

Opening Doors, Hearts and Minds

Compiled by Andrea Foster

Insightful, enlightening and eye-opening. This is what comes to mind when I reflect on the panel discussion, “Opening Doors, Hearts and Minds,” hosted at the 2006 annual COEO conference. We were fortunate to have four dedicated Torontonians share how they interpret outdoor environmental education and environmental education in what they do and offer suggestions as to how we might integrate their work in diverse urban communities.

Tafari Anyika is the founder of Umoja Learning Circle, a community-based African-centred school at Islington and Albion. Yuga Juma Onziga is the founder of the Environmental Centre for New Canadians (ECENECA) — a non-profit organization working to promote nature-based learning with indigenous peoples of the world. Eduardo Garay is a board member of FutureWatch — a non-profit organization devoted to providing support, training and hands-on experiential learning to build capacity and sustain community efforts. And finally, Alison Neilson is a professor of Education at OISE, University of Toronto, and Environmental Studies and Environmental Sociology at Queen’s University.

What follows is a summary of the panelists’ rich presentations. — *Andrea Foster*

Tafari Anyika, Umoja Learning Circle

Umoja Learning Circle is a private elementary school for 13 African-Canadian children, ages 4–11, and is open Monday–Friday, 10 am to 4 pm. We receive funding from various foundations and York University student volunteers are assisting in the grant writing process so we can keep afloat. The school — an old house — is divided into a classroom, kitchen, dining room, library, computer room, music room (every child has his/her own djembe drum), play/exercise room, dress-up room, and an impressive grow lab.

Food security and planting things are a priority — hyperactive kids calm down when they work with plants in the soil. It’s like there is a spiritual connection between children and soil.

Most of our science curriculum at Umoja Learning Circle is based on environmental studies. We believe a forest is more than “just a bunch of trees,” and is a community of magnificent complexity. Children are given hands-on experience in learning about ecosystems, respecting nature and wildlife, recycling and environmental conservation and preservation. The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority granted Umoja Learning Circle access to an area of five square city blocks at Eglinton and Albion Roads in Toronto to restore and preserve the land and trees on this property right outside our school’s backyard.

Some of the ways in which we have become part of the solution are by proactively participating in reducing waste, reusing material, recycling items and restoring parts of the environment. We have created birdfeeders, bird houses, indoor vermicompost bins, a living machine for our guppies, and a terrarium. We have planted a total of 100 native species per year for the past five years. We maintain a recycling centre on the premises, practice urban agriculture by growing an intergenerational community vegetable garden, grow aquatic plants indoors to be planted in our backyard pond in the spring and water our indoor plants with water from a rain water barrel.

Through exploration, children develop an appreciation and love for working with the Earth. They investigate the interrelationships from field to table between people and the food they eat, and finally how they dispose of the waste. We stress “overstanding” the responsibility of working with the Earth so that the children can gain a sense of protecting the environment through the experience of gardening.

Yuga Juma Onziga, Environmental Centre for New Canadians (ECENECA)

For the most part, environmental education and educators tend to focus only on the physical environment: air, water and soil/land issues. These environmental education programs have largely failed to meet the needs of several communities, including visible minorities, new Canadians, new immigrants, urban communities, low income communities and Native American communities. It is important that environmental education begins to address these communities for several reasons.

Firstly, there is the fundamental ethical issue of equity and fairness. All people should have access to relevant and meaningful educational programs. By understanding demographic issues as social issues, the importance of informed and active citizens on every block underscores the need for environmental education to reach these communities. Wouldn't it be great if environmental education reflected the diversity of our population?

Secondly, these communities have much to teach us about our environmental education, science, cultural ways of knowing and traditional ways of teaching and learning. To believe that our environmental education programs, largely grounded in Western science, are the only ways to teach and learn, is to miss the richness of all of the other ways of knowing nature. Traditional ways of knowing, recounted to us by elders in cultural groups throughout the world, are just beginning to be appreciated. To solve our multi-dimensional ecological and social issues today, we are going to need multi-dimensional solutions, and those are at the heart of traditional knowledge and culture.

Nature is the ultimate balance or harmony, and crime presents an imbalance to society. Kids should learn in all sorts of environments and seasons to restore a balance to society. Wilderness or outdoor training is the activity that will reformat their minds. At the end of this reformatting, they will be ready for any challenges and will turn their minds away from crime or being victims of crime.

The ultimate goals of learning programs among youth should be

- to transform negative and destructive attitudes of high risk youth, and identify pathways for self-assessment and empowerment
- to implant employability skills (including exposure to computer use, tutoring on academic skills, mentoring, community services)
- to promote nature-based learning with indigenous people of the world
- to enhance life skills and rituals so that youth can become contributing members of society
- to implant critical skills among high risk youth
- to encourage healing of the spirit.

Eduardo Garay, FutureWatch

FutureWatch was founded in 1993 by two graduates of the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University in Toronto: Debra Kosemetzky and Philip Lucima. They envisioned the possibility of bringing community leaders together in partnerships to find solutions to complex social, environmental and economic problems.

FutureWatch partners with community leaders and groups, both domestically and abroad, to collaborate on grassroots-based projects focusing on sustainable environmental, cultural and economic development. It upholds the underlying principle that cross-cultural understanding and environmentally sustainable practices are needed to facilitate the growth and development of healthy communities.

FutureWatch achieves its mission by

- creating opportunities for people of all ages in cross-cultural settings to learn from one another
- coordinating projects to address complex environmental, social and economic issues
- researching practical, realistic and measurable options in communities in Canada and the developing world
- providing support, training and hands-on experiential learning to build capacity to sustain community efforts.

Dr. Alison Neilson, Professor of Education, University of Toronto, and Sociology and Environmental Studies, Queen's University

Rather than look externally for the reasons why outdoor education is losing support (e.g., outdoor education centres being closed, membership in outdoor education associations declining), perhaps it is time to look inward. If the people involved in outdoor education are not representative of the general public, i.e., they appear to be from a narrower racial and socio-economic range, perhaps this narrowness has affected the mainstream definition of outdoor education and who can actually be part of it. Who else is doing outdoor education under a different guise? Is there something about the way you or I define outdoor education that excludes more diverse participation?

I suggest that we ask these questions because the calls to get more people involved have been heard with little success for decades within mainstream environmental education communities. I also know that there are a myriad of organizations doing work that involves the outdoors and environmental concerns in important ways, but generally they identify themselves as doing social justice work and they are not coming to these meetings or joining outdoor education organizations. Community health organizations and community gardens/food security groups in particular seem to be good candidates for partnering with in outdoor education.

Exploring power. Living through a time when the provincial government removed environmental education from the formal school curriculum and when school boards continue to close outdoor education centres, outdoor educators can easily feel marginalized. It is understandable that outdoor educators would not automatically look toward their own power and privilege as part of the problem. But this is exactly what I am asking you to do.

I suggest that this power gets used throughout the world of outdoor education. This power determines who is identified as “founding

fathers” (gender reference is deliberate), what is outdoor education, where it happens and whose voices speak about outdoor education. Before we can expect any other community educators/activists to be open to partner with outdoor educators, we need to explore how we have created a system that excludes different perspectives on what could be considered outdoor education. This is a messy process with no concrete answers, but the goal is not to focus on blame or guilt. By exploring these processes and asking questions, we open the door to the members of the broader community who may not have felt welcome in the past.

Becoming an ally. Rather than seeking other people to become supporters of outdoor education as we define it, or to become members of our organizations, I suggest that the process of exploring power and our own privilege calls for us to become allies. I believe that this reflection suggests listening and learning about the work that gets done in our urban centres. This questioning and listening is key for us to be able to see and hear those people and groups whose work complements ours, but who we have not been open to seeing or hearing before.

The term “allies” suggests an equal partnership working together to meet the goals of each, but if we’ve dominated and excluded in the past, the first part of creating an equal partnership is for us to stop pushing for our specific goals. If we truly become part of a larger community, won’t we also get more support for our goals? Maybe our goals will change as we work in a broader community. Can we afford to shift our time and energy to focus on broader environmental health concerns when outdoor education centres are being closed? Can we afford not to?

For more information on ECENECA, visit www.eceneca.ca. For more information on FutureWatch, visit www.futurewatch.org.

Andrea Foster mediated the above panel discussion at the fall conference. She is COEO's former Project Coordinator.