

Dwelling Where I Teach: Connections with Friluftsliv

By Mike Elrick

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I was born in Guelph, Ontario, Canada in 1963 and grew up digging forts and tobogganing in the backyard of my parents' home. Today, I still live in Guelph, reside in my old neighbourhood, and teach at my old high school. I continue to run the trails and paddle the rivers of my childhood. My children now know Guelph as their home and slide down the same hills (though with fancier sleds), climb the same trees and attend the same schools. And as far as I can see, when I die, my ashes will contribute to the organic layer somewhere nearby.

I have always wanted to start an article or speech with this proclamation because it declares "Who I am and Where I come from." The unique part is this: I am one of the few that teaches in their hometown. And this "uniqueness" has had a direct influence on, and has shaped much of my teaching. Life and work naturally intersect when, to use the words of Wendell Berry, "I eat my history day by day."¹ I might argue today, that "who I am is where I come from." Teaching and dwelling to me are tributaries of the same river. For many years, I have struggled to describe the kind of curriculum and teaching techniques I have been drawn to. Hence, when the idea of friluftsliv education was described to me, it lined up with much of what I believed in. It was as if someone had twisted my camera lens into focus after years of being slightly blurry.

For ten years I have taught what we call in Canada — An Integrated Curriculum Program.² Its name is CELP (Community Environmental Leadership Program) and it is best described as a package of regular high school courses grouped together and taught at an off-campus site. The students earn the following credits in their grade ten year: 1) English, 2) Careers, and Civics, 3) Outdoor

Education and 4) Interdisciplinary Studies. The program, however, takes place outside of the sanctioned walls typical of most schools in our community. Daily, a bus transports us to and from a 55-acre summer camp that we rent in their off season. Several units take place in the city and one in a more remote wilderness setting several hours away. A second teacher is responsible for the English course, and I am responsible for the other three. The setting is one of intimacy with a strong focus on community. There are no "bells" and the same students learn together all day with the same teachers. We have a formal classroom with desks in one building, and we utilize another with a kitchen and living room. The camp property includes open fields, trails, a large forest and a small river. For five months, or one semester, this is school for twenty-four students and two teachers.

My outlook on life and my ways of teaching were born from a childhood of one house, one community and what I believe to be an inherited connection (to be discussed later). Specifically, its alchemy grew from my walks to school, trips to the swimming hole, excursions to the city dump, and, in particular, my connection to the local river. At age eleven, I became interested in the sport of slalom white-water kayaking, an activity I was introduced to from attending a typical Canadian summer camp. And when the water was open, I spent much of my time in it. With white water, it is necessary to learn how to roll, to turn the boat over and suspend oneself in the water. True immersion. And to know how to paddle and manoeuvre in rapids, from an athletic perspective, one has to intimately know the river and its ways. More than anything else, this daily river sojourn slowly flowed its way into my soul. A friluftsliv upbringing perhaps? Canadian style?

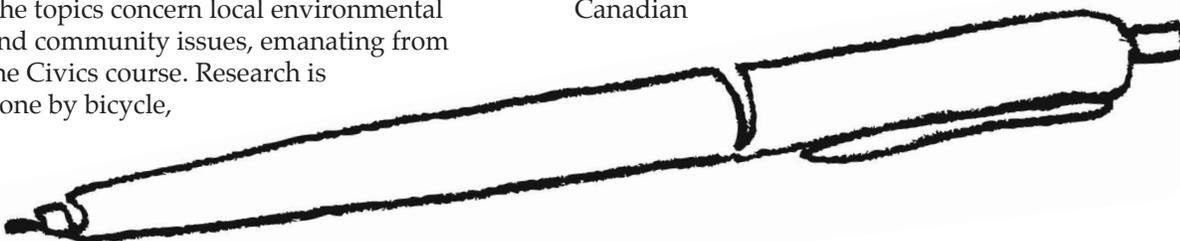
After high school, my kayaking pursuits and university education took me around the world for several years.³ Returning to Guelph to live and work was not something I considered. It just . . . happened. But now, with some reflection time in my backpack, (a kind way of saying I have aged) I know that much of what I share on a daily basis with my students has a direct correlation with my own life's journey and personal connections to my home. I teach what I know. And what I know is that this land speaks to me on a daily basis. It speaks to me with stories and meaning and a sense of connection beyond what seems possible with textbooks and basic field trips. And I wonder, is an education taught with this perspective part of the missing link? Because, I might argue, today's environmental learning is failing us.

A typical day at CELP begins with a 20-minute bus ride. I enjoy referring to our school as "upstream" from town. Simply mixing the students from different high schools begins the community-building process. They have to meet the kids from "that school!" Upon arrival, we have a morning circle for announcements and one student provides a reflective reading for the day. English class follows for 70 minutes and the curriculum requirements are met with themes that meet the overall goals of the program — Community, Environment and Leadership. In the first week students are asked to write a paragraph about a memory for them in the natural world, a moment they felt a sense of connection to nature. The skills of reading and writing are used as tools to excavate and create relationships with themselves, their community and the world around. Integration occurs because much of the curriculum of the other three courses overlap and swirl together. For example, when students engage in debates, they are learning research and oral presentation skills from English and Interdisciplinary Studies. The topics concern local environmental and community issues, emanating from the Civics course. Research is done by bicycle,

interviewing local citizens and visiting places of issue — Outdoor Education. A journal is also kept, an all-encompassing mirror of reflection weaving throughout the four courses.

I visualize the program as a river's journey. We begin at a lake near the mouth of a river — our community. We then travel upstream, against the flow. This is a somewhat different approach to learning than most conventional education today, and sometimes hard to do. However, people used to always journey upstream, and there is much to be gained by traveling in this direction. We head to the source — where the real issues flow out of — past the band-aid environmental solutions we have produced to date. We ask the underlying questions of our problems and investigate truly eco-effective practices. And when we travel back downstream, we use the skills and knowledge to paddle with the flow — long term, and sustainable ideas of how to live on this planet. We arrive back to our communities with a sense of responsibility, connection and purpose. We have engaged in practices towards deep ecology. In the process it is hoped students develop a personal life "ecosophy." Arne Naess, would be pleased I think.⁴

Our upstream journey begins with a five-night wilderness canoe or snowshoe trip, depending on the semester. We spend two weeks learning and practicing the traditional travel skills of the region and reading stories of those who have travelled before. Though this unit takes place several hundred kilometres to the North, and goes against the "local" approach of *friluftsliv*, we have concluded that the remote wilderness setting has a power to "awaken" one's sense of connection with the natural world more quickly than our more urban setting. As well, there is something truly Canadian about going on a canoe or snowshoe trip. It is a window into Canadian culture and Canadian



stories.⁵ Upon return we make links and draw parallels by trying to live the lessons of our wilderness trip in our day-to-day lives. A recent student, Brent Goemans, captured this intended outcome in his journal:

As I sat on the rocks and drank the tea, I looked around at the fog materializing off the water. I thought what a magnificent sight this was and how lucky I was to witness it. It was at this moment I realized that these sights are happening all the time. Nature is always here. It does not just perform for people when they arrive. These sights are happening all the time, some even more glorious than I have ever seen . . . I am now making an effort to try to acknowledge nature even when I'm at home or in the city.

After the trip, English class focuses on a reflective essay of the wilderness venture. It is a chance to write from direct and potent experience. The careers course walks them through an investigation of their own skill sets, future employment ideas and job application techniques. We improve our communication and problem solving through activities such as trust falls and group initiative tasks — learning to work together. Every Friday is “community day” where, as a class, we share a meal and clean up our site. A group of six students is empowered to design, shop for, pre-cook and finally serve a meal for the entire class. We finish with a full-camp clean up, including dishes, toilet scrubbing, mopping and vacuuming. This covers healthy eating habits from the physical education course. And we investigate the interconnected nature of food from different perspectives. Who grew this food? What chemicals were used or not? How does the purchase of a banana directly impact the farmer who grew it, both positively and/or negatively? We learn, through integrating curriculum, that when it comes to probing the sustainability of our planet, no learning happens in isolation. “All living things on the earth are connected,” as the Institute for Earth Education so eloquently states.⁶

One of my most important lessons of education to date arose from these community days. When I started CELP, I thought that the most important thing was getting outdoors, being on the land — the “E” (environment) part of CELP. I designed lots of activities for that purpose. The Friday routine was thrown in at the last minute from another program's model and from the necessity for cleaning at the week's end. But something magical began to happen on these days. I was struck by how the simple act of sharing of a meal nurtured the growth of our class. Fridays became a big deal. At first I didn't get it! It finally dawned on me that adventuring on the land wasn't enough to truly build an environmental ethic. If my class couldn't get along with each other and function as a community, we could never get anywhere with the greater community around us. It took me a long time to realize that the skills of how we relate to each other are the same ones needed for how we relate to the earth.⁷ Perhaps there is much more to educating about food than I am presently aware? My students taught me why “C” (community) is the first letter of our acronym.

Nearing the source, my students teach a program called Earthkeepers™ to over 300 grade five students from our school board. For if a child can begin his/her life where the water is pure, perhaps this river may be clean in its journey downstream. Earthkeepers™ is a three-day program designed by the Institute for Earth Education.⁸ It is composed of a “head, heart and hands” section. For the head component the students learn ecological concepts. With the heart, the activities develop feelings for the natural world. Finally, in the hands, students commit to lessening their impact on the earth and sharing what they know with others. The program is full of creative learning activities and is woven together beautifully with the earning of four KEYS. These keys, in turn, give them privileged access to locked boxes with secret meanings about the earth. The true magic of the program, however, is in the relationship between the high school and elementary students. My students gain real, hands-on experience in teaching. The elementary students get an “awesome”

education program and get to meet kids from high school! On Monday mornings in this unit, my students will often share that they ran into several of their little "Earthkeepers" in town on the weekend. Little do they know that the learning and role model effect continues, even after school hours. Over half of my high school students now have been participants' years earlier in Earthkeepers,TM returning to the same place to share what they experienced. The students become teachers: returning again to the source.

Last June I had two former students simply "drop by" the CELP site. They wanted to "come back and see the place." They brought their girlfriends and boyfriends and told me, after their wanderings, that the campfire stones from their daylong solo spots were still there! Though words couldn't quite grasp the deeper meanings, their hearts were displaying a sense of place, sense of home and sense of comforting continuity. I run into my students about town all the time. I often feel my most important lessons happen here, not in official classroom time. When I ride my bicycle to work, buy local produce at the market or paddle with my children on the river, they witness me attempting to live a life with sustainable elements in it. They see my compassion, connection and concern for my "home." This is, I believe, the next layer in the foundation of an education system that teaches "sustained life" as former Chief Gary Potts of the Temagami Bear Island First Nations Anishinabe peoples once stated.⁹ But because I grew up and live here, it all seems so normal to do.

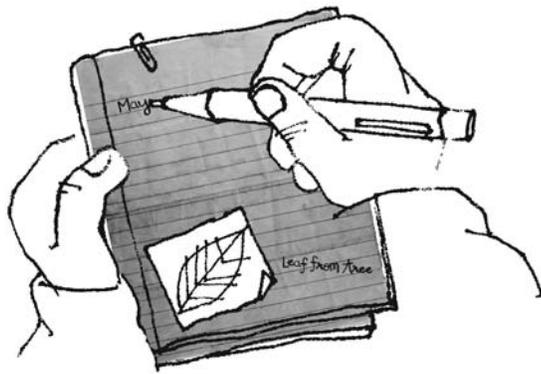
As we spin around at the source, the downstream curriculum attempts to find ways we can live sustainably, ways that flow with our ecosystem or, as Bill Reese recently stated, "... ways when we see ourselves as a mere part of nature, and not separate from it."¹⁰ In Civics, we explore political structure and discuss local, national and international issues. We learn how to participate in matters that have meaning to us right in our own community. I have always felt, though, that to make decisions about community, one must know community. So, for seven days, we

take to the streets on our bicycles for just that purpose. On Day 1 we learn the rules of the road and feel, in our bones and muscles, that the bicycle is a viable form of transportation. Anchored by research for debates on local issues of sustainability, we bike to our water source, to the sewage treatment plant, and to City Hall. We bike to our waste-handling facility and to the old landfill. We bike to an organic vegetable farm and tour a local abattoir where they slaughter 2,000 head of cattle a day (perhaps the most powerful tour on the circuit). We visit an organic dairy farm and talk with people fighting to keep Wal-Mart in check. The community becomes the classroom. In between visits we picnic by the river, have ice cream at the historic Boathouse, and play "grounders" on park play structures. It is hard to capture in words, the joy I feel biking around my hometown with students, discovering and learning its complex inner workings and hidden places of beauty. The feelings of freedom, the welcome physical exertion and the visits with our local citizens all weave together for an incredible week. We meet our community on a level beyond what is typically possible. Sharon Butala once stated that, "To discover these truths (about the wonder and beauty of the world) we don't need to scale Mount Everest or white-water raft the Colorado or take up skydiving. We need only go for walks."¹¹ I might add "or for bikes."

Often our travels will take us by a small dam on the local Eramosa River where we stop for lunch. Boy scouts built it fifty years ago. It creates a pool to recharge the springs from which our city gets its water. Before departing, I gather my students around an outflow where a small rapid is created. Here I tell them a story. "This place," I explain, "is sacred to me. As a child, my friends and I took bike hikes here and spent hours skipping stones and swimming. In teenager days, we camped in the hills behind. As a young adult, I portaged my canoe traveling both up and downstream. And several years ago, when my wife and I had a stillborn baby boy, we spread his ashes here in ceremony." After an emotional pause,



I tell them, "It gives me joy to see all of you enjoying this place — this sacred place." It is a moment, perhaps, that the previous four months have led up to. But it is a moment that is unique to my situation, and attempts to awaken questions in their minds of what being a true dweller is. The land must have elements of sacredness for us to love and care for it. It has that for me and I hope to instill the same with my students. I often wonder, when they return to this small dam, if they tell others this story. For now it is their story too. It is part of who they are, and where they come from.



In the final leg of the course we spend a day in our home community where the students plan, execute and evaluate an Active Citizenship Day. By consensus, they decide in small groups, how to "Better Their Community." On the actual day, the students take to the streets without direct teacher supervision and carry out their chosen tasks. It is a day of celebration as I bike from group to group and see them walking dogs at the Humane Society, flipping pancakes at a kid's breakfast program and performing self-written puppet shows about the environment. It is a culminating day of so much of what we have learned.

In English class the students read a book called *Halfway Man* by Wayland Drew. It is a wonderful story involving an upstream canoe trip to the source and back as well. And for six of my ten years I finished with a local canoe trip that literally lived out our river metaphor. We would portage out the back door of our high school in the city, down to the local

Eramosa River, then paddle, pole, portage and drag our canoes upstream for a day, heading to a local park. Here we would camp for two nights, doing a solo and a year's end reflection — what we learned about the source — at the source. Then, we would paddle, in half the time, back home. The gentle current pulled us along. Next year we are initiating a grade 12 (age 17) integrated program called HEADWATERS that will complement the existing grade 10 CELP. We will be resurrecting this final canoe trip. The students will be milling wood from our off-site school property to carve out paddles for their trip.

CELP ends when we invite all the students and their families to a closing ceremony. Beginning with a potluck supper (the theme of food again), we move on to share slides and journal quotes of the semester, narrated by the students. Following this, the teachers award the students a certificate and honour each with a brief story. It is meant to be a transitional moment. The students will return to their home schools having completed half of their grade ten requirements. And, in tune with our overall philosophy, our program is never meant to exist in isolation. The skills and life lessons gained at CELP are meant to help them in their ongoing river's journey. This is simply school for five months.

Last summer I had the unique opportunity to travel to Norway to attend a family reunion held on a farm that has been in my lineage for over a thousand years. A journey to my source — way upstream! I ate roasted lamb with relatives, saw the house where my great-great-great-grandparents emigrated from in 1857 and shook my head at the resemblance of one elder to my own grandfather. But the most significant moment came when I traveled up to the family setter (a small cabin traditionally used in the summer pasture lands). The host of the reunion, Nils Rosholt, a large, gentle man of six foot-four, spoke of how every year he and all the men of the Rosholt farms (now a group of three divided farms) gather for a fall moose hunt. They have a fire pit which they circle around and "talk about things" as Nils stated, as if his English translation was not quite capturing his deeper

meaning. He said they work at “getting along” as a family and that this is something they are “very proud of.” And with those words, a tingle ran up my spine. My bloodline believes in community, works at nurturing this community, and is connected to their land — their home. And this has been “home” for quite a while. It was an affirming moment. This is where I come from. The words and aspirations of Nils run through me, like a river.

After being in Norway, I realized Canada is a young country. The mindset of “going west to find your fame and fortune” complemented more recently by the cheap fossil fuel era of constant mobility, perhaps have never allowed a percolation of stories to settle into place. But this may change as we move more into the next century. As a global community we are reaching the peak of oil consumption, and in an ironic way, it may return us to being a true dweller of one place. I think the type of education I am providing for young people lines up with this outlook, but I may never know in my lifetime. It has been a natural progression for me as a teacher and dweller, to share the stories, foundations and issues of my community with my students. Learning the term *friluftsliv* affirmed and clarified for me, this might be a way — a way of seeing the world from a long term, sustainable outlook. To date other ways don't seem to be working. As Aldo Leopold stated so many years ago, “Is it certain that only the volume of education needs stepping up? Is something lacking in the content as well?”¹²

Endnotes

1. Wendell Berry, “History” from *Collected Poems of Wendell Berry, 1957–1982*. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987).
2. Bert Horwood, Integration and Experience in the Secondary Curriculum. *McGill Journal of Education*, 29(1), 1994, 89–101; Sona Mehta and Bob Henderson, Exploring Notions of Schooling, *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*. July / August Vol. 8, No. 4, 1996, 11–17.
3. Editor's Note: Michael Elrick was a member of Canadian National White Water Kayak Slalom team from 1983–1988.
4. Alan Drengson (ED), The Long-Range Deep Ecology Movement and Arne Naess, *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* (theme issue) Vol. 9, No. 2 Spring, 1992. See specifically Melissa Nelson, An Exploration of Intuition: its Relationship to the Deep Ecology Movement and Ecosophy.
5. Bob Henderson, *Every Trail Has a Story: Heritage Travel in Canada*. (Toronto: Natural Heritage, 2005).
6. Steve Van Matre, *Earth Education: A New Beginning*. (Warrenville, IL: The Institute for Earth Education, 1990)
7. Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990)
8. Earth Keepers: An Education Program designed by: *The Institute for Earth Education: Cedar Grove, Greensville, West Virginia*.
9. Chief Gary Potts, of the Bear Island Indian Reserve, Temagami, Ontario. Quoted in: Temagami: The Last Stand. The Nature of Things, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: 1989.
10. Bill Reese, Excerpt from Keynote Speech at EECOM (Canadian Network for Environmental Education and Communication) conference – Creating Ripples: Oct 1, 2005. Camp Tawingo, Huntsville Ontario.
11. Sharon Butala, *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship In Nature*. (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1994) 65.
12. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970 edition) 243.

April 22, 1991 Earth Day — My foundation stones — what are they? Heather and my love and relationship with her, my kayaking, my contact with the natural world, my running/fitness, my contact with children and others in a teaching/guiding framework, my family, my native lands.

The Mississauga River — Yes! It is a full possibility for this summer. It just could be the fix I need as well, though fix is not the right word. It could be the "base work" that I desperately need in my life, in my life today to keep me going through May and June as well. What better river to paddle than Grey Owl's river? The person who was there when my life was consciously awoken to the outdoors.

July 15, 1991, on the Mississauga River — When I come upon a small rapids like this it conjures up images in me of so many training sites I have visited such as these. How many hours I played and trained on waters like this and so enjoyed gaining that ultimate feeling of harmony with the river. Physically feeling in good shape and working my body, emotionally, setting challenges, striving for goals, socializing with others and, finally, spiritually that sense of contact with the natural world and that deep inner part of me that felt fulfilled in a positive way.