

Getting Lost in the Woods: And Other Gateways to Creativity

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Abstract

The connection between experience in nature and the development and nurturance of creativity has long been a fascination of mine. My journey as a practitioner in the formalized world of outdoor education has provided a well-marked trail to follow, complete with set rules, policy manuals, and risk management plans. My life as a creative explorer and writer, however, has inspired me to walk off the beaten track, taking some unmarked routes, sometimes with students in tow.

Wilderness experience can be a powerful tool for generating creativity, innovation and meaning-making, as well as personal direction and inspiration. Experiences while wandering and wondering in the wilderness can unlock hidden truths, provide insight and clarity, and break apart stagnant ways of thinking and being. All too often as outdoor educators, we create a container for students, which is heavily constrained by the rules, boundaries, social norms, and limits that are required of our profession. However, these practices can also have the effect of squeezing the juice out of the experience, disconnecting people from their surroundings and putting limits on the freedom to explore.

This paper is an exploration of ideas and practical experiences designed to loosen the plaque of creative thinking and living, freeing ourselves and our students to get lost in the woods, and be present in nature. The paper seeks to make connections between the ideas of diverse disciplines in outdoor and environmental education, learning theory, creativity, and mindfulness.

Key Words: Creativity, Learning, Mindfulness, Embodied Cognition, Environmental Education.

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Introduction

One of the greatest compliments I could ever have received as an educator came from a student shortly after she had taken part in a creativity workshop I held at a cabin in the woods of northern Ontario. She told me that I had taught her to *throw the rubric out the window*. This student had been asked to disregard some of the external rules, expectations, and prescribed outcomes most often attached to both school and organized wilderness experiences, in order to access non-linear thought and the wellsprings of her own creativity.

As outdoor experiential and environmental educators, I would suggest that we have the perfect tools available to us to help unlock the creative minds of students. In a rapidly changing world, we also have a responsibility to help people reconnect to themselves, their communities, and to nature. Shellenberger & Nordhaus, authors of *The Death of Environmentalism* (2005), suggest that what is needed is a *collective step back to rethink everything*. “Rethinking everything” requires a creative, fluid mind, one that is able to perceive the root causes – and to understand the power and responsibility of the individual consciousness within the whole. If we understand environmental problems to be rooted in an anthropocentric, utilitarian, materialistic, and non-sacred worldview (Yamamoto, 2005), then the task must be to re-connect humans and nature through means that integrate mind, body, and spirit. I believe using a combination of experience in nature, a willingness to release the need for predictable outcomes, and creativity exercises, is one way to address this.

In my professional life I have worked extensively within outdoor & experiential education, as an instructor, a classroom teacher (occasionally), an administrator, and a guide. I am also a creative person, and have always been involved in writing and art. I am fascinated with the possible connections between the development of creativity and our ability to be open to divergent perspectives and worldviews. My childhood, and subsequently my adulthood, have been blessed with plenty of unsupervised time and access to wilderness, both urban and wild. I believe that movement, creativity, and unstructured time in nature can unlock paths to new learning, intuition, and knowledge. My journey as a practitioner in the formalized world of outdoor and experiential education has followed a beaten path, complete with policy manuals, curriculum standards and risk management plans. As a learner, creative explorer and writer, however, I have been inspired to walk off the usual trails and take some unmarked routes, sometimes with students in tow. This paper seeks to tie together some of the ideas which have inspired my path as a student and an educator from a combination of constructivist educational theory, place-based education, radical environmental philosophy, mindfulness, and creativity practice.

Creativity Unbound

Creativity can be defined here as the ability to engage in divergent patterns of thinking (Guilford, 1967). Armed with the ability to shift perspectives and divergent thinking skills we are better equipped to adapt and see new ways of being that are more conducive to a healthy human-nature relationship. All too often I see teachers and students alike

throw up their hands in exasperation at the seeming insurmountability of the task of “changing the world”. Often, this is paired with an attachment to the idea that “this is just the way things are”, or, “I don’t have the power to change it”. In part I see this as the result of a basic failure to imagine the possibility that there are other ways of being, knowing and understanding ourselves and our place in the world. Although the human-nature relationship is complex, there are many who believe the root of the problem is caused by an inability to dislodge ourselves from the paradigm of nature-as-other (Livingston, 1993; Evernden, 1993). In western society, we are entrenched in a belief that we are separate and distinct from “environment”, and act accordingly.

The development of creative skills has much relevance in environmental and sustainability education. Art and writing as expressions of experience with nature can be valuable tools to help generate understanding; aesthetic experience *provides a ground for the questioning that launches sense-making and the understanding of what it means to exist in the world* (Greene, 1978, in Graham, 2008, p.32). While I am not suggesting that creative education is in itself the solution to our ecological crisis, I do believe that it is an important element in fostering change. A creative and receptive mind is a vital ingredient of an expanded environmental consciousness. Imaginative and creative education, which seeks to re-forge the human-nature relationship through experience, can help support the process of collective rethinking.

Shaking the Tree: The challenge of structure

The idea of education as a creative process is certainly not new or revolutionary.

Advocates of student-centered and constructivist approaches to education say that the

task of education is to immerse students in experiences that invite them to ask questions and construct meaning (Shiro, 2008). Learning, and therefore teaching, is a process of making meaning, one that involves a departure from the expected, and the possibility of something new (McKernan, 2008). Outdoor and experiential education programs have arisen from the philosophies of John Dewey, Kurt Hahn, and others, who believed that learning is a creative process, rather than a prescribed outcome. Most outdoor environmental educators are well-acquainted with this idea in the practical sense; when dealing with direct experience outside of the four walls of the classroom, there are unexpected turns in the trail. Within many programs it is by design that our students become our guides, and therefore the architects of their own experience. Both the student and the educator have to be comfortable with uncertainty and able to adapt as things change.

While outdoor environmental educators have a much greater freedom of practice when compared to traditional classroom teachers, we find ourselves in an increasingly litigious and outcome-oriented world, one bound and controlled by externally generated policies, and prescribed curricular expectations. Pyle (2008) suggests that one of the essential sources of disconnect from nature and community is borne out of a litigious and risk-averse world that relegates youth into organized instead of free activity. The days of unstructured wandering and wondering in the woods are no longer (Louv, 2005; Gruenewald, 2008); spending time in the outdoors is now a matter of policy manuals, curriculum documents, permission forms, and planning. The advent of structure over human wildness has resulted in an increasing disconnection from the natural world, ourselves, and others (Louv, 2005).

In order to get ourselves and our students reconnected, we must begin to shake the tree of our educational practice, whether it be in the classroom or in the forest. We need to take a critical look at the constraints we currently place on learning and experience, and find the fruit that result from removing them.

Being Wild in the Wild

The western human-nature paradigm is firmly grounded in the idea that we can and need to control every aspect of human experience in order to remain “safe” (de Silva, 1998). Even experts on risk management in outdoor programming are critical of our society’s fear of unregulated activity. Barton (2007), in his book *Safety and Risk and Adventure in Outdoor Activities*, identifies a “misapprehension of risk” in society as one of the key problems, and suggests that over-subscription to rules and regulations short circuits both the potential for authentic adventure as well as the development of common sense and good judgment. In the context of outdoor experiences within organized programs (such as Outward Bound or school based outdoor education) it is obvious that we need to recognize the importance of risk management policies and procedures. Used properly, they create a safety net, developed through years of trial and error, which minimizes the chance for injury and loss.

Similarly, many educators, especially those who work with youth, are beholden to some sort of curriculum, handed down by the organization, government body, or school they work for. Prescribed curriculum can have the effect of focusing the attention on a pre-determined result, one that reproduces a template, rather than a creative process of learning and discovering for oneself (McKernan, 2008). As an English teacher, I have

often struggled with the need to teach the subject's forms and structures over the fun and flow you can have with language when the formal criteria are removed for a time.

Unfortunately, experiences that provide opportunities for creativity, novelty, and unexpected outcomes can become inadvertent casualties of risk management and prescribed learning outcomes. In our frenzied attempt to control risks and outcomes, we lose many of the inherently valuable elements. As Barton (2007) puts it:

*The waste of young lives through lack of purpose and lack of self-esteem barely registers on the scale of public concern, yet many see this as the direct corollary of a diminution of the available opportunities for self-discovery, **self-expression** and self-belief.* (p. 4).

Creativity and self expression are lost as the need to control every variable increases, and as a result, people have lost their ability to self-entertain and self-teach.

Pyle's (2008) observation of his undergraduate students is that they have no experiences in the unstructured wild, whether it be a neighborhood pond or backyard tree house.

When left to their own devices, children have lost the art and skill of free play (Louv, 2005). This leaves us with a doubled task; not only do we need to re-introduce students to wild places but we also need to allow them to be a little wild, by removing some of the boundaries we currently have in place. To explore, to spend time without structure, to wander, and possibly, once in a while, to get lost, in order to find themselves again.

An example of how this plays out is the briefing we have with students before a solo. Our fixation on boundaries, rules and policies, can have the effect of containing the experience to the point of domestication, rather than highlighting the opportunities to

become one with the wild. As practitioners, we have to be careful to make the structures we build around students less domesticating. We have the unique opportunity to create space for our participants to be in direct contact with nature and self, rather than being one or two steps removed through the gauze of a safety net. We need to discern when it is possible to create opportunities for our students to take part in a less regulated engagement with the world. Failing all else, we must take time to program wildness into our practice. In the following sections I will begin to create a list of ingredients which I believe can help in this process.

Becoming Spacious

While working as principal of Outward Bound Canada College, an integrated high school program in Ontario, I invited the students on a creative journey. The experience was inspired in part by an assertion that in order to free up the flow of imagination we need to remove psychological barriers such as rules, expectations, and judgment (Cameron, 2002). What emerged was “Water, Wood, Power and Spaces”, a weekend workshop spent at a solar powered log cabin surrounded by 200 acres of forest, wetlands, and lakes. My intention was to introduce students to some tools to get the creative juices flowing, move past blocks to creativity, and delve into unexplored territory in their own writing and artwork. Art and English were two of the subjects in our integrated curriculum. Within the bounds of curriculum expectations there is often a tendency for educators to rush to the “meat”, the rules, structures, and prescribed methods associated with the discipline. My intention was to do the opposite, to remove the boundaries, structures, and

any expectations of “good” and “bad” creative work in order to help the students tap into their wild minds.

Becoming spacious was one of the key ingredients of the workshop; this was manifested on both a physical and metaphorical level. We took the students from their regular classroom setting into one that was more organized around communal living, in order to disrupt normal patterns. The type of space you have for learning, studying, or teaching can also have a profound impact on the outcome. The cabin space was large and high-ceilinged in one area and small, candlelit, and communal in the other. Students and staff interacted through workshops and sessions, and also socially, around the tasks of cooking, cleaning, and working in a rustic environment. Outside the cabin, there were 200 acres of road-less woodland, field and wetlands available for wandering feet and minds. When staff were not engaged in teaching a session, they would be participating as learners, breaking down some of the barriers that can exist between students and teachers. Structured workshop sessions were interspersed with communal and free time. From a symbolic point of view, space was also created in the work that students were asked to do. Writing exercises were organized around “free-writing” practices where the requirement was to shut off the internal editor and write, “stream of consciousness” style. Thus the idea was to create both physical and mental space for creative thinking to unfold.

Becoming Present

Most wilderness trips involve some sort of access point; we drive for miles along bumpy, muddy and deserted roads in order to get to the places where the roads stop and the

wilderness begins. It is useful to have a starting point, or point of arrival for our creative and physical journeys, a moment when we arrive and become present. Mindfulness practice is a tool I have used when doing creativity workshops, or when simply arriving at a new location with students.

Mindfulness, one form of which is traditional meditation practice, is the act of training the mind to remain present in order to perceive reality as it is. Reality, according to Buddhist thinking, is that which is not created by humans (De Silva, 1998). Our day to day existence is so crowded with external stimuli, other people, and objects that attract our desire or disgust, that we have a hard time noticing what is around us in the here and now. Mindfulness practice is an opportunity to silence the cacophony and tune in to what really is.

Solo time, often used in wilderness and environmental education programs, is a perfect opportunity to offer students some time for stillness, to pause and take notice of what is around them. Over the years I have observed the tendency people have to keep busy during solo time. Human nature (and some would say a key to our ecological problems) is to try to fill our time, make something, build something, do something, and therefore we often miss what is happening around, and within us. In recent years I have made an attempt to program in stillness, by providing some training in mindfulness practice to help my students begin to resist the urge to stay constantly engaged in doing. Through mindfulness, the individual can be immersed in nature as a place of peace and quiet, and *when the boundaries that separate self, others and nature grow thinner... a sense of peace and compassion for all beings emerges.* (De Silva, 1998).

Mindfulness also has links to creativity in that it is said to arise from a source beyond the self, coming, in part, from a position of taking notice of what is, without judgment (Cameron, 2002). Langer (1997) attributed a mindful approach to the following characteristics: *the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective* (p.4). It enables us to get outside the ego, examine ourselves and our nature from a critical perspective, and shift our perspectives.

Movement

Travel a thousand miles by train and you are a brute; pedal five hundred on a bicycle and you remain basically a bourgeois; paddle a hundred in a canoe and you are already a child of nature. –Pierre Elliott Trudeau

Access to a wild and creative mind involves movement. There are myriad thinkers, both academic and creative, who have made the link between movement and creativity.

In the creativity workshop, we used a variety of tools; free writing, writing prompts and exercises, a bookmaking workshop, sculpture making with found objects, and physical and metaphorical rambles through the woods in order to prime the creative pump. An important element to this process was the idea of movement as a conduit for learning, connection to place, and creative flow. Julia Cameron speaks extensively about such links in her book, *The Artist's Way* (2002), as does the field of educational kinesiology which supports the idea that one of the keys to unlocking learning and cognitive functioning is tied to the body. David Abram (1997), in his writing on human ecology, asserts that

meaning is rooted in the sensory life of the body (p.80). As we engage in movement, so too do our thoughts, allowing us to work out problems, ponder possible solutions, get “unstuck” from life’s dilemmas, and come up with new ways of doing things. In the words of Julia Cameron (2002), problems are often solved when people go for walks. Movement through nature also has a role in our connection to and relationship to place. Cuthbertson et al. (1997) found that in many indigenous nomadic cultures, it was the movement through and across the land that fostered a connection between people and their environment: *In a deep sense, the people traveled on the Land not simply in order to reach certain destinations, but rather to be at home.*

With these ideas in mind, I entitled one of the activities in the creativity workshop: “Getting Lost in the Woods (and Eventually Finding Yourself Again)”. I sent students out on a solo walk, armed with sticks and flagging tape to mark their paths, a “turn back time”, and an assignment to wander at will around the property and spend time taking notice of the world around them. They were to bring back one item that they found on their walk, either a physical or narrative token of their experience. Later, the objects served as an inspiration point for a piece of writing and a piece of artwork. The intent was twofold; to get people in a state of creative flow where their bodies, and therefore their minds, would harmoniously activate; and to get them in touch with the natural spaces in order to develop a relationship to the land forged by moving through its myriad smells, sights, sounds, and feel.

Conclusions

As people in the world we are presented with countless challenges and barriers to addressing the human-ecological crisis. As educators we have our work cut out for us, as do our students as potential actors in the cause. Every opportunity for change and action is met by a thousand limitations, boundaries, and comfort zones to be breached. Students and educators alike often become disempowered to the point of inaction or apathy, suffering from a basic inability to see beyond the current status quo. Being able to delve into authentic experience in order to access possibility, connection, and creativity has the potential to jumpstart our ability to see beyond the current state of things.

Outdoor and Environmental educators have the opportunity to be a part of a global rethink. What I am suggesting is that this is an opportunity that may necessitate a willingness to break free of some of the constraints we have placed on our practice and our students' experiences. We must, to some extent, be willing to throw the rubric and the rule book out the window in order to open up the possibility for creativity in mind and action.

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