

Jeff Ziegler
ILS 252
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Post-Consumer Compost Education






The initial stage of creating a project that will better the world as a whole is a somewhat daunting task and I was first overwhelmed at the thought. I quickly decided, possibly selfishly, that my world was the easiest to change. As usual, the garbage in my apartment desperately needed to be taken out and in the process of doing so, I was sifting through and separating out what was compostable. My roommates and I collect our compost, which we then donate to Union South or F.H. King. However, recently we began to notice when dropping off our compost that the materials in the receptacle at Union South were not often compostable; people either didn't understand what they could place in the compost bin or they just didn't care enough to differentiate between the options. Either way, the contaminated compost would either become rancid due to the inorganic matter in it or someone else would have to spend a great deal of time and effort to sift through to take out the unusable material. My project was thus created!

The next step of my project was to coordinate with the Food Service Director for Union South and determine what I could do to help with improving the condition of the compost. After meeting with Carl Korz we determined the best course of action for me was to volunteer time during lunch (approximately from 12:00pm – 1:30pm during the week) and assist people with figuring out which items they were throwing away were compostable and which were not. The most effective way to inform people of composting is to actually help them and physically show them what is compostable. This certainly put me outside of my comfort zone, but it was an interesting turn for my project and I was excited to meet the challenge. I'd like to discuss the approach and information I used when helping patrons at Union South and some of the successes and problems I came across, as I believe these are the most beneficial lessons from my experience.

First, Carl and I planned out how I would interact with the people I was attempting to educate and we then determined the actual information I was to use. We discussed which areas of Union South had the most foot traffic, considering too the food each restaurant serves. For example, because fat, grease, dairy, and meat are all non-compostable materials, stationing myself next to the restaurant that primarily serves pizza would not be the best allocation of my time. After determining the location, I then needed to figure out the best way to engage people in being educated. The opening line I consistently used was, "Excuse me, would you be interesting in taking a couple of seconds to learn which pieces of garbage you have are compostable?" We agreed on this phrasing because it was polite, direct, and would actively engage the person in the educational process. Next we discussed other pieces of useful information about composting, for instance where the material went after Union South, what kind of facility it was, and why it was important to compost.

The materials are first taken to a composting facility on the west side of Madison, where an aerated Windrow composting method is used (CPEO). This method is a standard method of composting that yields high amounts of compost. Piles are turned by large machinery on a frequent basis with fans or other methods of aeration underneath to ensure dryness and to decrease order (EPA, 2011). After the compost is processed at this facility, it is then given back to the community, specifically to the Eagle Heights community gardens and F.H. King. The second piece of information is much more important: why is it important to compost? The first major reason for composting is its usefulness as a regenerative tool for soil (Cornell, 1996). Since compost is composed of organic matter, this material is then broken down, yielding a quality substance for growing. Essentially, one can use a wasted and used material to support new life and growth. The second major reason to compost is the lessened burden on landfills resulting from this reuse. It really is quite simple: the less waste put into landfills the better. Although composting is by no means an end-all-be-all solution, it certainly does lessen an already incredibly dirty and harmful method of waste management. This is all a lot of information to fit into a small window of attention I had, so I decided it would be a good idea too to include a handout, to ensure my educational efforts were not only confined to Union South. I printed out copies of a diagram I have on my refrigerator from F.H. King, neatly and succinctly detailing which items are compostable and which are not. With all of these great ideas and information, I was excited to get my volunteering started, but as is often the case in life, it was not that simple. After a couple of times volunteering, I quickly learned which methods were useful and which needed tweaking.

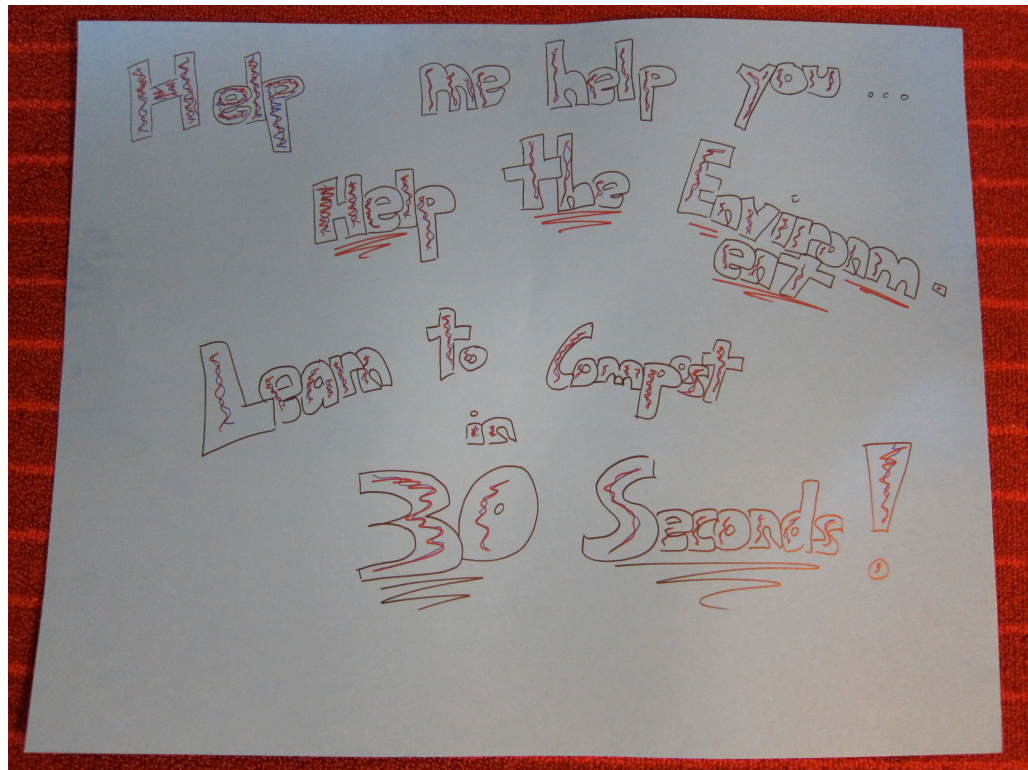
F.H. King Students for Sustainable Agriculture Composting Guide

<p>DO <u>NOT</u> COMPOST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Meat, bones, dairy, fish, fats  ✗ Rice & Bread Products  ✗ Colored Paper, labels/stickers  ✗ Diseased Plants  ✗ Inorganic Materials ✗ Synthetic Chemicals ✗ Avocado seeds, peach pits etc.  	<p>YES, COMPOST!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Coffee Grounds  ✓ Fruit & Vegetable Scraps  ✓ Crushed Eggshells  ✓ Teabags (torn open, no staples/string)  ✓ Ripped-up Brown Napkins/Paper towels  ✓ Ripped-up Cardboard and Newspaper  ✓ Peanut Shells 
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Created by Erica Bickford

The initial problem I ran across was picking the right location. At first I figured it would be easy to stand next to the garbage receptacle near the largest

entrance and exit, but soon learned people tend to go to the garbage can without a creepy man standing quietly next to it. I needed to show people my intention even before speaking, so I constructed a sign to signal what my purpose was right off the bat.



Secondly, I had not prepared myself for the possibility of coming across those who were not interested in learning about composting. It was a difficult reality for me, especially when I was allotting much more of my time (nearly an hour each time) while sorting compost took merely 30 seconds (as advertised). This was the most

difficult lesson of all for me, but possibly the most valuable. It is unreasonable for me to expect everyone to be as interested and passionate as I am, but that is basically the goal of my educational effort: to increase awareness in the hopes of inspiring people to take the time to compost, to make a conscious effort with regards to how they dispose of their waste.

I thoroughly enjoyed this experience because it was not only rewarding to do something for the betterment of society, but it was also a nice change of pace in comparison to other projects and assignments in most of my other classes. Although composting and compost education is not the most glamorous or intriguing way to save the world, it is important and focuses on two very pressing issues: waste disposal and maintaining healthy soil. Hopefully my efforts were not in vein and my educational attempt helped at least one person learn what composting is, why it's important, and how it's done. Don't forget to compost!

Works Cited

Cornell. (1996). *Why Composting?* Retrieved November 29, 2011, from Cornell Composting: <http://compost.css.cornell.edu/why.html>

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