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Six Offerings: What outdoor learning might present public education during this time of quite radical cultural, social, and environmental upheaval

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This chapter starts with the premise that, as the globe tips into this new geological era called the Anthropocene, it is high time for a re-think of consumer capitalism and the colonizing ways of the culture that some have dubbed “modernity.” This cultural orientation undergirds much of public education in Canada. Putting these things together suggests that it might be past time for some pretty substantive re-thinking, re-orienting, and re-creating of “public” education. We are no longer preparing students for the stable world of our grand-parents, but for a dynamic and changing future filled with uncertainty and, as yet unresolved, important questions about justice, diversity, equity, and the environment.

Now, this is not a chapter that seeks to vilify or even blame public education. For the demands being placed on the system in relation

to responding to issues of social justice, mental health, diversity, inclusion, equity, reconciliation, and the environment are enormous and that is without even considering the mandate to educate children and prepare them to be functioning, skilled, citizens for an uncertain future. To add cultural change to the educational mandate seems absurd and unfathomable, but it has become the key project in our work. This is the same work that responds to all of these challenges that “Canada” is facing and that might make it possible for students to help find answers for the profoundly uncertain future. They must prepare for the Canada of tomorrow and not of the 1950s & 60s that is long gone.

Given all this, this chapter is really just a condensed compendium of previous papers (Blenkinsop *et al*, in press; Blenkinsop *et al*, 2019;

Blenkinsop & Ford, 2018; Blenkinsop *et al*, 2016; Blenkinsop, 2014; Blenkinsop, 2012) and rests in our research over the last 15 years with some quite radical, outdoor, cultural change focused public elementary schools. It proposes that outdoor learning can contribute expertise, skills, and pedagogical orientations to this larger project of cultural change in and through public education and then suggests how.

Historically, outdoor learning has often existed on the margins of public education as rich experiences held outside of school at outdoor centres, or on the trail, or as an elective class/semester separated from the mainstream flow. This chapter wants to position and even challenge outdoor learning to envision itself as having something to offer and to find ways of inserting itself into public education. Not as a panacea, for that outdoor learning is not, but also not as an addendum, for outdoor learning is more than that, but in partnership with and as an equal at the table of this pedagogical project for cultural change in an eco-socially just world.

We have noted in our work that in order to do this, it is helpful for outdoor educators to name, own, and improve the skills we have, especially those that are useful in this endeavour. Part of this naming is to be clear about what outdoor learning might offer the partnership, but also because, in our experience, outdoor educators themselves don't often have a clear idea of what we have going on. A surprising amount of outdoor education involves intuitive, under theoretically situated and understood, practices. Thus, this chapter is really about generating a list of skills, or better yet six offerings, that outdoor learning has and that can contribute to this project of cultural change. These six are as follows.

1. Safety and the outdoors as classroom space
2. Risk, Problem Solving, Encountering Uncertainty, and Embracing Spontaneity
3. Facilitation and relationship building skills
4. Lateral Thinking, Creative Flexibility, and the Inverted Curriculum
5. Trauma, Time, and Transformation
6. Extending the Critical and Teacher as Activist

Safety and the outdoors as classroom space

In some ways this appears to the most obvious contribution that outdoor learning has to offer. Safety management has long been part and parcel of outdoor learning and yet not so much in teacher education programs or even in school district planning for that matter. Early in our research, we found that teachers had little background considering risks and mapping responses. They weren't very adept at site awareness, at student management, or at developing local operating procedures and risk management plans. All of these become obvious places that outdoor learning can step in and offer expertise.

However, there is more to this category. For many classroom teachers the building, the walls of the classroom, the presence of a principal, and the flow of a "normal" school day are all part of a built-in structure. This structure lends shape to the learning arc and does "control" work for the teacher in the background. As such, when taking children outside the skills of holding space, of breathing and shaping the learning day, and of creating structure in a place that doesn't have the same history and structural supports already built in are quite nascent for both teachers and students. When allowed outdoors for learning, the experience was consistent and often comical to watch as students scattered, for them it felt like recess, and teachers scrambled to contain them and get into the learning plans for the day. For many outdoor educators, this is one of those more implicit skills that has been learned intuitively, but that once made explicit can be shared and developed alongside classroom teachers making the move to "get outside."

One final piece of this offering that outdoor learning can contribute lies in considering the affordances and possibilities of any learning space. For many of the teachers we worked with, it was a challenge initially for them to recognize learning possibilities and how to take advantage educationally of those opportunities – be they student interest, surprising encounters, or background knowledge of the place itself.

Risk, Problem Solving, Encountering Uncertainty, and Embracing Spontaneity

This seems like a bit of a hodge-podge of a category, but as an offering from outdoor learning to a public education system, one that is beginning to position itself as having a role in cultural change, all these pieces are important components of the process. For as outdoor educators have known for a long-time, rich learning can happen when up against the challenge of a problem. For some, the problem is in fact a driver of the learning process, but learners must be comfortable with uncertainty and taking risks in order for the problem to be encountered and solved. Those risks are not always physical. More often the risks are intellectual and emotional: the risk of making a mistake, the risk of opening one's ideas to criticism, the risk of disagreeing with the status quo. In our times of profound uncertainty helping learners become more comfortable with a state of uncertainty and risk-taking or problem-solving as places from which to step towards solutions appears to be incredibly valuable.

Beyond this, we have found another component directly involves the ideas of teachers. For many of the classroom teachers we have worked with, one of the biggest challenges to be overcome as they shift practice from inside to outside, from totally preplanned and specific outcome driven to more spontaneous and serendipitous has been releasing control (Jickling *et al*, 2018). This release comes in a myriad of ways, but all involve the teachers themselves becoming more comfortable with uncertainty, finding ways to trust the learners, the natural world, and the outdoor learning process, while at the same time becoming better at responding to the spontaneous in ways that allow for learning to continue apace.

Underneath this, it becomes clear that part of this offering from outdoor learning helps classroom teachers to think differently about their identity as teacher. What it means to be an educator without always having total control of learners and outcomes. What teaching looks like when teacher isn't the absolute centre of all knowledge. How teaching changes when knowl-

edge is both more distributed (ie. amongst learners and even including the natural world) and an ongoing process (ie. this is what we know right now and these are the questions or problems we are tackling next in order to grow that knowledge). Our sense from our research and teacher education work is that there is much here that outdoor educators can offer and much to be further considered and worked on as well.

Facilitation and relationship building skills

This is actually one of the offerings that outdoor educators tend to get some training in. It is something that is thought about and actively developed given the profession's interest in creating community. For us, as outdoor educators, working with public schools and classroom teachers, it was an important recognition that the skills of growing trust, building community, creating spaces where learners can take risks are not actually implicit to teaching. Helping to build these skills in public education would be a tremendous offering.

Unsurprisingly, this work goes beyond simply the teacher and the learners who make up their classrooms. For if change is to be part of the work then parents, caregivers, and community members must all be part of the conversation. They need to be brought up to speed around this "new" education, about what learning is happening, and how their children are not actually losing out by being outdoors. This means that educators have to stretch their facilitation beyond say a single age group and out into a larger community context.

However, as outdoor educators will note, community building is the only part of the facilitation work that is going to be needed here. There is also the kind of facilitation that allows learners to travel in different directions in search of learning, or that enhances the learners' skills with regard to building community itself (ie. communication, values creation, self-awareness and reflection, etc.) or that challenges learners to lean into difficult questions (ie. those of privilege, colonization, equity, justice, etc.) and allows for

change work to really happen. These are all traditions that exist in various forms and levels of sophistication across outdoor learning that could be gathered and grown to become a rich offering from one set of educators to another.

One final area of relationship building that has become fundamental to our work is with all-of-our-relations: the myriad beings that make up the world around us. Again, there is a rich tradition in outdoor learning that can be brought into public education. Classic activities for and orientations to being outside are well understood as being successful in helping humans become more attentive, aware, thoughtful, and caring of or towards the natural world. In our work, we have suggested that outdoor educators might offer insights and expand their own practices with regard to considering nature as a co-teacher (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010). For us, this move to understand the natural world as having knowledge, as being vibrant and agential, as having rights and communicating, and as being filled with mystery and possibility that humans can learn from, has been a very important shift and a cultural reorientation. This cultural reorientation is critical, not only around the identity of teachers, for what happens when teachers aren't just human and they exist all around us, but also in response to an educational and larger culture that tends to background and colonize the natural world (Blenkinsop et al, 2017).

Lateral Thinking, Creative Flexibility, and the Inverted Curriculum

We have, in several places, previously written about the curriculum of the dirty sock and we won't repeat that here, but the basic tenet of that discussion is to challenge educators to create curricular content starting from a dirty sock. This often begins with a quiet hush and some frustration, but soon ideas are flowing and the more ambitious are sketching a whole year of grade two or a complete high-school math course using the sock as a starting point. The point here is that the ability to ask good questions and to navigate the web of knowledge such that a sock can connect learners to any "required" content

is important and, intriguingly, one that we found was hard for many of the classroom teachers we have worked with. This ability has implications for working well in outside learning environments, but also with regard to responding to the spontaneous and unexpected. It is a skill that outdoor educators often possess, even if under recognized.

There tend to be a couple of pieces to this lateral-ity. The first has to do with one's curiosity, having some, using it well in response to the world, and giving it a little freedom to explore. The second, is what we have called creative flexibility or the ability to make connections amongst things that aren't readily apparent, while at the same time having an imaginative awareness and range that can interact with the seeming every day in new and unusual ways. There is a kind of wildness in all of this, that is self-willed and the opposite of domesticated. To be clear, this is not about the holding of ideas and turning them into curricular content, it is more about how skilled one is at responding to that which is arising from serendipity in the educative moment and spinning it into learning gold.

Another component of this educational offering involves assessment. Historically, public educators design curricular content starting with a set of learning outcome goals and then work backwards to create experiences and content that they think will lead to those outcomes for their students. Then, they assess to determine whether the process has been successful. Have the learners achieved the expected outcomes? Now, educating in this more linear Tylerian form, which many outdoor educators chafe at, actually tends to limit the spontaneous, the natural world as co-teacher, and the wider range of goals (ie. self-awareness, group building, comfort in uncertainty, etc.) mentioned above. It is here that we think outdoor educators have another offering and it is the skill of watching, recording, and responding to learning outcomes as these appear in or fall out of any learning experience. Hence the "inverting" of the traditional curriculum, here the experiences, encounters and myriad teachers drive the program and the educator's

job is to engage, to ask good questions, and to follow the learners as things progress. The result, as outdoor educators may know, is that there can be space for a wider diversity of learnings to occur in any given experience and, turning back to lateral thinking, if done well the “required” content can be covered at the same time and just as thoroughly.

Trauma, Time, and Transformation

These three T’s may not sit obviously together or necessarily appear to be offerings that outdoor learning has for cultural change and public education, but in our work, when considered carefully, these do. The most unexpected of the three is likely trauma and here we are not suggesting creating it, but finding ways to recognize and respond to it. For many teachers and schools in Canada, trauma-informed practice has been a growing presence and for good reason. It is impossible, given its prevalence, to imagine gathering a class full of learners and not have trauma be a reality for some, even many, in the group.

In our work with most schools the presence of trauma has been extended to include parents and caregivers who over time have come to report their own distress often in relation to their own schooling experiences. Yet, in spite of much evidence that the natural world by itself can be therapeutic, not to mention if engaged in conjunction with thoughtful educators, there is little to no evidence that teachers are thinking about trauma and the outdoors. Here outdoor learning in some of its more diverse forms has much to offer in terms of activities and educational experiences, but also potentially in the area of theorizing psychological care responses that are more grounded in place, the earth, and relationship. This is not about blurring the boundaries between education and therapy, since those distinctions have long been honoured in outdoor learning, but experiences can heal at the same time as they teach.

Time is an intriguing piece of this discussion. At one level it is really about finding ways to slow down, to allow deeper and richer forms of learn-

ing to occur, and to push back against this more colonial concept that time is both scarce and linear. These actions are all things that outdoor learning has, to various degrees, developed pedagogical offerings around. Yet at another level, this slowing down is also about what is needed to facilitate actual change, to allow learners to change at an individual level, to become who they might want to be. Outdoor learning has a long history of supporting, even seeking out, these kinds of learning goals and creating spaces where they are possible.

This takes us to the third T, transformation, and into something that might be bit of a push for outdoor learning as well. In our work, it has become quite clear that the kind of change needed to undo this modern, capitalist, individualistic, consumeristic culture involves not simply changing individuals one at a time, but changing the very concept of what it means to be human as understood by that culture. This process takes time, likely generations, and it will also be quite uncomfortable. Here, we can see that outdoor education has something to offer, but that it might also need to seriously consider upping its game, because this project is about enabling a whole culture to change: an educational challenge, if ever there was one.

Extending the Critical and Teacher as Activist

This final offering is really about taking things further than most school teachers, and possibly outdoor educators, are usually willing to go. If the underlying project for education is about changing the culture in the direction of one that is more ecologically and socially just for all, including the more-than-human, then teachers are going have to position themselves differently in the world. From our work, part of that has been about human teachers decentring themselves, a nod to undoing anthropocentrism, and the inclusion of other teachers or ways of knowing. However, part of this is about teachers beginning to think of themselves as activists and here is where it gets a bit challenging and where the critical is helpful.

Public educators tend to see themselves as “neutral” and, as such, their job is to just deliver the content, help students become citizens, and not get “political.” Sadly, if we take the voices of the marginalized, disenfranchised, and more-than-human seriously, it quickly becomes clear that public education isn’t actually neutral. It just feels that way for those who are part of the cultural centre of the mainstream. Schools tend to further a mainstream agenda which is problematic, privileged, and worrisome in many directions including environmental ones.

Thus, we have begun to work on this at two levels recently. The first has been to begin positioning the natural world as a colonized (Blenkinsop *et al*, 2017) and the second has been to start thinking about teachers as activists. In the case of the latter, it is not about teachers standing on the barricades, wearing black, and flipping cars, although this oddly seems to be the image that appears for many teachers when they first encounter this idea, but about critically positioning themselves in their work of “bringing the world” to their students. For if you would rather not just parrot all the troublesome positions of the mainstream, then you are going to have to actively respond, push back, and do things differently.

Our experience in this work suggests that parallel examples are happening in educational moves to undo institutional and otherwise racisms, sexism, genderisms, ableisms, and stereotyping. Public educators and outdoors educators have much to learn from these, while also having offerings to make. In the case of the former, nature as colonized, we have found that this re-languaging has helped educators to find the parallels to some of the above discussions while at the same time engaging and deepening their own reflective and critical thinking and practices (Blenkinsop & Ford, 2018; Jickling *et al*, 2018).

Conclusions

Cultural change takes time. It is challenging work that often forgets that it is deeply educational (Blenkinsop & Morse, 2017). To take a community from one place, a place where it lives, thinks,

plays, makes decisions to a different place where it thinks, speaks, understands itself and others in new ways is an educational problem. For never in the history of cultural change has a culture gone to bed on a Wednesday and woken up different on Thursday morning. Change needs to be supported, facilitated, critically engaged with, and ongoing. Our work suggests that this is not a singular educational project; it is not about, for instance, outdoor teaching and learning stepping into the void and making everything right. This will be a shared, polyvocal, wide-ranging, stakeholder filled project, but one that needs to include outdoor learning as one of the contributors. This also means that outdoor educators will have to step forward and challenge themselves to recognize and further develop the offerings they might have, while at the same time listening to, learning from, and building alliances with other educational strands that are also important to better ensure the success of the cultural change project itself.

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Resources

Maple Ridge Environmental School, <https://es-sd42.ca/>

Nature Education for Sustainable Today's and Tomorrow's (NEST), <https://sd46.bc.ca/programs/alternative-ed/nature-programs/>