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Collaborations with Tribal Elders for Sustainability Education

Summary: Environmental sustainability studies are enhanced through local and regional partnerships between academicians and curriculum developers with members of area First Nation communities who have lived sustainably since time immemorial. Recent collaborative efforts between Seattle Pacific University's School of Education and Snake River-Palouse tribal elder Carrie Jim Schuster have led to the development of a one semester, secondary level integrated history, geography, literature, and science curriculum investigating the indigenous peoples and environment of the Pacific Northwest's Columbia-Snake River system. Seven core principles of cultural and environmental sustainability are discussed that were formulated through this collaboration involving Northwest tribal elders.

Keywords: Sustainability Education, indigenous peoples, principles of cultural and environmental sustainability

Резюме (Рихард Шойерман, Кристине Гриттер & Кэрри Джим Шустер: Сотрудничество со старейшиной рода для создания экологической устойчивости): Исследования по экологической устойчивости были расширены локальными и региональными партнерствами между академиком и разработчиками учебных планов с членами сообществ индейских племен аборигенов, которые издавна вели экологически устойчивый образ жизни. Последние совместные попытки педагогического факультета Тихоокеанского университета Сиэтла и старейшины рода Снейк Ривер-Палоуз, Кэрри Джима Шустера, привели к разработке учебного плана на один семестр, ориентированного на среднее образование второй ступени. Данный учебный план интегрирует историю, географию, литературу и естественные науки и исследует жизнь и окружающий мир индейских народов в системе ЛЕД-Пасифик Нортвест Колумбия-Снейк Ривер Систем. В рамках данной работы обсуждаются семь основных принципов культурной и экологической устойчивости, сформулированных при сотрудничестве со старейшиной северо-западного рода аборигенов.

Ключевые слова: создание экологической устойчивости, индейские народы, принципы культурной и экологической устойчивости

Zusammenfassung (Richard Scheuerman; Kristine Gritter; Carrie Jim Schuster: Zusammenarbeit mit Stammesältesten für Nachhaltigkeitsbildung): Ökologische Nachhaltigkeitsstudien sind durch lokale und regionale Partnerschaften zwischen Akademikern und Lehrplanentwicklern mit Mitgliedern von First Nation Communities, die seit jeher nachhaltig gelebt haben, erweitert worden. Neueste gemeinsame Bemühungen zwischen der School of Education an der Seattle Pacific University und dem Stammesältesten des Snake River-Palouse, Carrie Jim Schuster, haben zur Entwicklung eines einsemestrigen, auf den Sekundarbereich orientierten Curriculums geführt. Es integriert Geschichte, Geographie, Literatur und Naturwissenschaften und untersucht Leben und Umwelt indigener Völker des LED-Pacific Northwest Columbia-Snake River System. Sieben Grundprinzipien der kulturellen und ökologischen Nachhaltigkeit werden diskutiert, die durch diese Zusammenarbeit mit Nordweststammesältesten formuliert wurden.

Schlüsselwörter: Nachhaltigkeitsbildung, indigene Völker, Prinzipien kultureller und umweltbezogener Nachhaltigkeit

Introduction

Place-based education fosters student learning by incorporating elements of surroundings and community throughout the curriculum. "Place" in this context is usefully defined by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan to be space plus culture, or the dynamic regional relationships between human society and the natural world. Explicit advocacy of the approach is seen in the work of such theorist-practitioners as

Comenius, Pestalozzi, Montessori, and Dewey. By incorporating considerations of place into regular instructional practice, a method also characterized as constructivist and experiential, they sought to facilitate the development of students as whole social beings with moral sensibilities. Place-based educators who are heir to this pedagogical legacy in rural, suburban, and metropolitan settings directly connect classroom activities to their students' lives and communities. They develop critical thinking about cultural, political-economic, and environmental connections to promote community sustainability by relating locales to the wider world. Four core aspects of teaching are generally emphasized including (1) consideration of community life, indigenous knowledge, and local ecosystems; (2) active, inquiry-based interdisciplinary learning experiences; (3) preparation for citizenship and the technological literacy in the information age; and (4) reflection about these experiences (Sobel, 2005, Gruenewald, 2003).

The Rise of Place-Based Instruction

Among the most prominent and enduring examples of place-based studies in at the elementary and middle levels is Shady Hill School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. School founders Agnes Hocking and Katharine Taylor formulated a private educational experience in the 1920s combining "active examination of local surroundings" with year-long interdisciplinary "central subject" themes of world significance which to this day still include Ancient Greece and Rome, China and the Silk Road (Marco Polo), Maritime Cultures and Exploration (James Cook), and Early America (Yeomans, 1979; Shaw, 2006). Place-based investigations combined with curriculum derived from such traditional sources such as those associated with world civilization represent a powerful educational convergence fostering at once appreciation for the cultural heritage with contemporary, community relevance.

The renowned British contemporary of Shady Hill's founders and an eloquent enemy of "inert ideas," mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, suggested such a plan in his celebrated 1921 London lecture, "The Place of the Classics in Education." Whitehead proposed that studying the works of exemplars of learning throughout history could bridge the growing divide between classical and technological education. In the case of a unit on Greece, he advocated a literature curriculum for younger students based on an age-appropriate translation of the *Odyssey*, history derived from the writings of Herodotus and Plutarch, scientific study of Archimedes' simple machines, and connections to several axioms and propositions from Euclid's *Elements* on number theory and geometry.

The relevance of Homer and Marcellus to a London suburb might seem as peculiar as that of Marco Polo to Seattle. But not to Whitehead and advocates of expansive learning. He advocated the mapping of local features, measurement of precipitation and wind, collection of plants and rock specimens, and related tasks ("gaining the utmost information from the simplest apparatus") as means to understand and appreciate the local as well as other places and times. Active student inquiry in such ways offered educational experience of highest quality. Global education becomes meaningful when it is preceded by local education that imparts cultural and personal identity, civic responsibility, and environmental stewardship (Whitehead, [1921] 1967; Theobald 1997).

Place-based educators similarly often incorporate works of local authors as curricular connections to themes from classical world literature and epic tales of mythology from indigenous peoples. As Helen Vendler's observes, "Literary imagination is incurably local. But is it against the indispensable background of the general literary culture than native authors assert their local imaginations. Our schools cannot afford to neglect either resource" (Bellah, 1996:451-52).

Place-studies at the high school level in America were notably popularized by Eliot Wigginton at a public high school in Rabun Gap, Georgia in the 1960s Foxfire project of cultural journalism that emphasized the values of simple living in rural Appalachia. In-depth interviews with community

members were conducted by students who then edited and illustrated their stories into a series of articles published annually in a journal and remain in print as a best-selling book series (Puckett, 1989). In the 1970s Seattle Pacific College Education Professor Margaret Woods introduced a generation of Northwest teacher candidates to the principles of “hands-on creative learning techniques” consistent with a place-based approach. One of her students, Meryl Pruit, went on in the 1980s to establish a comprehensive curriculum on regional Native American culture and pioneer life in cooperation with Puget Sound school districts (Labuda, 1985).

Coincident with the emergence of place-based approaches like Foxfire was the publication of popular books bearing such titles as *The Greening of America* (Reich, 1970), *The Closing Circle* (Commoner, 1971), and *Where the Wasteland Ends* (Roszak, 1972). Such authors presented in both romantic and critical terms a view of post-World War II culture increasingly dominated by technocratic mentality and complex organizational structures to advance interests that measured wellbeing in purely quantitative standards of socio-economic value. The result of this shift in values from individual dignity, material adequacy, and mutual concern and others espoused by the republic’s founders spurred the deterioration of public trust, environmental quality, and community spirit.

Authors and educators like Reich and Wigginton had been greatly influenced by the legacy of environmentalist author-activists like Aldo Leopold and Howard Zahnizer—themselves heir to the ideas of Gesner, Blake, and Muir. Leopold’s classic 1949 book of essays, *A Sand County Almanac*, offered a naturalist’s hope for establishing new appreciation for place not as commodity, but “as a community to which we belong” meriting love and respect borne of special study and understanding. He found evidence of such appreciation throughout history and evident in accounts of explorers and First Peoples as widespread as in the Tarascan and Aztec empires of Central America to Marco Polo’s China and medieval Europe. The book initially received an indifferent reception but became a best-seller after its 1973 reprinting. By that time Zahnizer’s efforts as executive director of The Wilderness Society resulted in the 1964 Wilderness Bill to preserve natural places across the nation as “vast school-rooms” of worth far beyond any market value. In these place members of all generations could “apprehend the interrelations of the whole community of life” by learning about interdependence and self-reliance (A Leopold, 1949; M. Harvey, 2007).

Zahnizer saw natural areas as a fundamental source of liberal and democratic traditions, and their preservation as an educational imperative for the benefit of young people and spiritual fulfillment for all in accordance with religious principles of environmental stewardship. He and Leopold intuitively understood the pedagogical and social significance of place. In *Beyond Ecophobia*, David Sobel (1996) warns of misplaced concern about environmental degradation and climate change through “premature abstraction” and focus on disaster scenarios. He writes of the need for opportunities by children “to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it, before being asked to heal its wounds.” The same might be expected of teachers and other adults. In one of our summer teacher training institutes I overheard a conversation among teacher candidates about a controversial practice of banning the use of rock salt from Seattle streets during winter in order to prevent damage to Puget Sound. The most animated participants found the idea incomprehensible for a major Northwest metropolitan area known to periodically experience snow and ice. But when asked if any had actually observed one of the dozen killer whale pods inhabiting the Sound, none replied in the affirmative. Whales and salmon were ideas sometimes seen on television or read about in the newspaper, not living creatures now threatened that had lived in harmony with residents of the area for generations.

Sobel credits environmental activism whether in rural or urban settings to two sources: “hours spent outdoors in a keenly remembered wild or semi-wild place in childhood or adolescence, and an adult who taught respect for nature (p. 10).” This ethic provides proper justification for the many outdoor environmental education programs operating across the country to provide young people raised in

any setting with life experiences fostering connection to the natural world. Leopold lamented an educational system's preoccupation with technical interests at the risk of society's wellbeing by heading "away from, rather than toward, an intense consciousness of the land" (A. Leopold, 1949, p. 223). The validity of Henry Wallace's New Deal era reminder of place-based education's special promise for any community endures: "Many of the most lively, intimate expressions of spirit spring from the joyous continuous contact of human beings with a particular locality. If life can be made secure in each community and if the rewards are distributed justly, there will flower... not only those who attain joy in daily, productive work well done; but also those who paint and sing and tell stories with the flavor peculiar to their own valley, well-loved hill, or broad prairie." Not everyone may need a Walden to foster an ethic for sustainability, and commentary on Thoreau proposing otherwise is a misreading of the Concord sage. He spurned ascetics like the French Canadian woodsman Alek Therien for boasting of self-reliance without books and for being ignorant of major social issues.

Societal Challenges to Place-based Approaches

The prospect of affirming the centrality of place and its myriad natural and human associations as an educational model met with challenges of implementation among teachers traditionally influenced by national professional associations and developers of curriculum materials for the mass market. Moreover, the 1973-74 oil embargo and ensuing energy crisis in America generally led to mere reconsideration of change in spite of presidential encouragement by Jimmy Carter to shift from the national mentality of an Abundant Society sustained by exploitation of global resources to the Modest Society affirming local self-reliance. Scion of one of America's most wealthy families, Laurence Rockefeller wrote a 1976 *Reader's Digest* article, "A Case for the Simple Life-Style," that described a host of endeavors resembling the Table of Contents in a classroom Foxfire volume including the revival of handicrafts and the formation of consumer cooperatives. Americans were being encouraged to engage in "plainer living and higher thinking" without renouncing technology or modern conveniences, but by fostering, or perhaps rediscovering, a new spirit of self-reliance (Rockefeller, 1976).

Historian Ray Billington viewed the decade of the 1970s as a turning point in Western civilization and concluded, "We have reached the limits of the past type of life that we've been able to enjoy." But the "permanent adjustment in mentality" he envisioned—an educational construct, "might take years or decades or even a century of agony..." Indeed, federal calls for restraint were replaced through national policies in the following decade rededicated to principles of individualism, economic freedom, and relaxed regulatory oversight. The new order sought to restore prosperity through the international marketplace and free trade rather than engender economic and educational policies of constraint to promote local wellbeing (Stevens [Billington], 1979).

Kentucky writer-poet Wendell Berry found American public schools complicit in the arrangement. "Schools are no longer oriented to a cultural inheritance that it is their duty to pass on unimpaired, but to the career....," he wrote in a prescient 1988 essay, "The Work of Local Culture." "The orientation is thus necessarily theoretical, speculative, and mercenary. The child is not to be educated to return home and be of use to the place and community; he or she is educated to *leave* home and earn money in a provisional future that has nothing to do with place or community." Berry characterized his charge against the public educational establishment in terms revealing its historical connectedness to industrialization in order to serve interests beyond the community and region. The costs of such education, Berry concluded, are evident in psychological dislocation, cultural loss, and environmental neglect (Berry, 1990, pp. 162-63; Peters, 2007).

The remedy and educational imperative for our day lies in the recovery of character and skill, which for Berry means understanding the value of restraint—choosing less, and self-reliance, or doing more for oneself. At the present time, however, education and economies for consumption are normative.

Education for independence from constraints of time and place leads to the accumulation of things that have little to recommend them other than their availability, and lead to insidious problems ranging from personal and national debt to energy demands and climate change.

Berry finds relevant examples in communities past and present, Old World and New World, where cultural values shaped attitudes of stewardship through restraint and self-reliance. In his essay, "A Native Hill" (1968), he contrasts the experience of his Kentucky forbearers with the ways of Old World peasants and Native Americans:

(...) the Indian, who had the wisdom and the grace to live in this country for perhaps ten thousand years without destroying or damaging any of it, needed for their travels no more than a footpath; but their successors, who in a century and a half plundered the area of at least half its topsoil and virtually all of its forest, felt immediately they had to have a road. (...) Indians and peasants were people who belonged deeply and intricately to their places. Their ways of life had evolved slowly in accordance with their knowledge of their land, of its needs, of their own relation of dependence and responsibility to it. (...) We still have not, in any meaningful way, arrived in America. And in spite of our great reserve of facts and methods, in comparison to the deep earthly wisdom of established peoples we still know but little.

Elements of Sustainability from the Columbia Plateau Peoples

Place-based learning approaches do not discount the importance of building strong academic proficiencies for a wide range of professional opportunity, but also seek to promote sustainability and student wellbeing through instruction that relates community, regional, and global issues to the experience of indigenous cultures. For the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest's Columbia Plateau, core foundational beliefs have characterized a common life way for generations throughout a vast region of geographic diversity and cultural complexity. Such prominent nineteenth century Plateau spiritual leaders as Kotaiqaan among the Yakama and the Wanapum prophet Smohalla expressed these beliefs through traditional *Wáshat* ceremonies and in meetings with agency officials (J. MacMurray, 1884; C. J. Schuster, 2009).

The term *Wáshat* is derived from the Sahaptin word for "dance". Consideration of these ideas by middle level students through readings and presentations by tribal elders on ceremonial traditions, mythology, and ecological understandings offer topics of significance that relate to the full range of content areas including social studies, language arts, science, fine arts, and health and fitness and include the following elements:

1. Pervasive spirituality. Human experience is inextricably linked to sacred obligations within nature. Reliance upon Mother Earth for sustenance does not assume we exist apart from our "place" within the environmental system. (Note the use of names for family and band clusters was derived from the locative suffix *-pam*, or "people of" with indigenous geographic morphemes). Human beings are to be stewards or proprietors (vs. owners) of creation. Humanity exists in a covenant relationship, or sacred trust (*ah tow'*), with the Creator through which sustenance is provided to people, animals, and plants. (Knowledge in general is *wapsu'khwid*.) This is what the Plateau chiefs of the nineteenth century meant when they spoke to government officials about the "law" (*tamanwit*).

2. Environmental knowledge. We are to respectfully use and manage natural resources which requires intimate understandings of environmental systems, native species, and agricultural practices. The desire to get more than one needs leads individuals, groups, and even nations to harm land and life. The health of individuals and culture is related to the health of the environment—plains and forests, streams, rivers, beaches, and oceans. Experiential knowledge further involves detailed cosmological lore related to hunting and fishing, gathering and cultivation, and realms of meteorological

and astronomical understanding.

3. Language and moral literature. Words contain special force implicit in sounds associated with natural forces, life forms, and landscapes (e.g., fire, wind, animals, personal names) and storytelling fosters understanding of experience. Cultural knowledge transmitted through myth (ancient), tale (experiential), lore (anecdotal), and oral history provides practical and symbolic means to meaningfully relate to place and culture. These experiences develop moral sensibilities for respect, stewardship, reciprocity (sharing), cooperation, hospitality, and cleanliness. Songs express appreciation for the “law” that descended to Earth and put all things in existence commemorating the sacrifice of creation for humanity, and our gratitude for these benefits. Elders teach and maintain cultural memory to guide youth and sustain natural resources for future well-being through lessons and experience for personal identity and affiliation with the circles of life (e.g., fire-keeper [child]>hunter [adolescent] > trader [adult] >etc.), and responsibilities to family, clan, community, and world.

4. Ceremony and celebration. Songs, dances, feasts, rites and other ceremonies recognize and commemorate relationships with one another, within families, among generations, and between peoples and creation. (Note also sacred architecture, cardinal directions, and Seven Drums of the *Wáshat*.) Ceremonies offer thanksgiving and teach obligations to animals and plants, landscapes and waters, and the Creator to reveal our place and role in the web of life. (Sacred First Foods in creation order and hierarchy of creature chiefs: water/*kúš*> fish (salmon/*núsux*)> animals (venison/*yamaš*)> plants (bitterroot/*piyáxi*)> fruits (huckleberries/*wíwinu*).

5. Artistic expression. Baskets, bags, clothing, gear, and other utilitarian goods are crafted from natural materials. They are generally decorated with motifs associated with their particular use, place of origin, or individual or family identity that impart a sacred influence beyond symbolic value. For example, Kotaiaqan’s sacred colors were white, symbolizing earthly light and unseen spirit; blue (in the center) for water and sky; and yellow for the heavenly light of the spirit world. Specific practices were taught for the gathering and processing of plant materials often accompanied by songs and ceremonies. Through these preparations and in the actual weaving, sewing, and beading individuals learned about tribal culture, family ancestors, and individual spirituality.

6. Cyclical time. Aspects of physical and spiritual experience reoccur in a cyclical process that transcends time and circumstance and is not bound by linear progression. Time exists in a dimension beyond the course of chronological incidents. Events from the time of myth and personal qualities of persons from former generations are sometimes revealed in dreams or in the sounds of nature for those who listen, and lived out in contemporary experience. The hemp string “time ball” (*ititamát*), literally a “day counter”, or calendar, was tied with tiny markers of colored stones, bones, beads, and cloth to record significant events throughout one’s lifetime, and ultimately be buried with the owner. Just as events from an individual’s “season” might touch upon another from a different time and place, so humanity’s wisdom and experience may intersect through power of a sacred word, story, creature, or event.

7. Responsible innovation. Change can be beneficial when promoting the well-being of humans within the natural world system and among global cultures. Conflicts with the dominant culture have often arisen when such constraints are ignored in the name of short term gain or perceived higher needs. Plateau political leaders (“chiefs”, or *miyúux*) like Kamiakin welcomed Christian missionaries and adopted such agricultural and pastoral innovations the raising of grains, crop irrigation, and selective breeding of livestock. A spiritual leader (“shamans”, “medicine men”, or *twáti*) like Kotaiaqan or teacher (*iyánčá*) like Smohalla spoke of the family of all mankind, and accepted technological progress within the limits of moral obligations to creation. In contrast, 20th century government engi-

neers sought to impound the state's entire Columbia-Snake river system for hydroelectricity threatening the Fish Nations; erosive and contaminant agribusiness practices result from "fence to fence" cultivation; and scientists seek to retain ancient human remains indefinitely in spite of federal legislation and moral imperatives for repatriation.

Place-based Storytelling Strategies

As veteran middle level social studies-language arts educators, we have spent much of our teaching careers creating contact zones for students to encounter Native American oral myths in the Pacific Northwest. The strength of these collected stories and encounters with tribal elders have affected the frameworks of social studies, language arts, science, mathematics, fine arts, and health and fitness curricula at the schools with which we have partnered. Through years of collecting such legends through collaboration with Native American elders, we have sought to develop a framework for deeper insight into the time-honored values of the region's First Peoples. The juxtaposition of indigenous values with modern ones afforded ample opportunities for students to read and write authentically across disciplines and reexamine the integrity of their own values. We have found the following strategies to be effective in organizing instruction for these purposes.

Reading Authentic Indigenous Literature

Basal literature readers for middle level students typically feature a handful of popular selections by notable Native American and other authors representing the nation's ethnic diversity. While publications meant to appeal to a national audience can devote only limited attention to specific places, an enriching array of age-appropriate indigenous literature can be found for instructional use. We were led to meet Gordon Fisher through a reference in *The Way It Was (Anaku Iwacha): Yakima Indian Legends*, a book of Columbia Plateau Sahaptin legends published by the Region IV Johnson O'Malley Committee. Although many works like this one are printed in limited editions and soon out of print, permission from copyright owners to reprint selections for classroom use is common. Other books, such as *First Fish, First People: Salmon Tales of the North Pacific Rim* (University of Washington, 1998) remain in print and are excellent resources for use at the secondary level.

Writing Imaginative Stories and Poems

The vivid and expressive language evident in stories like Gordon Fisher's, "How Beaver Brought Fire to the People" leads to authentic associations with meaningful personal experience. Students are given opportunity to reflect on various themes that emerge through storytelling such as overcoming challenges and service to others above self, and are inspired to write about their own experiences. Initial drafts are evaluated by peers using a six-trait writing model with exemplary work featured in classroom publications.

Making Interdisciplinary Connections

The nature of Native American holistic understanding provides myriad meaningful associations to the academic disciplines. Chief Seattle famously observed, "All things are connected," and this wisdom can be applied by creating interdisciplinary units derived from place-based story themes. Tales from Snake River country of Beaver and the Wolf People easily relate to science lessons on endangered species, native flora and fauna, regional geology, and other topics. Connections can similarly be made in mathematics, social studies, and the arts and available in such units for middle level/junior high students as *I Am Salmon* (One Reel Productions, 2000).

Conclusion

Place-based experiential learning based less on teaching and more on learning. The learner, rather than the teacher and standardized curricular materials, becomes the focus along with ideas, before skills. The ancient doctrine of interest is invoked, and students are invited to pursue ideas with local relevance. The teacher's job is to support and make possible the exploration of such ideas by students and to create the kind of physical, social, and intellectual environment that makes it possible for learners to become active explorers. For these reasons, the teacher's role becomes more challenging and complex. Textbooks and workbooks play a greatly diminished role. The study of "real" books (biographies, novels, etc.) and indigenous literature of local significance is encouraged. The fact that not all the students in a group have "covered" the same pages in a text is perceived as a strength, not a weakness, because this is not a centralized, standardized curricular approach.

Integration of subject matter, particularly with emphasis on thematic learning, is integral to this place-based learning. Student-to-student interaction is encouraged in the form of cooperative investigations, discussions, and the sharing of work. Whereas conventional approaches sought to keep students away from each other, now we are inviting them to talk to each other about matters of immediate interest and relevance, to work together, and to share, not compete, for ideas. Problem-solving projects with their inherent syntactic complexities are focused on real-world outcomes like the group of Canadian middle school students who mounted a successful campaign, complete with abundant research, to remove chlorofluorocarbon-containing Styrofoam cups the British Columbia ferry system.

Thus the curriculum becomes localized, decentralized, and less predictably patterned. Students are expected to search for meaning, patterns, and relationships in the course of place-based investigations. True intellectual rigor is demanded of students, but on their own terms, at their own pace, and in a variety of ways of demonstrating that learning is indeed taking place. Assessment is less standardized even though students who experience an exploratory curriculum generally do as well or better than their traditionally schooled counterparts. In these ways predetermined outcomes and material to be covered is secondary to an emphasis on learners and the process of learning.

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