

Eco-poetic inquiry for inspiring relationships with local places: exploring a sustainable curriculum of eco-literacy learning

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Abstract: In this paper I outline how Poetic Inquiry can serve to help learners develop a closer relationship with the places that they live. An eco-hermeneutic investigation of language helps writers to develop a closer relationship with the places that they live by finding language to describe the plants and animals that grow there. I consider how a deep analysis of language can inspire learners to pay closer attention to local environments and seasonal shifts. A close analysis of being part of the process of collecting and growing food is a place where the sharing of intergenerational is fostered. The sharing of stories also contributes to a deepening of awareness to climate change. By investigating and expanding language to describe experiences within the nearby nature of local places, learners consider how stories of place can also help them uncover and expand their understandings about the Earth.

Keywords: eco-poetic inquiry, ecoliteracy, eco-hermeneutics, and ecojustice education curricula.

INTRODUCTION

The spirit of the Earth, its inner fire, its *logos*, has become ourselves. In this way, eco *logos* becomes *ego logos*, ecology becomes egology. Understanding ourselves need only refer to ourselves: to our skills and concepts, our mastery of requisite inner states of competence and performance, our skill at wielding methods and processes. (Jardine 1992: 271)

In this paper I draw from Eco-justice Education and Eco-poetic Inquiry theoretical frameworks as I consider how stories can help to shape our understandings about the places where we live. Moving between stories and poetic work becomes a creative space that can help learners to write about what they are motivated to think about and consider. Moving to different forms of representation is a good way to inspire learners to write and investigate their relationships with the places they live. As they take snapshots of what they see, I ask teacher candidates to find language to

re-present and re-interpret what they see in their photographs. This activity does not need to involve a camera or a phone. I often ask learners to sketch what they see. Throughout many of the classes that I have worked with, I have often brought students outside to draw and investigate what they are familiar with in the local places that they live. These activities lead to discussions about their favourite places, or the places where they enjoy spending time. Moving from story to discussion, to sketches and paintings, and to poetic writing are all acts of translation. These are not exact descriptions but rather works of representation to re-imagine what they witness. In a recent graduate class, we move from the role of teacher to learner as we investigate how imagining ourselves as writers changes the way that students engage with processes of writing. Asking learners to re-present their engagements with the world around them can also help to inspire changes about how they understand their relationships with the Earth.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH INTACT ECOSYSTEMS

Outdoor spaces along the Precambrian Shield or the Prairies; like gardens, parks, fields, and forests inspire multidimensional conversations and writing opportunities about the climate. These come out when we try to situate ourselves in a relationship with the spaces that we find ourselves. Intact ecosystems, with few human inhabitants, inspire a pedagogy of place that promote deep understandings about the landscapes that surround us. Abram (1996) writes about the air as he explores our connection with the more-than-human world:

It unites our breathing bodies not only with the under-the-ground (with the rich microbial life of the soil, with fossil and mineral deposits, deep in the bedrock), and not only with the beyond-the horizon (with distant forests and oceans), but also with the interior life of all that we perceive in the open field of the living present—the grasses and the aspen leaves, the ravens, the buzzing insects and the drifting clouds (1996: 226).

When we give learners time to consider and investigate their own stories about a place, they realize that these lessons are important to them. They find questions that they need to answer for themselves. The following is the poem that I was writing as I considered eco-justice curricula, and how

to facilitate discussions with graduate students and teacher candidates to inspire their students to write about climate change. I consider Kelly Young and Andrejs Kulnieks (2022) investigation about how the “analyzing the history of language can involve an eco-hermeneutic inquiry”. I tried to include that story as I was trying to re-call, re-present, and revise a description of the farm, and some of the relationships that I developed with local places from gardening and walking in the woods with my grandmother:

Wild hazelnuts

Follow trails through woods you walked
look to find the path of least resistance
through pricklies and pine branches avoided
pick mushrooms in gold beams of sunlight across drying dew

fences along fields circumvent property lines
to avoid the Precambrian Shield, posts stand as if they were just dug
though that was seventy years before
walk past the space where the fated fences kept cattle contained

watch tall grass some years and walk them back to short grass
brown cow's tails swat flies as they stare as visitors
then scatter and trot into the distance
regardless of the lure of corn husks and left-over carrot greens

stop at a safe distance peering as if uninterested
the sound of giant hooves stomping along poplar sprouts
met our reaction to stay put
far from the cityscapes in the south

when my grandmother came to feed them they would visit
staring silently as greens were tossed over the fence
they moved in for a feed when she was on-line
beside the electrified barbed wire nearest to the ground

beside the gate, was the highest crawl space beneath the low electrical current
touch that and you zoomed
before moving along the edges of the forest to collect wild hazelnuts
bring them back of birch bark to roast on coals once the fire died down

follow paths of Hereford cattle
brown and white cows show sites to explore
through years farmed
and returned during the warmer months of their retirement

medicines still congregate along the fence-line
moments of developing a deep relationship
with the places that we grew
nourished by gifts from the earth (Kūlnieks 2022)

As I reread the lines of the stanza, the next draft becomes a response of clarifying what would be missed if I was reader unfamiliar with that space. Somehow, after several days, I am re-writing again and finding parts of the picture that I would like to clarify.

One of the reasons that it is difficult to create exact representations is due to our use of the language that we are using to represent those thoughts. As Wordsworth writes in his 1815 *Preface to Poems*:

...the judicious Author's mind is enthralled by Etymology; he takes up the original word as his guide and escort, and too often does not perceive how soon he becomes its prisoner, without liberty to tread in any path but that to which it confines him. It is not easy to find out how imagination, thus explained, differs from distinct remembrance of images or fancy from quick and vivid recollection of them: each is nothing more than a mode of memory (1815/1965: 482).

I want to make sure that I am writing clearly – and that some parts allow for the reader to enjoy the story by including and interpreting some of their own story through their reading. The writing process, according to Rosenblatt (1994) must be seen as always embodying both personal and social, or individual and environmental, factors (p. 1072). As I write these poems, they connect me to the places where the thoughts therein originated. They bring with them previous ways of thinking that are embodied in language, but a deep analysis of language helps the reader uncover some of the changes that are introduced through the ever-increasing mechanization of day-to-day life. As Martusewicz et al. explain:

... when a farm is seen through the machine metaphor, the farmers focus is on what inputs and techniques will produce the most food, rather than on understanding and caring for the land—the soil, plants and animals, as well as the humans—as living

interdependent relationships. When “the farm” is thought of as “a factory” we lose the understanding of and appreciation for the connections that our bodies have with the bodies of other living creatures; we lose the understanding of the sacredness of that connection and its necessity to the life cycle (Martusewicz *et al* 2011: 69).

Eco-poetic inquiry provides an opportunity for writers to deepen their knowledge through an interpretive investigation of the language that they are using. I ask learners to begin their investigation of terminology by looking up words in the on-line version of the Oxford English Dictionary, which a history of the first time the words are published. This search for etymology can reveal how language has changed so that they can consider some of the meanings that were intended. We consider how definitions evolve and are sometimes intentionally manipulated to shape perceptions and understandings.

It is late July when I return to the table in the old farmhouse, where my grandmother used to sort the mushrooms she harvested. In focussing on the plant and animal world, one realizes the wealth of memories that are embodied by local places. Connections to those learning experiences help learners return to the relationships with the places where they have been walking. This is a dry year for blueberries and for mushrooms. There were several frosts that wiped out the early growth for blueberries. Maybe they were a bit early this spring but I have noticed that this loss of berry eating possibilities for animals that feed on them has taken place increasingly often since I began picking blueberries in my childhood. When we picked while growing up, even the driest summers yielded basketfuls but there was certainly a difference between the years that the fields were blue and those, when you had to hunt carefully for the berries.

I walk along some of the paths that my mother and grandmother would walk to collect chantarelles. The rocks lead me from one space to another where I know they return. Some years, they have not come out and this is one of them. For me, this return is important because it is part of how I develop my relationship with the places where I live. During winter months I sometimes focus on the space that is home during a return to warmer months. There is sometimes a longing for the flavour of the mushroom sauce that would accompany potatoes. A connection to the earth is made through gathering and consuming food from networks of plants like mushrooms that grow through the soil.

Eco-hermeneutic textual investigations require accessing cultural information that merges with personal experience and language learning: “An eco-hermeneutic tracing of text includes the development of an experiential relationship with the places that fostered the development of a particular story.” Andrejs Kulnieks et al. (2011: 18). The following poem helps me to recall some of those moments as I consider how to develop focal practices that become a space for poetic Inquiry. Activities, like looking up the ingredients of processed food in relation to natural products, can help teacher candidates consider how to facilitate deep understandings about the importance of developing life-long healthy eating habits.

Heirloom potatoes.

shapes and sizes expanding earth
as worms slowly slide by
blue electrolyte-filled spuds drop into rows
to be covered with earth mounds

light grey to black earth the rototiller would move through
year to year at the time it seemed we would be in the moment, forever
how could the hours slip by any slower
now an eternity from where we are

the final chore you asked the last year you came to your farm
I dug up a new garden between poplars and blue pine
you watched the fire from your bedroom
as it burned throughout the night

you still wanted to make it to the old paths
scan to see if you can and then you are off
follow them back to the first time that you picked
here in the north away from the crowds back in the city
stories move us there to witness the northern lights

your labour of love helps keep us fed throughout seasons
remember the old timber that kept the earth
a board's width above the ground
raised the temperature to expand the growing season

years later I return to your home town, no-longer occupied
recognize family feasts are delicacies there too
potatoes pancakes and dumplings with creamy gravy
mouth-watering variances no longer found in super-markets

from time to grow the potatoes slightly
beyond their boundaries
separate and move them into the burlap bags and
into the turquoise blue Chevy Nova

magic emanates from the waggon wheel
that leans beside the blue spruce
water, sheds from the tight curved hardwood
over 80 years after you needed it to till the soil

(Kūlnieks 2022)

Re-writing poems away from the places that events take place is part of the process of reconciliation. Memories connect us to the places where these events were experienced. I consider why those moments were essential for the continuity of our family at the time. Those memories resonate in connecting with the animals and plants that helped us survive. Tools like the wagon-wheel, now artifacts, connect me to the thoughts, ideas, and technologies that demonstrate why connections that we make with the Earth are so essential.

FOOD TRADITIONS

Being part of the process of gathering, growing, and preparing food stretches back to the first human beings on earth that depended on the Earth for their survival. Consumer systems of today promote and perpetuate the idea that food comes from grocery stores and restaurants. Learners need experiences of growing and harvesting plants as they consider connections with the plant world, animal world, and the Earth. Learning to connect with the Earth should involve developing a deep relationship with food. David Orr (1992) describes this in a similar way: "...all education is environmental education" (p. 90). Writing about these experiences is also a form of re-presentation and translation. Systems of education should provide the tools for learners to have a healthy

relationship with the world. For many educators, it is difficult to know what the goal of education should be. Chet Bowers writes:

In the same way the Internet is now altering the consciousness of the digital generation that has grown up focussed on digital screens and experiencing the phenomenon of instantaneous access on the Internet, the amount of data collected and stored from the increased scale of surveillance and connectivity will further undermine such old traditions as the narratives, ceremonies, and the people recognized as the keepers of a culture's wisdom. (Bowers 2016: 63)

Moving this learning to the digital world is yet another degree of separation from intact ecosystems that the planet needs for the continuity of life. As we move to an ever-increasing separation from the natural world, it is increasingly important for educators to create opportunities for students to make connections and develop relationships with the Earth.

The following is a poem that I have been working through as I consider the importance of celebrating learning in the practice of preserving cabbage.

Sour cabbage

bought varieties replaced home-grown on local fields
another term for vitamin c grown in summer months
transplanted to plastic pails that were clay
after the deep frost

families resist forced engagement as they come together
preserve food into the colder months
cabbage slicing over the blades
collected onto the sheet

brought over to the vessel and mixed with salt, pepper, slice of apple
pounded with tapered toward the top
thick apple tree branch
until juice flows over the top of the shredded leaves

covered with a plate
submerged under a rock
just heavy enough to keep most of the basement air
from molding the winter food

these are good times
brother at the slicer
dad supervising the salt and pepper mix
girls giggling at trying out the weight of the apple branch

Lucile Clifton's stories continue to inspire me

sometimes a bit out of reach
these good times
bagged in milk sacs tied with zip ties
and the spirits may be here too (Kūlnieks 2022)

Writing the poem about food processing helps me evoke memories of the past but also reminds me about what I should be eating. I am remembering a recipe in the poem but I am also sharing a family story as I mediate between past and present ways of knowing the world. The poem becomes a space for interrogating difficult information in a positive light. There is the positive information that comes from being able to feed larger populations with food that comes from different places. There is also the consideration of historical implications of shipping that food by wagon to rulers in other locations, provinces and even countries around the world, with little to no connection of the importance of developing deep relationship with the places that we live.

It is important for educators to provide opportunities for learners to engage with writing practices beyond the act of self-expression. Poetic Inquiry becomes a space for asking what else is going on in the poem. Eco-poetic Inquiry can create a space for learners to consider the implications of the language that they are using. It is also an opportunity for communication between learning communities of local writers interested about local ecologies. Robin Kimmerer writes:

Listening in wild places, we are audience to conversations in a language not our own. I think now that it was a longing to comprehend this language I hear in the woods that led me to science, to learn over the years to speak fluent botony. A tongue that should not, by the way, be mistaken for the language of plants. (2013: 48)

Learning about the Earth, whether it is through science or botony, becomes more fun and memorable when it involves activities that are connected and inspired by the outdoors. The following poem explores my

preparation and recollection for a family gathering near the east end of Algonquin Park, to celebrate the return of spring often remembered when Easter celebrations take place.

Celebrate seasons

Share moments with family in the return of seasonal return
family celebrations, birthdays, and names-days
small discussions around the table eating foods that we remember
consider connection with webs of life

grant time for sharing knowledge to expand understanding
create realizations through preparing seeds after the harvest
share information in the glow of the candlelight
investigate information that plants hold

there is magic in the making of recipes written
and unwritten as they are performed
dance with taste buds before they flow through our bodies
in connection with the earth

rustle through the sounds of the forest
beyond city human-made structures of organization
walk paths beyond those of cars and trucks
as moonlight illuminates the language of voices

moulding maple trunk pushed over then broken and chopped
when you gathered smoke for your bees
calming concoction prepared for bees to calm through during summer months
you chatter about what stories to share, I wanted to know everything at age seven

walk winter paths that you have walked long ago
moving through space holds memories that you moved through here before
feel connectivity that you have been here in the past
engaged in connection with the rock and trees that guide your way

plants teach us and become part of us
exported continuity of life
watch birds slow, stop and prey as I sit encircled
ground slowly coming back from a long rest ready for summer's growth

the live museum of the wilderness invites us again
to gather sap from maples and then birch trees
something flickers beside the candle-light
sharing light in the glow. (Kūlnieks 2022)

Writing and reading poetry becomes a space for deep thinking for learners resilient to engaging in written forms. Opportunities to write in areas of personal interest help them activate understandings about what they want to know more about. It is through that interest that learners have an opportunity to expand their skills as writers. I investigate why Poetic Inquiry is important for me and evaluate contributions to thinking processes and how some of those ideas can lead to further thinking about the places that I live. Chet Bowers explains:

The exercise of ecological intelligence thus involves an awareness of how one's interpretation of the patterns that connect affects the mutual support systems within the cultural ecology as well as the life-supporting natural systems." (Chet 2016: 82)

Relationships with land and all living things can become sacred. They are with us long beyond the initial moments that these ecologically-connected events takes place. Stories line shelves throughout buildings connecting us across the landscape but ecosystems are alive and resonate the making of stories, as old as life itself. Opportunities for learners to develop a deep understanding and connection with the food that they eat should be an important part of the curricula of systems of education. Eco-poetic writing practices become spaces for learners to re-consider what they know about the foods that they eat and to promote sustainable and healthy relationships with the Earth.

ECOLOGICAL LITERACY, POETIC INQUIRY, AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Providing opportunities to go outside and explore local spaces is an essential part of eco-poetic Inquiry. Being able to move beyond the walls of the classroom helps students to consider their relationship with the Earth. Rebecca Solnit writes:

So stories are travels and travels are stories. It is because we imagine life itself as a journey that these symbolic walks and indeed all walks have such resonance. The workings of the mind and the spirit are hard to imagine, as is the nature of time—so we tend to metaphorize all these intangibles as physical objects located in space. (2000: 72).

Walking local landscapes is important because it gets learners to slow down nano-second technology and helps us to see, re-consider, and embrace the land which we live upon. Figuring out what types of plants live where we are can involve an inquiry model which is to figure out what plants are through sharing information and then using technologies to investigate what is “out there”. When I walk the campus grounds with students I ask them what plants they know and then co- generate a class list that they can check out as they re-examine local places that they know and would like to learn more about. Many are surprised to find out how little they have noticed about the campus during the years that they have been at the university. As we examine and expand vocabulary for nearby nature, I provide some terminology for some of the ingredients for snacks that they sometimes munch on. This helps us begin to uncover ecological literacy that is in plane sight, but often disregarded.

Some complain about being outside, but when it is too good to spend time outside, they reminisce about the importance of outdoor writing. Many then begin to appreciate what a gift it is to be able to make the connections with local places and write about these creatively for our literacy café at the end of the term. Paying attention to language helps us understand how much is taken for granted in the web of life just beyond the buildings where they spend most of their time. Wendell Berry writes: It is hardly surprising, then, that there should be some profound resemblances between our treatment of our bodies and our treatment of the soil.” (1977 p. 97). How we relate with the Earth is also reflected in our relationships with each other. By providing opportunities to move away from screen time and learn more about the foods that they eat, we are also engaging a process of reconciliation with the Earth.

Educators need to provide opportunities for students to explore what they feel a need to write about. Being outdoors provides both an essential space to write ecologically-minded work that plants can inspire. Being outside is an essential space to learn from, discuss, and write about

relationships with food because without the Earth, we cannot survive. Obviously, the Earth would do just fine without our presence. Learners of all ages need to be aware of that continuing discussion because the lure of wealth is something that is constantly sold as the be all and the end all. Missing information can be researched and become clarified through deep discussions and writing practices as learners engage with Ecojustice Education and Poetic Inquiry. Moments to explore, and investigate deep meanings that words represent is a crucial aspect of fostering deep connections with the local places where learners move within. These narrative investigations get students excited about the importance of ecological literacy, and can inspire a deep consideration of sustainable practices that they may inevitably want to learn more about.

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Bio-profile

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