

Imaginative Ecological Education: Role of Cognitive Tools in Enriching Place-Based Education

- Invite everyone to imagine a place that was special or informative to them as a child—actually take a minute, close your eyes and picture it in your mind, if you can. Turn to a partner, introduce yourself and instead of answering the classic “where are you from” with a city or town name, exchange places and try to articulate why that place is important. --- Call out a few.
- One of the things I appreciate about a cognitive tool approach to learning is that it recognizes the developmental significance of universal or near-universal childhood experiences—singing songs, building forts, collecting things, obsessions with pop stars, etc.—and resituates these phenomena as vital to the development of higher psychological processes. I suspect and hope that many of you, when you thought of a special place from your childhood, were stuck by an emotional response. From a cognitive tool perspective, this response is more than just sentimental nostalgia—it is indicative that places are fundamental to identity, psychology and knowing. That, on some level, we think with places and that they are, as Kieran Egan describes, *bon a penser*—good to think with.
- I am going to briefly discuss the role of cognitive tools in enriching place-, nature- and land- based education based on my graduate work in environmental education, my book, 5 years of research at the Maple Ridge Environmental School project, and my present research on Gabriola Island. But the core ideas of this presentation are derived from the Imaginative Ecological Education wing of CIRCE—in particular the work of Gillian Judson and can be found in *Engaging Imagination in Ecological Education* and *The Walking Curriculum*.
- I wonder how many folks are familiar with the notion of place-based education? Experiences. Images. Definitions. -- What would be a good slogan for place-based education?
- I want to start with the Ministry of Education definition:

From: The Glossary of Curriculum Terms in the New BC Curriculum

↳ “Place is any environment, locality, or context with which people interact to learn, create memory, reflect on history, connect with culture, and establish identity. The connection between people and place is foundational to First Peoples perspectives of the world.”

- More interesting than definitions is the question: What is place-based education for?
- Quick story. A few years ago I am at the North American Association for Environmental Education conference in Oakland and the keynote puts this question to hundreds of attendees—what is place-based education for?—and in my head I am thinking “a strategy to address the climate crisis” or maybe “a decolonial framework for reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples”—but instead, as if I was the only one who missed the memo, hundreds of voices chant in unison: “get kids outside.” Which is true, and anyone who has read about Richard Louv’s Nature Deficit Disorder or seen statistics on screen-time these days, is hard pressed to disagree. BUT—getting kids outside is only the first step, and while the institutional barriers to this are great—I myself as a professional grown ass adult teacher with a master’s degree have literally been summoned to the principal’s office on the PA to get reprimanded for taking kids into the forest without permission slips—pedagogically speaking, getting kids outside is the easy part. What is PBE for? What core competencies (including the development of social and emotional intelligence to both humans and other-than-human beings), curricular competencies and concepts we are aiming to cultivate by going outside.

- For me, this is where IEE comes in. There are plenty of books like these (*The Big Book of Nature Activities* and *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*, etc.) which are indispensable in terms of activities—the doing part—but can often land as just fun “nature experiences”—not “real learning” or the knowing part. Knowing is what happens in the classroom. So take geo-caching, for example, a classic get outdoors activity, it is fun, it is even science-y with the use of technology, but I have seen it done many times and it lands more like a field trip fun thing to do before we get back to math and literacy.

- So just to give a concrete example of something we are presently working on at Gabriola Elementary—we have taken a “core routine of nature connection” (Coyote Guide), the “sit spot” or “microsite” which entails getting students outside and choosing a special place that they will return to and observe weekly, which is great, but/and guided by IEE we can answer the question what is a “sit spot” for with three principles: 1) the cultivation of feeling, that is taking emotional connection with places seriously as both an educational objective and an important way of knowing that is primarily developed through use of narrative (in this particular case we are trying to infuse the curriculum with local Snuneymux stories and values), 2) activeness, thinking through bodily or somatic engagement with place, so this looks like activities that focus on sharpening attention by way of the senses (water colour paintings, poetry based on local plants, etc.) and through musicality -- so we are doing a soundscape ecology curriculum and hopefully going to record local sounds and work them into musical projects with the band teacher, 3) developing sense of place, which for me, is what education is for in the context of settler-colonialism and the sixth extinction.

- So I want to end by contrasting the Ministry definition with the definition described by Gillian Judson:

In a general sense, places are the meaningful contexts of human perception of, and participation in, the world. They are meaningful because they evoke emotional response; we *feel* something about them. As we observe and participate in the activities of daily cultural life, and as we make sense of our experiences, the spaces where we are and the contexts we find ourselves in take on meaning. —I might interject here and say rather they *can* take on meaning, but they often do not, particularly in schools—Sense of place refers to how we understand and relate to these contexts. It is made of interconnected emotional and intellectual dimensions; it takes shape around what we feel about place and what we know about place. Sense of place involves, thus, both a personal relationship with one's context as well as a certain depth of knowledge about it.” (24)

- The sit spot is often described as building such a personal relationship with place such that it seems like “a best friend.” What I like about a cognitive tool approach to this is that it recognizes that not only is it NOT childish to fall in love with places, it is the foundation for thinking well in context—what could be more important for education in an age where we are living out the legacy of placeless thinking that facilitated an extractivist and colonial relationship with the land?

- “In the end we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught.” (Baba Dioum, Senegalese Ecologist 1968.)