

Sustainable Moments in Outdoor Art Education

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The air was magic. As we stumbled onto the sandy beach, I could feel a sense of reverence; the land in front of me rose gently leading to weathered sitka spruce trees surrounded by beach grass. Behind the trees, concealed by brush and shadow, were the remains of ancient Haida totem poles, leaning, yet supported by the earth below.



On this day, we journeyed into the past, reconnecting with the elements of life, both land and sea. We came to this place to learn about the Haida culture – a people who lived in harmony with nature. Our group of 15 children ranging in ages from 7 to 11 flew down to the ancient Haida village of Skedans on Haida Gwaii to experience place through the expression of art. We talked about the people who lived there, their history and the intrusion of white settlers. We studied light and shadow and made charcoal drawings in our sketchbooks illustrating the different types of poles in their natural surroundings.

We discussed how art can be a means for recording history, as well as a vehicle for personal expression. Emily Carr sat and painted where we were. She sat next to this same shoreline, among these driftwood logs, and longhouses, and the people of Skedans. She saw how these people lived and she painted their story. Emily painted the energy of nature using powerful flowing brushstrokes. I looked at the children sitting in the grass and said, "Look how she captured the movement of the wind and the stylized Haida designs on the frontal poles. Now use your imagination; can you see how the ovoid designs of killer whales, human faces and bear, look similar to the curved lines of the cedar bark and the knots on the spruce trees?"

"Human education is primarily the activation of the possibilities of the planet" and "in a sense, human education is part of the larger evolutionary process" (Berry, 1988, p.92). If nature is the source of all things, then creative expression in art mirrors the natural world around us. There was a time when humans were a sustainable part of this interdependent natural world. Yet, we are we today, living and learning in institutions far removed from the natural environment. How can teachers in the classroom re-instill this wonder and awe for nature using multi-disciplinary art education?

"In a world where the value of everything is measured by the economic scale of currency, our children are becoming disconnected from nature, culture and community" (Grande, 1994, p.36). Outdoor community art projects informed by regional themes and interdisciplinary education stemming from nature will help reawaken our children. By studying environmental artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and Nils Udo, we can teach children how to create art that is connected to the environment. Art making that is informed by calls into question, current societal values and moves rhizometrically from conventional art practices. It is art that comes from within – a place of conscience, stillness, and inspiration. Environmental art or "Eco-art" is a blend of new and old knowledge. Students can find new ways of seeing and explore multiple methods of problem solving. They will develop new skills for the future in order to become adaptable in the context of economic and environmental change. Art that is insightful and imaginative can open up new ways of thinking, connecting disciplines to create a more holistic learning experience.

When the children went to Skedans, they were given the opportunity to work directly from the source and become part of the story of Skedans. We wanted the students to experience a connection with the natural world and to be able to see into the life of things, which rises from emotion as well as intellect – from the heart as well as the head. When students are given the opportunity to learn in nature, they are using all the senses, opening up possibility and imagination.

All genuinely new knowledge comes by means of passionate, energy-filled insight that penetrates and pierces through our ordinary ways of thinking. The function of insight is two fold: to remove blocks in our customary and fixed conceptions of things, and to gain new perceptions. The imagination then, is necessary for perceiving and understanding the world, making possible human discourse and purposeful activity. (Sloan, 1993, p. 141)

Artists are witnesses to society. Art has always been an effective tool for recording historical changes. Today, our message is that of sustainability – living within our means, changing our entire economic structure and placing the environment ahead of commerce. Our education system must also change its focus; we need to teach children about bioregions informed by the land and traditional culture.

We must decentralize, working towards healthy Micro-cultures as the best way to manage ecosystems. In shifting our economic focus away from a global perspective, we are supporting local economy, breaking our dependency on fossil fuels, reducing green house emissions and preserving culture and the environment. (Grande, 1998, p.43)

Most art classes do not have the opportunity to take field trips to ancient Haida villages. But this does not mean environmental art education is inaccessible. Any opportunity to work in nature, whether in a small community garden or a local woodland park, can provide valuable and direct communion with the environment. Teachers can bring objects from nature into the classroom either as a source for study or as a medium for creating the art itself. Impermanent and process art making methods can teach valuable lessons (for example, a Japanese garden or illustrating pond studies) opening up new ways of observation and developing a deeper understanding of the connections between science and art. Producing art from memory after an outdoor experience increases imagination and creativity. Studying connections in global issues such as fossil fuels and politics can be a springboard for artistic responses emphasizing art as a "voice for society", a place where the artist becomes the activist, advocating for social change. A young artist

from Ontario recently created a body of art sourced by natural pigments found within a 100-mile radius. This "hundred mile art diet" showed viewers how the process of art-making can be a sustainable practice in itself. Art is the vehicle for the message and art is the message.

Another example of artists who are more than societal mirrors is the work by Helen and Newton Harrison. These two artists are working on the theme of crossing borders and beyond borders. Their present idea is to study the border between the USA and Canada, redefining the straight border line into a more geographically sensitive border. This new border would allow for natural landforms and watersheds. Teachers can bring artists into the schools to talk about ecology and art processes, including demonstrations and hands on activities for the students. However, in doing this, children should not be inundated with negative environmental talk because they can become indifferent and feel a sense of hopelessness. Teachers should educate older children (after gr. 4) about the more serious environmental issues and focus on instilling a love of nature in the primary grades.

There are no simple answers to our current environment changes, but education and awareness are the first steps. "Our civilization is facing an ecological crisis of incredible proportion, and this changes the way we conceive and approach notions of art" (Grande, 1998, p.48). I believe that all aspects of society – education, medicine, politics, commerce, and so forth should be built on the concept of sustainability of the earth. So too, should art education be sensitive to the present environmental crisis. And even more importantly, we must reconnect children with the natural world teaching respect, reverence and a sense of wonder.

The children from Haida Gwaii will always remember their trip to Skedans – a lesson to be remembered surpassing any classroom experience. They will remember the descent of the plane into the tiny sheltered cove, the smell of the cedar trees, the warmth of the sunlight on their arms as they sketched, and the stories told by the Haida watchman while tasting fresh cut fruit next to the longhouse. All senses were enriched and each mind was alive with wonder and possibility.

References

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