

Pedagogy and the Poetic: Nurturing Ecological Sensibility through Language and Literature

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the context, methodology, and theoretical framework of a research project conducted with coastal Newfoundland children living in communities deeply affected by the collapse of the marine ecosystem. Through a participatory engagement with bioregional poetry, the author investigates how children grow in their capacity to develop an ecological sensibility for the places they inhabit. The article critically examines the technical, resourcist bias of present educational discourse and proposes it is imperative that the term "ecology" be reclaimed for education.

Résumé

Le présent article donne un aperçu du contexte, de la méthode et du cadre théorique d'un projet de recherche portant sur des enfants vivant en région côtière à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador dans des collectivités profondément touchées par la destruction de l'écosystème marin. Par l'entremise d'un engagement actif et d'une poésie axée sur la biologie locale, l'auteur se penche sur la croissance des enfants en matière de sensibilité à l'écologie des endroits qu'ils habitent. L'article examine d'un point de vue rationnel la partialité technique qui ressort de la tendance à tout considérer comme une ressource exploitable, présente dans le courant de pensée éducatif actuel, et avance qu'il faut absolument se réapproprier le terme « écologie » dans le domaine de l'éducation.

Key terms: hermeneutic phenomenology, ecology, poetry, language arts, curriculum theory

Context of the Study

As a secondary school teacher, I lived with children in a region once home to the greatest biomass on the planet. The incredible diversity and numbers of fish species that swam the plankton-rich waters of the North Atlantic stood not only as testament to the miracle of the life-generating power of the Earth, but also to the unknowable depths of human greed and the capacity to destroy and lay waste to that same miraculous fecundity. Much has been written about the reasons for the collapse of the Northern cod population; unfortunately, finger pointing and the apportioning of blame have characterized the analysis. For the

most part, public discourse has been devoid of any real sense that our places, our communities, are comprised of interacting life systems.

During the 1990s, I used a critical pedagogy approach in an attempt to address my concerns by devoting several weeks of my language arts program to exploring the social, political, and environmental constructs responsible for the collapse of the ocean ecosystem. The exploration was primarily expository: letter writing, critical media analysis, debates, and research essays. In retrospect, it was an objectivist orientation to support the objectivist approach of the sciences. Environmental education in my school, as in most others, was a subset of the science curriculum. As the ocean was plundered and decimated, the children dutifully categorized the natural resources and diagrammed the water cycle. Meanwhile, their communities died a slow, inexorable death. Hope and promise were on the wane. Many children grappled with the prospect of leaving a place that was their home.

However, it was my students' personal, expressive writing that was largely responsible for the research project I conducted. The writing spoke to me of children struggling with their sense of place in a rapidly changing reality and it led me to look elsewhere for insight and understanding: to language and literature—particularly, to poetry. I felt that imagination, creativity, and the power of language might provide another way of knowing more deeply how to dwell in place.

This experience raised some key questions for me as a researcher, teacher, and human being. How can our defining human abilities, language and imagination, as products of nature, be seen as mediums by which we may grow in our relationships with the living places we inhabit? How can the poetry of the bioregion, reflecting deeply on human-nonhuman interaction and interrelationship, provide a vital, dynamic space of transaction and mutualism between text and reader? It was my desire to inquire as to the nature of this knowing. The investigation sought to understand children's experience of living in place through their writing and through their response to bioregional literature (Howard, 2006). This article provides an introduction to the larger research project and describes the theoretical framework and epistemological foundation that informs the inquiry.

Research Methods: Experience as Touchstone

Through a participatory engagement with bioregional reading and writing, I wanted to investigate how children develop in their capacity to know, imaginatively and in ways that engender affinity and affiliation, the places they inhabit. The data collection took place over a 12-week period. All 26 ninth-grade students in the class consented to participate in the study. All students were either 14 or 15 years of age. The children reflected on their reading of bioregional poetry through activities, writing prompts, and creative writing opportunities designed to nurture a deeper sense of the intimate connection between ecological attunement and language. As a teacher-researcher, I collaborated with

the children and their diverse perspectives and experiences in re-imagining an understanding of ourselves and our places. The classroom activities designed for the project were based on an acceptance that the practice of living is generative, and reflection on experience generates insight, awareness, and a deeper sensibility. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach adhered to in the research reflects a pedagogic concern because “pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience (children’s realities and lifeworlds)” (van Manen, 1997, p. 2).

This approach made way for and honoured the experience of my students as we, together, nurtured and fostered, through poetry, a sense of the intimate connection between ecological attunement and language.

Describing the experience of teacher and students as we engaged with reading and writing that may lead to a greater ecological sensibility required a methodology rich in language that was able to show the lived quality and significance of the experience and, at the same time, deepen and enrich it. The inquiry took place in classrooms situated and contextualized within a living landscape subject to the rhythms of seasons and tides, inhabited by children who grow in and out of the life of their bioregion. Information was gathered through observation, artefacts, and materials, creating a portrait that depicted a community, a culture, embedded in an ongoing story of land and sea. The study narrates (from the Latin *noscere*, “to know”) a language arts classroom as a space in which children, teacher, place, and landscape collide and coalesce in the messy contingency of everyday experience. Ultimately, the inquiry has the experiential as its touchstone.

Two Classrooms

The grade eight science class is busy; the unit, *Interactions and Ecosystems*. Small groups of three or four huddle around desktops turned to face each other. Students kneel or sit on their heels before poster board and a scattering of coloured markers, scissors, and old magazines. The florescent lights are made brighter in the gathering autumn gloom; the morning hour has an afternoon feel. Outside, the year is being swept away in a serious November light. “Okay, grade eights,” the teacher reminds, “we’re only interested in those natural resources on which we depend right here in our region.” A few students look up.

“Remember what we talked about,” the teacher continues, “we rely on human resources and natural resources.” She makes her way carefully, avoiding the rolling markers and open textbooks. “Pay attention to detail and be specific,” she instructs, “include pictures to illustrate the different resources on which humans rely.”

A northerly wind scours the surface of the bay visible from the classroom window, pushing long manes of white caps toward a black rock beach, skirted by an apron of snow. The world is monochrome, grayscale. A disembodied voice rises from behind a knot of desks. “Do we include cod when we list fish as a

resource?” The teacher moves forward. Some say yes, others no; work stops, markers poise.

There is a brief discussion—the words *mismanaged*, *endangered*, and *extinct* interperse the conversation. “Too many boats, too few fish,” mimes a young voice in a surety gleaned from countless adult conversations around a kitchen table. Attentive to the moment, the teacher asks about technology’s part in the disappearance of fish. “Factory trawlers, foreigners, fish finders...” The volume increases. One boy blames seals; a girl jumps to their defense.

“Okay, okay,” the teacher interjects and re-focuses the group. “Include the fishery but leave out cod, just chart the other species.”

“Crab and shrimp?”

“That’s right. Now let’s get back to work.” She moves off toward another group of students.

A sudden sharp gust lifts sand grains and small rocks from the parking lot, sending them in a tinkling spray against the classroom window. A young girl lifts her eyes to see a brooding low sky and churlish gray sea—a sea that gives little anymore. Boats toss on their moorings or lay slumped on their sides on the beach, propped carelessly in disuse. Men mill around in small groups or bend into the wind on their way to the corner store. “Only fifteen minutes people,” the teacher’s voice cuts in. The girl continues to colour the letters for her chart, *Our Natural Resources*. The marker squeaks with each firm stroke as cold rain skids across the panes unnoticed.

Down the corridor, a teacher reads aloud. The grade nine class is exploring a selection of poems by the writers of the region. Rain runs in tiny rivulets and pools on the blackened sills. Heads turn toward the windows when the gusts slant forcefully, audibly washing clean an autumn’s grime. The teacher reads a final stanza, his voice rhythmically invoking the pull of place as written by John S. Mitchell (1983):

boats upside down
on red wharf
cliffs surround and close
centuries of eyes
in each eye
whispers and whispers
in me. (p. 133)

His voice trails off quietly in diminuendo, holding the last syllable. A hand goes up but not before a boy blurts out, “It’s like he’s being watched or something, it’s a creepy feeling, isn’t it?”

“Yes?” the teacher acknowledges a boy who has raised his hand. “I think that the speaker feels there is a lot history in that place—there are people, but it seems to be a much longer history, centuries—or... it’s like geological time,” he says.

Katie¹, a girl near the window, adds, “And it seems to be speaking to him, a feeling, or, like, a spirit of the place whispering... it’s hard to explain.” Outside now, the bay and surrounding hills have become obscured—a thin skein of fog envelops all imperceptibly, as roads and houses fade; the light is forced, squeezed, and burnishes roof lines and fence posts.

The teacher holds comment and chooses another poem: *Watching My Grandmother Pick a Late Flower* by New Brunswick poet Allan Cooper (1983). Once again his voice quickly adopts the cadence and flow of word and line as he begins to read. The poem tells of a memory, a longing for another place and time:

She wanted to pick the last fading iris
in a field
across the road,
she spoke of old homesteads,
now gone...

She walked out into the field.
She carried the past with her.
her presence stirred
the grass... (p. 133)

The last word seems to hang in the air. He closes the book and walks toward the window. “What I would like you to do is to write about a time when you had a similar experience as these poets. Where were you? What was it like? What does it remind you of? Write quietly in your handbooks for the next fifteen minutes.” The students are familiar with the process; there is some rustling in desks, but most are busy already.

The girl by the window, Katie, twirls her yellow pencil, the words still reverberating, “field,” “homestead,” “presence,” “stirred”... a felt-sense, a memory, an image arises and she begins to write:

I remember seeing my grandfather, sitting and rocking, his hands with their big blunt fingers resting in his lap like two old dogs. I remember thinking how he loved the water, his boat and how his hands tell the story of his life on the sea their creases, scars, deep lines are story lines. His hands were formed by hard work, always soaked with cold salt water (but not preserved). Big and quick they knit twine, braid rope, haul nets filled with fish, countless cuts from fileting (sic) knives. Strong and gentle at the same time—hands to fix a doll and to build a boat. Wethered (sic), eroded like the cliffs, old like the drift wood... tired now, trembling and turning the crinkled thin paper of his worn black Bible... I can’t help but think my grandfather belongs to the sea and the sea to him.

The bell rings to end the period. Outside a herring gull swoops on an empty potato chip bag skittering across the parking lot.

The Limits of Science

Like thousands of students in Canada, the children in the science classroom above, busy categorizing and charting, are learning about the natural environment and appropriate human-environment relationships as a subset of the science curriculum. In Atlantic Canada, most recently developed curriculum documents introduce environmental science as a course of study in high school, while throughout all grades environmental education emphasizes technology, trade, and resources. Most often, it is a biological approach with a strong focus on efficient use and wise management of those resources. The underlying belief of curriculum developers is that by understanding our reliance on the natural environment, researching endangered species, calculating ecological footprints, and memorizing the “Rs” in the recycling process, our children will become ecologically literate and sensitive citizens. The firm hope is that this approach will inculcate in children a knowledge that results in a sensitive, respectful, and restrained use of nature.

Without a doubt, science has its place in environmental education. The abstraction, the impersonal, the objectifying stance of science can help us know *some things* with a degree of certainty. It has produced an invaluable body of knowledge about intricate ecological systems, the value of species, and the complexity of species diversity. Scientific study provides information on which we base decisions that will directly affect the health and well-being of this planet and, in turn, each of its inhabitants. The children in the grade eight science classroom are engaged in important work. They will come to know and value the bounty of their region and understand their dependence on it. However, the knowledge gained in this classroom begs the questions, “In what way do our children *know* the living Earth and what *value* do they give it?” Wendell Berry (2000) says, “We know enough of our history by now to be aware that people *exploit* what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they *defend* what they love” (p. 39). Does the technical, resourcist bias of the sciences, with its dispassionate, objectifying language, make it incapable of bearing the burden that we place upon it?

It was these concerns that motivated Marilyn Doerr to adapt William’s Pinar’s *currere* (Pinar, 1978) for implementation in a high school science-based ecology course. Doerr (2004) developed a practice she called Environmental Autobiography to counterbalance the mechanistic objectification of the scientific approach, as a means to let students begin to emotionally connect with the environment. Doerr explains what happened in her ecology class:

During the times we were exploring the basic scientific principles of ecology, we were also exploring the interior lives of people interested in ecology—themselves... I needed to find something that would move my students from “I know” to “I care.” (pp. 30-31)

The experience of living with children on the coast of Newfoundland during the momentous culmination of decades of blatant disregard for the marine ecosystem was in many ways life-altering. The ensuing social upheaval underscored the connection, the deep interrelatedness of the human cultural world and the biotic realm that is the reality of human existence. The shameful ways we have compromised the marine ecosystem and the reductionistic commodification leading to the extirpation of the myriad living beings of the sea resulted in a profound systemic effect on children, families, and communities.

Different Ways of Knowing

In his book *Transformative Learning: Educational Vision for the 21st Century* (1999), Canadian scholar Edmund O’Sullivan posits that modernity, with all its wonders and advances, has reached the full fruition of its limitations. He writes, “We are in need of an evolutionary transformation that transcends the forces of modernism and includes them at the same time” (1999, p. 1). We must educate so we see ourselves as part of the web of life, as implicated in the world, not simply isolated, self-maximizing individuals. David G. Smith (1994) warns: “As adults we inevitably suffer the cultural diseases of our time, but then reproduce them in our children to the same degree we have not healed ourselves” (p. ii). The inquiry undertaken with coastal, rural children proposes to see language—poetry, writing, and response, as means to heal and re-vision our human presence on the Earth. This requires a new understanding of ourselves and our place in the living world, in communities, and in traditions that will sustain us ecologically and spiritually.

The instrumental rationalism and the technocratic, managerialist language that is dominant in education today is pervasive and powerful. The discourse reflects a way we have come to *know* the world—an epistemology. But what happens when epistemology becomes ontology? In other words, what are the implications when the discourse of science-technology-industry claims to reflect the physical reality of the natural world and constructs how humans are to “be” in the world? What happens when the language of science-technology-industry, so prevalent in our classrooms and consigning the Earth to mere *concept* and life to mere *resources*, is largely responsible for strongly held cultural beliefs about the way the world “really is”? Do our children see the living world as a machine? Does the metaphor become identity? Does it lead one to believe that the Earth and all its creatures are mere human artefacts?

Reclaiming Ecology

E.F. Schumacher said:

The volume of education...continues to increase, yet so do pollution, exhaustion of resources, and the dangers of ecological catastrophe. If still more education is to save

us, it would have to be education of a different kind; an education that takes us into the depth of things. (in Sterling, 2001, p. 21)

Our society is in need of a highly ecologically literate citizenry as in no time in the past. To achieve this, we must move beyond the scientific into a conversation designed to bring to light our strongly held beliefs and values concerning our relationship with the more-than-human world.

But in what sense do I use the word “ecological”? Paying close attention to the meaning of the word is to address its significance. The *Nelson Canadian Dictionary* (1997) indicates that “ecology” can be defined firstly as “the science of relationships between organisms and their environments,” and secondly as “the relationships between organisms and their environments.” It is interesting to note that the definition itself tends toward “objective” abstraction by placing *the science* as a common term with *the relationships*. This is not an intimate ecological relationship, but one marked by the disengaged reductionism of science. When we trace the life of the English word *ecology* to its roots, we see that it was derived “from the German *Okologie*: Greek *oikos*, house; see *weik*: clan (social unit above the household). Greek *oikos*: *house, dwelling [ecology, diocese, ecumenical]*” (*Nelson Canadian Dictionary*, 1997). The original life of the word was tied to relationship, clan, and family. The term *dwelling* suggests a noun and synonym for *house*; yet it retains the sense of its verb form, *to dwell*: ecology as dwelling, as what it means to dwell in place. Martin Heidegger describes the troublesome separation in the West between becoming and being as the artificial separation between what it is “to build” and “to dwell” (in Foltz, 1995). We live in a culture preoccupied with building at the expense of dwelling. Our curriculum privileges the knowledge of building at the expense of the knowledge of dwelling. We must reclaim the word *ecology* for education to understand that as we build, we must dwell, and the two cohere.

Reclaiming the Sensible

Where can we look to lead our children into a sense of what it means to truly dwell on and care for the Earth? How do we recover a relationship with place, to allow children to nurture what seems to come to them naturally: an embodied integration into the wonder and awe of their natural places? How might we recover a sense of education that educes and engages, while encouraging spontaneity, insight, and reflection as it nurtures our children in becoming critical and compassionate?

What may be called for is a means to go beyond the knowledge of science while at the same time being inclusive of it. We must inquire further into the possibility to know the animate Earth through an understanding of language that is inherent in a matrix of the *sensible*. As with the word *ecology*, I use the word *sensible* with consideration, and differently from the way it used in

the vernacular today. To be sensible usually connotes “good sense marked by reasonable, intelligent action and behaviour” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2002). The word has languished under this constricted definition, but I do not wish to abandon it by turning away from it. Working to re-open its true history, nuance, and depth can reclaim the word. I invoke the word *sensible* to recover another meaning with which it was once imbued. Sensible and hence “sensitivity” is tied directly to the Latin *sensus*, to feel, the power or faculty of feeling; the capacity of sensation and emotion. The word *sensitivity* is distinguished from the cognitive and the intelligible, that which is grasped by the intellect. When we reveal the original meaning of *sensible* we see that it is rich, yet delicate and subtle, in its evocative power. When recovered in this way, *sensitivity* now seems to resonate with the capacity to communicate a kind of readiness to respond, a sensitivity born out of awareness and attunement. It conveys an emotional consciousness, a delicate attention. The word is also tied to a feeling of vulnerability and to the possibility that as a quality or trait, sensitivity exposes one to be hurt, or feel offended, by unkindness or displays of uncaring. How might a generative, ecological understanding of language and poetry nurture a sensitivity in children for the life of the places in which they dwell? What is the nature of this sensitivity? Is it a feeling? Is it a virtue, or an attitude? How, if at all, may it be taught?

The teacher in the grade nine class described above introduces his students to the writers of his bioregion—to the poets who have taken up language, the written word, in all its potency, and who endeavour to write language back into the landscape (Abram, 1996). These are writers who are attuned to other forms of sentience that surround us in the present. They employ the language of the individual, the unique. The classroom is situated in a larger world, a world of time and tide, the revolving seasons, the wheeling sun and moon on an encircling horizon. What happens when we are led by writers who encourage us to slip out of abstraction and human logic, to awaken another way of knowing our world, a way that may lead us to see our connection with and reliance on the living Earth, to truly understand that a grandfather can “belong to the sea, and the sea to him”?

And so I return to Katie sitting by the window in the grade nine language arts classroom. Outside, the late November light hardens as the wind and tides obey the pull and tilt of the planet in an eternal rhythmic turn of the season, cycling as nearly every system does, from the human body to a solar system.

Today her body deepened
As she picked a late flower
And behind her
The dust rose on the backroad
Like a remembrance of her life.

The words, contained in Allan Cooper’s (1983) poem, call up, lift out, a

memory, an association, a felt-sense. “I can’t help thinking that my grandfather belongs to the sea and the sea to him,” the girl writes. She describes her grandfather’s hands as being “eroded like the cliffs” and “old like the driftwood.” Does her language reveal a permeability of boundaries, a breaking down of perceived separateness, an identification with the greater rhythms of life? Her grandfather (and, presumably, she too) emerges as part of a greater community, a common ground or kinship. There is also a challenge in her words to a Sartrean existential isolation (Sartre, 2007) that becomes an unreality when we realize ourselves a part of larger life forces, when we discover the subtle organizing patterns of the universe and move toward a resonant relationship with them. The young writer chooses the image of her grandfather “turning the crinkled thin pages of his worn black Bible.” Could this be a sense of her grandfather’s life as an infusion into greater life processes that confront death? Katie’s short piece is imbued with a completeness, a *spirituality* that touches on and, in some way, brings to the fore the interplay between birth and death in the larger stream of life. Her words point to the education of sensibility, which is ultimately a deeply spiritual awareness—an awareness that is at the heart of this inquiry.

It could be argued that the girl’s response is not *about* the poem at all. There is no analysis of metaphor or personification in her response, or word choice, repetition, poetic style, form, or structure. The response does reflect, however, the “lived-through” experience and the richness of the space between the young reader and the text as it emerges in the moment. Wolfgang Iser (1978) says of this experience, “The significance of the work, then, does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that meaning brings out what had been previously sealed within us” (p. 157). The poem is generative; it serves to nurture and encourage understandings that lay within the student as she wrote “from” the poem to call forth personal memories, associations, anecdotes, and meanings. When the teacher reads the lines from the second poem by John S. Mitchell, he is allowing for the voices of other presences, for a sentient landscape to emerge into a growing field of significant relations.

boats upside down
on red wharf
cliffs surround and close
centuries of eyes
in each eye
whispers and whispers
in me

Katie responds with the beginnings of a beautiful piece of writing that nests her grandfather in an intimate interconnection with the life force of the ocean. David Jardine (2000) uses the term *ecopedagogy* to describe what seems to be unfolding in this classroom experience:

Ecopedagogy assumes that there is always and already a deep ambiguous kinship at work between the real, earthly life of children, the tasks of pedagogy... (including how we envisage and practice the relation between the young and the old, our conceptions and embodiments of knowledge and our images of ourselves as teachers)... to the extent that the task of pedagogy is to usher children into those understandings of the Earth's ways required for life to go on in a full and healthy and wholesome and sustainable way, it (pedagogy) is already intimately ecological at its heart. (p. 48)

The space of contact, of experience, between child, teacher, and text is one of mediation, a place of exchange, a flow-through of the voices of the young and the old. The poet Gary Snyder (1990) writes, "In this huge old occidental culture our teaching elders are books. *Books are our grandparents*" (p. 61). Rachel Carson, the pre-eminent marine biologist, who ushered in our contemporary environmental movement with the publication of her book *Silent Spring* in 1962, wrote in a short essay *The Sense of Wonder* (1964) of the pedagogical significance of the adult in the life of a child:

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, re-discovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in. (p. 7)

Perhaps, then, it is perfectly fitting that the young girl chose to respond to the poem by writing about her grandfather. It is a response that speaks to the intergenerational dynamic that renews the life process. It helps the child focus on what she has always already "known" and in its coming it is bound to carry the child's life forward, bound to educe and bound to eventuate a deeper self-understanding. The words of the writers who give voice to the essential fullness of life and landscape may serve as models, as "voices of appreciation" (Chawla, 1999; 2002), for such voices, in turn, are dependent for their fruition on the life-giving, life-force of the child.

So it is with the teacher, who tends the space carefully, introducing literature that conserves (Bowers, 2003; Jardine, 2000) a wisdom for how we might live on this Earth—literature that is inclusive of other voices. The teacher nurtures a space that allows opportunities for students to respond; the teacher creates a community in which young people experience deeply, and in their response re-create, re-vision, and re-new a sensibility, an ecological sensibility, for what it is to dwell rightly on this Earth at this time.

Notes

- ¹ All participant names have been changed.

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