, 1995, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2014). Over time, I began to question how I might include and foster a larger awareness of environmental issues, ecojustice education, and climate literacy through literature. When re-envisioning the framework, the intentional practices under this arm primarily stated the same, though other areas shifted and expanded.

For example, one arm of the pedagogical framework that I originally conceived and is now the central arm stemming from the “Ecojustice Pedagogy & Ethic” base is “Welcoming & Supportive Environment”. This arm incorporates relational pedagogy, where relationships and meaningful connections between students and teachers and between students and students are central (Bovill, 2020). Students need to feel respected, valued, and engaged with the material, with the teacher, and with their peers to thrive. To foster more connections to each other and the natural world and to be more inclusive of my “EcoJustice Pedagogy & Ethic” base, I start the term by asking students to share where they are from, a remembered outdoor, natural world experience, and what gift they can share with their peers. Similarly, regardless of discipline, teachers can provide opportunities for students to co-create eco-focused course/class assignments.

“Academically Challenging” is another arm of my Saguaro Pedagogical Framework. This arm emphasizes rigor, accountability, and high expectations, along with authentic assessment and high-impact educational practices (Bovill, 2020; Freire, 1970). Applicable practices include introducing students to eco-inclusive resources, websites, and ideas they have likely not been introduced to before and will likely challenge their worldviews. For example, I incorporate ecocritical vocabulary and critical questions examining human relationships to the earth along with the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#), the [Yale Program on Climate Change](#), and [ClimateLit.org](#).

### **A More Eco-Inclusive Framework**

In revisioning my framework to be more eco-inclusive, I renamed one of the arms—originally called “Relevant & Real-world Engagement”—into “Student Centric, Relevant & Applied Engagement.” This change reflects my emphasis on incorporating student needs and interests throughout the course and applicable assignments (Bovill,

2020; Perin, 2011). I have adjusted exercises so students may gear their writing assignments to specific audiences, and I have framed reading assignments as a goal that I want students to work toward. For example, instead of asking my college pre-service teachers to explain the value of reading a novel focused on climate literacy, the revised assignment now requires them to explain the value and need for such a novel to students in a particular grade level of their choice and then to write a similar explanation to a parent or an administrator. The revision of the assignment reflects the revision of my framework. “Student Centric, Relevant & Applied Engagement” better represents work done in the classroom to help prepare students outside the classroom—which includes an awareness and understanding of environmental issues, environmental justice, and climate literacy and how to frame these topics to others.

Another eco-pedagogical shift occurred when I added an arm labeled “Eco Engagement & Curriculum.” The goal here was to recognize the methods designed to be responsive and adaptive not just to humans but to the more-than-human world. This arm incorporates the humility for the unknown and includes an ecopedagogical examination of the curriculum and the larger world. Applicable practices include having eco-inclusive reading options (and allowing students reading choices), asking students critical questions about who benefits from decisions and structures, challenging ecocidal practices, and helping students reimagine options that include humans and the natural world. I have included assignments that promote more emotional engagement and connection to nature with more emphasis on hope and change-making. For example, in one course students have to spend time outside observing, reflecting, and then answering questions; in another course, students evaluate picturebooks using climate literacy criteria to determine books they would like to see in their classrooms.

The other major, and most important, re-envisioning of my framework is that of the trunk itself, which I eventually labeled as “Ecojustice Pedagogy & Ethic”. By naming the base of my saguaro framework, which provides stability for all my teaching, I recognize the intertwining aspects of social and environmental justice, a pedagogy that questions the status quo and investigates the use of social/cultural assumptions to address and redress social-ecological oppression (Lupinacci et al., 2018; Martusewicz et al., 2021). A saguaro’s inside pith and outside accordion pleats expand to hold

water, swelling up to two and half times the cactus' original size, thus sustaining and nourishing the cactus. Again, I think of Ecojustice Pedagogy and an Ecojustice Ethic as being my base, nourishing all curriculum.

Figure 1 (below) is the re-envisioning of my pedagogical framework into an ecopedagogical one that may inspire others to infuse an eco-inclusive focus and ecojustice ethic in their classes and for their students.

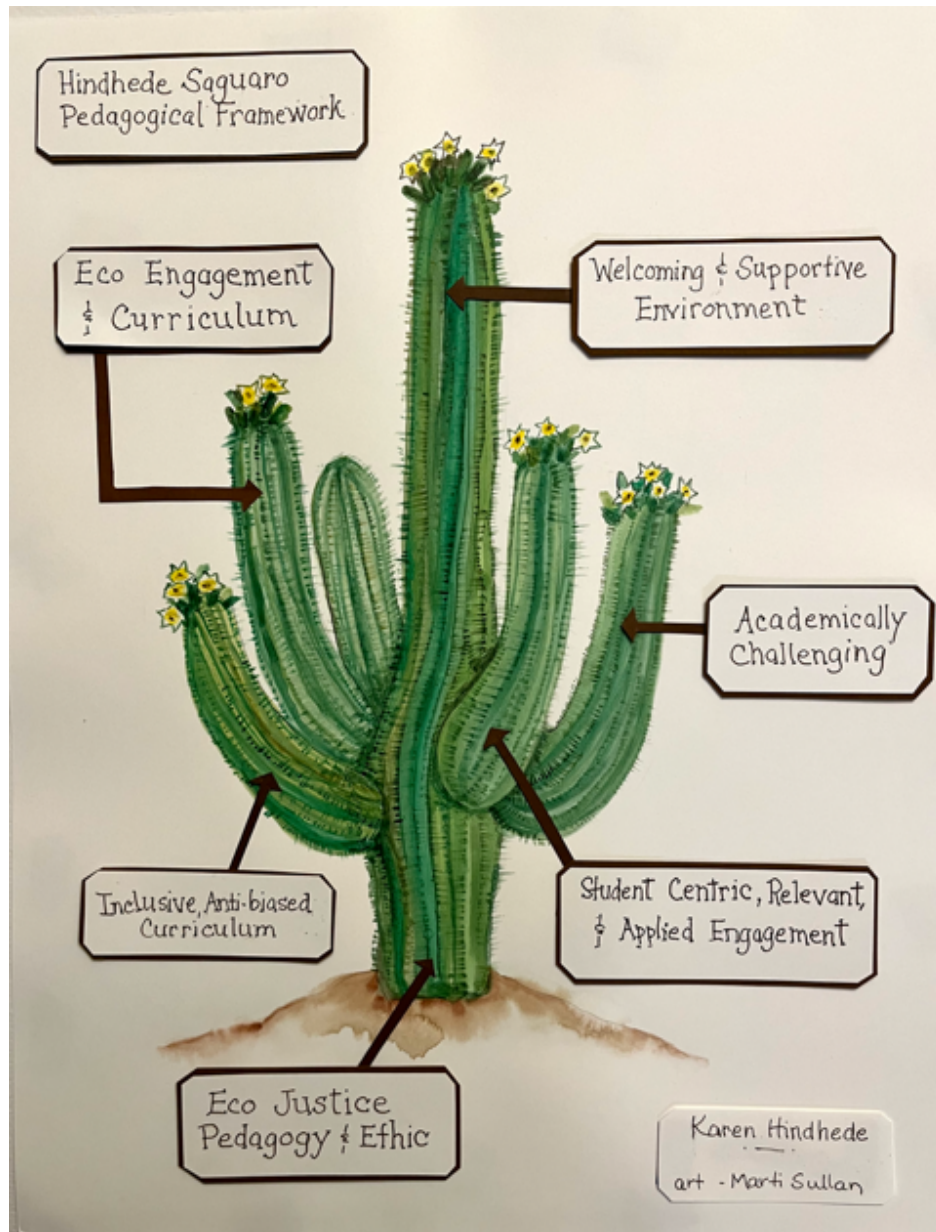


Figure 2: Hindhede Saguaro Pedagogical Framework

## Final thoughts

Saguaros can grow new arms at any time. There is no limit, though conditions must be right. For example, extreme heat or drought limits these desert tree-like cacti in their growth and ability to thrive. To reflect on my continuing journey as an educator, I intentionally left one branch unlabeled. This communicates an understanding that as I continue to grow as an educator, my saguaro framework needs to be able to grow with me—and that it must adapt to new conditions.

For young saguaros to survive, a nurse plant is needed to shelter the seedlings as they grow and develop. I do not always know what kind of supportive soil is available and what difficult conditions may impact students, fellow teachers, educational systems, and our planet. What I do know is that I continue to provide and advocate for as much support as possible for myself, other educators, and students in developing the right conditions to continue learning and growing and creating meaningful change for people and the more-than-human world. The Saguaro Ecopedagogical Framework communicates the intentionality of our work as climate literacy teachers and the need to provide learning environments that are more adaptable, creative, compassionate, equitable, earth-inclusive, and ecologically just.

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