

Appreciative Resistance: Balancing Activism and Respect

by Blair Niblett

Activism can be a contentious issue in the context of education. Teachers and students come to schools and outdoor centres with diverse values while wide-ranging educational perspectives fail to provide simple answers on just how to integrate activism into education. Outdoor education experiences often inspire passion for outdoor environments, passion that can open doors to controversy as students become aware of the ways socio-ecological issues are tied to our relationships with outdoor spaces. How should educators approach these controversies? Can activism be used in educational contexts without manipulating or coercing students? If activism is used as a pedagogical tool, can students and teachers use it in ways that demonstrate integrity and appreciation for everyone involved? Is activism worth it – how far can an educator go in encouraging students to engage with “touchy” political issues without stepping on sensitive toes?

This article explores education, outdoor education and activism, and the complex ways these constructs interact. I introduce here a concept I have named “appreciative resistance” to describe activism that is hopeful, and respectful towards activists and those with whom they disagree. It is my hope that a positive approach to activism will enable students to learn and experience engaged citizenship and as such may be helpful for outdoor educators to include as a part of their practices.

The idea of appreciative resistance draws on “appreciative inquiry,” an action research methodology based in a model of positive thought called the “appreciative paradigm” (Stavros & Torres, 2006), and on ethics literature in environmental education (Cheney & Weston, 1999; Jickling, 2005a, b). Following

an explanation of appreciative resistance, I offer some “nuts and bolts” strategies for educators who wish to incorporate appreciative resistance into their work.

Clarifying Concepts

Can activism be educational? When might it be otherwise? Given the highly conceptual nature of these questions, it seems difficult to begin an answer without first unpacking the question and clarifying specifically what each concept contains (Wilson, 1963). Simply furnishing a definition of each concept is not enough to clarify meaning. The amorphous nature of education and activism make it difficult to pin down a single definition for each (Jickling, 1997; Peters, 1966; Soltis, 1968). It is also difficult, however, to engage in an in-depth discussion without having some clarity about the key terms. Rather than attempting to frame the “right” conception of these ideas, my aim is to construct working conceptions that reflect assumptions about and possibilities for education, outdoor education and activism, and explicitly draw the notion of activism towards the centre of education, an approach somewhat different from most modern conceptions of education.

Education

While this article deals specifically with how outdoor educators may engage activism in their practices, I believe that outdoor education is best thought of as being nested within a broader conception of education (Jickling, 1997). Peters (1966) suggests that three primary criteria constitute the process of education:

- the transfer of contextually worthwhile things
- the development of some element of knowledge, understanding or cognitive

perspective that is dynamic or responsive to dialogue

- the avoidance of coercive or manipulative procedures.

How do these criteria lend themselves to an understanding of education that draws activism towards its centre? The first criteria, the transfer of worthwhile things, would seem to be easily achieved through activist endeavours, which generally centre around issues that are highly relevant to citizenship (assuming, as I do, that citizenship is a worthwhile thing). Peters' second and third criteria (the development of dynamic knowledge as well as student choice to learn) are somewhat more problematic when considered through an activist lens, as they beg questions of where education ends and indoctrination begins. These conceptual borders are particularly important when outdoor educators ask students to take a stance on an issue and act on it deliberately. Hare (1964) tells us that some degree of influence is intrinsic in a teacher/student relationship, and that the separating factor between education and indoctrination is *aim*. According to Hare, it is acceptable for educators to introduce controversial opinions or use leading teaching methods so long as their *aim* is to help students become independent thinkers before too long. While this approach may sound convincing, how can educators be sure that they aren't unknowingly nudging students in a particular direction? What is needed is a safeguard to prevent an educator's activist self from betraying his or her educator self, and vice versa.

Activism

In developing a concept of appreciative resistance, I have struggled with choosing the words to describe what I mean by action in outdoor education. In part for simplicity, and in part for its connotation of passion and engagement, I use the word activism to describe an ethics-based action in an educational context. By this I mean that

activism might be most educational when it is an enactment of a student's considered ethics (not imposed by a teacher or other authority, nor practiced unconsciously). The particular approach I think might be most educational is an everyday approach to ethics (Jickling, 2004), where ethics aren't reduced to a special project or particular occasion, but where students engage with ethical thinking and acting each day. An "everyday-ethics" approach may pave the way for an activism that is also carried out on a daily basis, and not only as special events within a curriculum.

Appreciative Resistance

Activist situations often result when an individual or group's ethics are compromised or infringed upon. Anger and frustration caused by such infringement are powerful and important emotions. I wonder, however, if these and other negative expressions of affect best serve the desired outcomes in an outdoor education context. Anger and frustration as starting points for activism may overshadow educational potential. As an alternative, appreciation may serve to channel the passion and enthusiasm that characterize activism away from potentially miseducative deficit-focused feelings (Dewey, 1938) towards more positive approaches to activating change. While this article can only provide a glimpse of appreciative resistance, I hope



it begins to outline an alternative to more deficit-focused approaches.

A primary focus of appreciative resistance is helping students to make clear and strong positive connections between theory and practice. By positive connections, I mean that student activism is focused on identifying what is best about a situation in order to harness it and leverage change towards positive futures. This means identifying and enacting ethics as etiquette in everyday practice. Ethics operate in the realm of ideas and values, and while this is a virtuous arena, it may be difficult to penetrate with students – one explanation why ethics are often reserved for special occasions or experts (Saul, 2001). Etiquette, on the other hand, is a representation of ethics linked to everyday ritual, routine or practice (Cheney & Weston, 1999). This kind of ethically reflective practice is central to appreciative resistance.

Intentionally or otherwise, educators influence students' ethics. Appreciative resistance recognizes such influence, and offers suggestions for exercising influence in ways that empower students to be engaged citizens. For instance, a teacher practicing appreciative resistance with students might help connect students with similar activist interests and support them in developing etiquette that highlights positive action around their issue of interest. Such a project might begin with or include a special event (letter writing campaign, fundraiser, or awareness-raising event), but a key feature of a pedagogy of appreciative resistance will be to help students find ways to extend the action from their event into everyday etiquette that demonstrates their ethics over time.

Suggestions for Implementing Appreciative Resistance

There are many possible approaches to making activism more central to outdoor education. In this article, I have put forward one approach based in appreciative

thoughts and actions. Like most approaches, appreciative resistance is not without its challenges. In an education system where discussing politics can be taboo, it may be daunting to draw activism into daily practice. Consequently, I offer some tangible ideas for outdoor educators to consider integrating into their teaching, or to enhance their current approaches.

- **Understand appreciative resistance as a frame of reference.** Appreciative resistance isn't intended as a step-by-step instruction manual for drawing activism closer to education, but rather as a tool to assist educators in drawing their own education/activism road map specific to their community or classroom. Appreciative resistance is best focused on the ethics and actions of individuals, rather than entire campaigns or events. Individuals empowered within an appreciative frame of reference may be able to initiate positive change in their worlds.
- **Appreciative resistance is not an all-or-nothing proposition.** Set out to make small changes in your pedagogy that invite appreciative resistance. Educators are under a great deal of pressure to squeeze a huge amount of curriculum into a limited amount of time. Doing appreciative resistance doesn't mean dropping everything else. It does mean using curriculum as a way of helping students to identify their ethics, and through positive focuses to begin to develop etiquette that showcases ethics on a day-to-day basis.
- **Live appreciation first, and others may get on board.** Administrators, other teachers, students and parents may be apprehensive about integrating activism into education. Appreciative educators can showcase appreciative resistance, and help others to understand why it is an appropriate strategy for helping students to become informed and engaged citizens.

When you feel comfortable, share with students some of your own ethics, and the etiquette that demonstrates your ethics in everyday ways.

- **Be mindful of manipulation.** An appreciative approach doesn't automatically make activism appropriate within an educational context. Educators must be mindful of the tensions between education and activism to ensure that one doesn't overshadow the other. If activism in educational contexts becomes manipulative, student empowerment (a primary goal of appreciative resistance) may be compromised. In implementing activist strategies, ask for feedback from students, parents and other educators. Their viewpoints may offer important perspectives on the degree to which students are encouraged to consider issues critically, and make supported, but independent decisions about what courses of activism are best for them.
- **Test and recreate the concept of appreciative resistance.** Appreciative resistance is a new concept for integrating activism into education. As such, it has had little opportunity to be "field tested" and refined in ways that best develop engaged and committed citizens. By practicing appreciative resistance, even in small ways, students may understand that a co-evolution between outdoor ethics and etiquette can help be a starting point for making important change in the world.

The account of appreciative resistance I have offered in this article is only a quick sketch. Readers may have questions or challenges about what I have put forward, and both are welcomed. In addition to inciting discussion and debate on how educators can better integrate activism into education, I hope I have introduced appreciative resistance in a way that helps educators interested in *doing* the challenging but crucial work of helping students learn how they can shape the world they live in.

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