

Nature Teaching Us

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and

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Abstract

What does it mean to be in relationship with the more-than-human; to see ourselves as equal partners with the other species with whom we coexist on this planet, and not as the central figures, or as the only 'intelligent' ones? How might we explore and understand the idea of interspecies sensibilities? Fourth-year education students participated in a seven-week project where they intentionally set aside time, three times a week, to be in an outdoor space and attune themselves to what nature had to teach them.

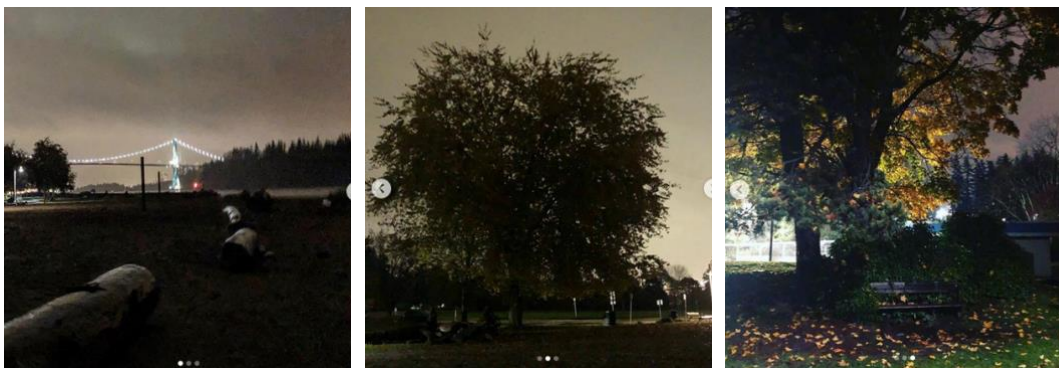
Keywords: *early childhood; common world pedagogies; nature; assignment; Instagram; more-than-human; interspecies sensibilities; teacher education.*



Nature Teaching Us

What does it mean to be in relationship with the more-than-human; to see ourselves as equal partners with the other species with whom we coexist on this planet, and not as the central figures, or as the only ‘intelligent’ ones? How might we explore and understand the idea of interspecies sensibilities? These were two of the central questions students grappled with in a fourth-year university course on outdoor curriculum in the early years. After thinking alongside the words and ideas of such scholars as Donna Haraway (2007), Anna Tsing (2013), Jeanne Marie Iorio, Adam Coustely & Christine Grayland (2018), Affrica Taylor (2017), and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015), students were invited to spend seven weeks engaged in an assignment entitled, *Nature Teaching Us* (NTU). The invitation was to set aside three, twenty-minute blocks of time every week to intentionally open themselves up to learning from nature; to being truly present in an outdoor setting and attuning themselves to what was being offered. In many ways, it was an opportunity to engage in the idea that Tsing (2013) puts forth, namely that “we are participants as well as observers; we recreate interspecies sensibilities in what we do. We don’t just identify non-humans as static others, we further learn with/from them and ourselves in action, through common activities” (p. 34).

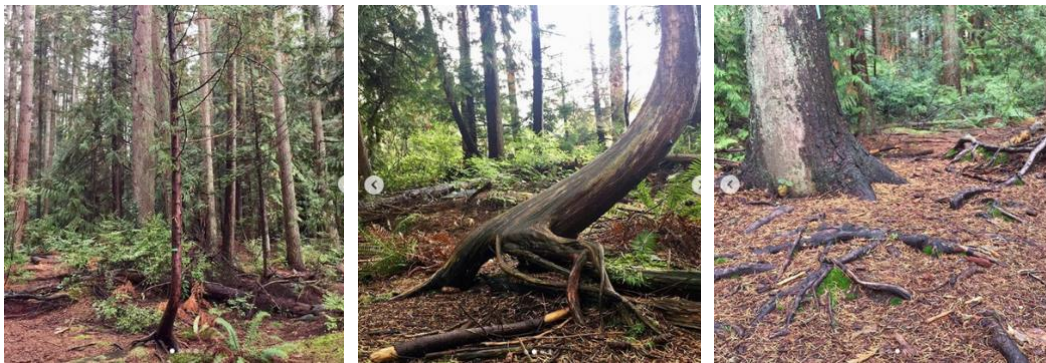
Students were asked to post their reflections each week to *Instagram* using the hashtag #educ483 so that their ideas would be made visible to the larger community. What follows here is a sample of some of their posts. We offer this as an invitation for you to see what nature can teach you if you intentionally become open to listening to what she has to say.



Kathleen: educ483mageek

This week I have felt drawn away from my comfortable routine of making my way into the forest to get to know trees. Instead I feel myself drawn to the edges of the ocean, where sand and water mix and mingle with lively entities. Here at the edge of the ocean I am still transfixed by the beauty and wisdom of trees. Everywhere I go they call to me and ask for my attention, which I give willingly... Yet at water's edge there are not trees, but rather the ghosts of trees, glowing in the moonlight. Log ghosts scatter the water's edge as if communing for a Halloween celebration... beyond this my attention is then pulled to the beautiful trees that have been chosen and specifically cultivated to be in this place by humans. The contradiction between the life and death of trees and our needs for both are ever present here. It's so sad that in our search for cultivating beauty we so often silence mother nature's inherent ability to do the same...

#educ483 #nightwalks #treestories.



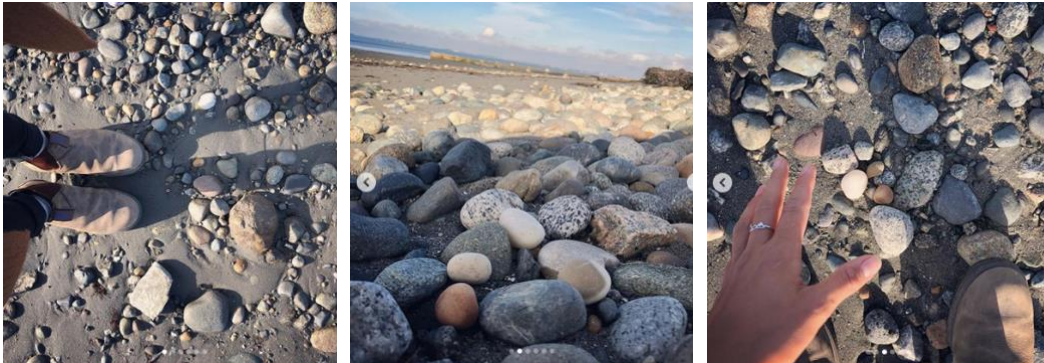
Roselyn: educ483gutierrezr

While walking through Forest I became fascinated by the way certain trees remained upright despite the obstacles amongst them. Tree in the first photo came to my attention after noticing her trunk and roots. I was fascinated by the way she slightly curved at the bottom, and how some of her roots tangled with one another. As I paid attention to her root system I became more aware of all the entangled roots around me. The root in the last photo particularly captivated me as it reminded me of hands on top of one another, such as when one places a hand on top of another's to comfort the other. This semblance brought me back to our first week's reading discussion about how older trees pass on their knowledge, resilience, and wisdom to younger trees. Yet, humans do not particularly understand this about trees, as I am unfortunately reminded of a conversation of how roots in a playground became problematic because it presented a tripping hazard to children. The only solution they could think of was cutting the roots. If only they knew that cutting the roots would disconnect Tree from all the other trees around her. Our knowledge about



the more-than-human has been so uprooted from its worldly connection that we cannot even fathom how such actions could affect the more-than-human entities

#educ483 #roots #entanglements.



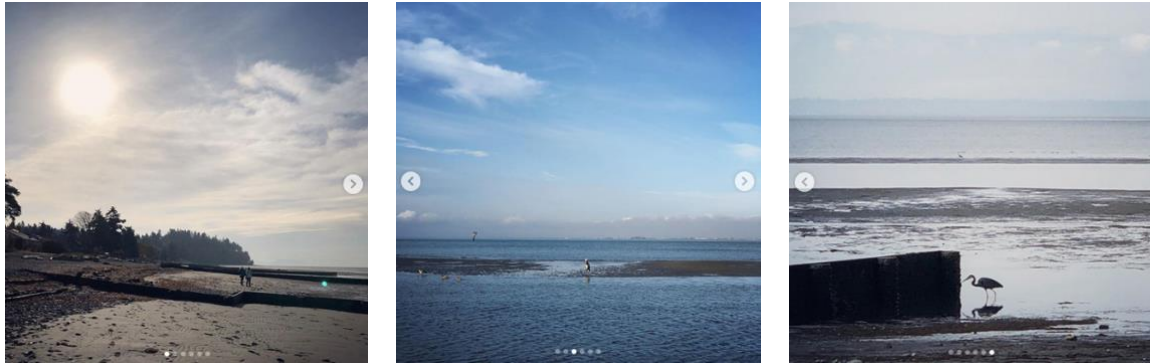
Crystel: educ483dumalaganc

What does it mean to walk with our full body and senses? It's very common that humans tend to look down as they walk; what is it about the ground, earth, that we are drawn to? Our eyes are captured? Regardless if it's cement, dirt, grass or sand, we look down.

Maybe looking down could also mean looking within? There were thousands of rocks and stones beneath and around me. I was surrounded. However, they all looked somewhat similar. Then I remembered Paulina Rautio's words, "This line of reasoning highlights the human individual as the agent, the one with skills, the one who chooses and the one who has the disposition or the proper personality traits to experience flow. Virtually no role is cast for the material surroundings in which, and with which autotelic activity takes place. What if it is the stones, the three shiny white ones and the five black sharply lined ones lying on the ground, rather than personality traits of individuals alone that bring about autotelic behaviour? Could we suggest that autotelic practices emerge in encounters characterized by aesthetic-affective openness on our part (Bennett 2010). If so, we would need to be more aware of the practices with which we cultivate and sustain such openness" (2013, p. 400).

I looked again, being open to what Stones and Rocks have in store for me. Then something was glimmering in the distance which caught my interest, as I paid attention to the different colours and sizes. I found myself picking up round and smooth Stones. The perfect shape and size of Stones warmed my hand and soul. Stones became my friends, who lit up just in time so they could play and engage with me. I realized that I just needed a companion, so thank you Stones, for being-you-tiful!

#educ483 #rocks #stones #aesthetic #agency #autotelic #friend #naturecompanion
#openness



Crystel: educ483dumalaganc

Wednesday. My flex day!! It was the middle of work week, and I just needed a break. I decided to go to the ocean to relax and rest. It was a lovely morning; Sun finally peeked in slowly after Rain visited us for two days. It was low tide in the morning, hence I was able to see emerging sand banks in front of me. I went for a walk by the shores, hoping to see something. I waited and waited. I saw Seagulls roaming above me and Ducks swimming in Water. I paused for a second just waiting and watching the more-than-human entities. Ducks and Seagulls were floating in Water, so far from my reach. I was hesitant to step into Water without my boots. I sighed and so I kept walking. Then I stopped and saw one bird so tall and mighty. I paused to see what she was. I was still too far. I walked a little bit closer, and she was staring right back at me, as if she was studying me. She stood out to me, maybe because she was standing so still? Maybe the blue colours of her wings? Maybe because I don't know her, and I'm curious as to who she is.

Although we were meters apart, I'm still thankful for this encounter. There was a beautiful exchange of gazes and pauses, wondering what we can learn and know with and from each other. I went back to my blanket and wrote down some reflection notes. As I was writing, she flew in the water right in front of me!! I got so excited. Was she following me? What was she up to? She plucked something out of Water with her beak. Thanks to Water for the wonderful gift!

*I hope to see her again. Her uniqueness, stillness and sagacity captured my attention. I have yet to learn from her and along with the other more-than-human entities!
"Considering the active attention of the more-than-human means that they (plants and*



animals) are paying attention to what is going on in their world, including what we, humans, might be doing” (Blaise, Hamm, & Iorio, 2017, p. 35).

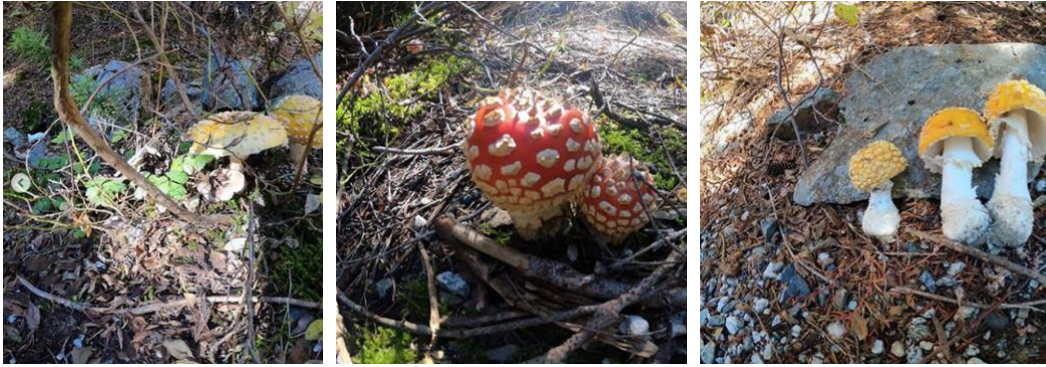
#educ483 #ocean #water #birds #blueheron #rest



Kathleen: educ483mageek

This week I have been enthralled by the beautiful changing colours I have been noticing in nature. Oranges, yellows, reds, greens, browns all blooming forth in the beautiful October air.... With this attunement in mind I have come into my local park to spend more time being with and learning alongside trees. Coming into the park I am instantly attracted to nearby tree, with mounds of leaves piled at its roots. Tree is adorned with fall colours, each mixing and morphing into the next, creating a gorgeous fall glow. Leaves call to my feet and I instantly remove my shoes so that I can feel leaves with all of my senses. My toes dip into the golden pile and instantly two leaves attach themselves to me. They are not only connected to me but to each other, creating a chain. This reminds me of the many times I spent laying in daisy fields, just sitting and making chains of beautiful white flowers to adorn my head with. I feel invited to take up this activity once again and start to make leaf chains. I instantly come to know Leaf better by working with it. Its body is malleable but delicate, with a strong and sturdy spine. I try to make a leaf crown but my attempts do not work. Leaves are telling me that they prefer to hang and sway in the wind rather than staying fixed to my head, and I listen to them.

#educ483 #leafchains



Michaela: educ483woodyardm

Yesterday, after realizing it may be one of the final days of warmth and sunlight in the next coming weeks, I went to visit Forest. Curious, I wandered the trail around Yew

Lake. Immediately I was drawn towards the many Fungi and Mushrooms that have sprouted from the cool, damp ground. Fascinated by their colours, shapes and sizes, I felt Mushroom invite me over to her. Looking at Mushroom, noticing Mushroom, and watching Mushroom as Leaves swept across the dirt ground provoked me to consider the ways in which Mushrooms are intrinsically interconnected to the Other-ness of Forest. Trees embraced their presence, creating a home for them as they were entangled in the spaces between branches, sticks and roots. Mushroom-Fungi-Moss-Tree assemblages provoked certain subjectivities as people passing by came to an abrupt halt, questioning their presence. As I left Forest, I came across 3 mushrooms perched against a rock. I wondered...how did they get there? Did people place them there? Were they forcibly removed from the ground? I felt saddened as I contemplated the political act of removing Mushrooms from their home for no apparent purpose.

📌 #educ483 #entanglements #intricacies #multiplicities #hiddenentities #perfection

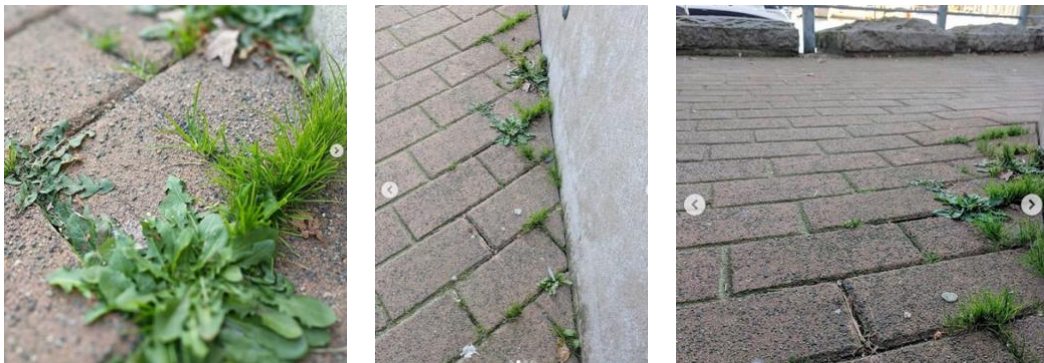


Patricia: educ483africap



I stumbled upon Nurse log today, harboring a young tree/plant. Sun was also present at this moment. He was shining his light towards the young tree/plant at the perfect time, drawing me even closer. Sun, with his ray of light, showcased a silhouette of the young plant. This moment of encounter reminded me that even though there are differences and complexities within these entities, they are very much interconnected with one another. I admire the relationship between Sun, Nurse log and the young tree/plant; nurturing and making way for the new generation within Forest. What a joy to witness such beautiful encounters.

#educ483 #nurselog #interconnection #newgeneration



Michelle: educ483buyserm

I went for a walk today around Yaletown. I took in Sun's warmth, embracing every ray of light as today would be the last day of sun for a while - at least according to the weather app. I admired Trees and Water in the concrete jungle that is downtown. I looked to my feet and was drawn to the greenery peeking through the cracks. A vibrant green contrasted against the neutral pavement. Humans try so hard to maintain and control nature, but Her power and presence is relentless. I looked in amazement, thinking about how despite the many slabs of concrete humans throw upon nature, she finds Her way through the cracks anyway. Resilient. I smiled at the green patches, thanked them for their presence, and continued my walk.

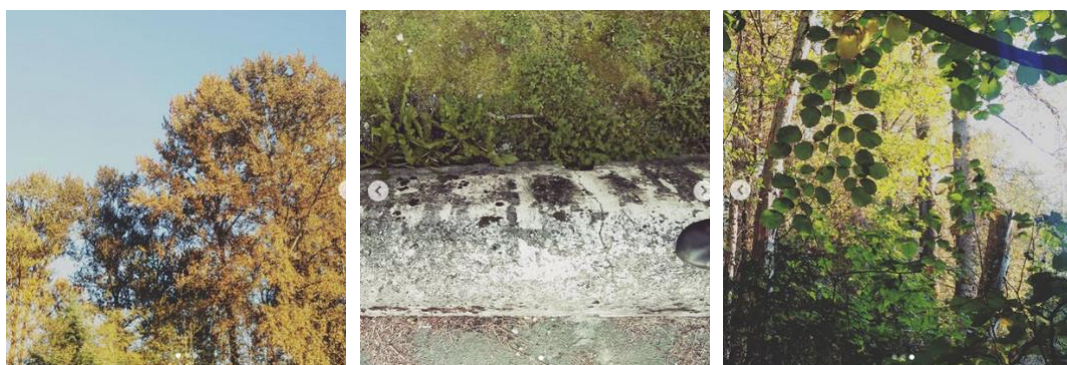
#educ483 #nature #entanglements #resilient



Kathleen educ483mageek

This week I have been moving myself around the north shore to come into relationship with trees. Through sustained engagement with trees I have come to fully appreciate the lives that live on and around trees. Today as I move through the thick forest brush I come across a large overarching tree with another laying at its feet. The dichotomy of life and death is very present here. Yet death for a tree does not seem as final as it is for humans. The fallen tree lays on the forest floor as if still.... But bent over trees large body I notice the life the tree has given light to. Mushrooms grow in small patches over its morphed and mossy bark. Not only mushrooms but small forest animals like chipmunks, squirrels, and rodents have made this tree their home. Their paths and traces of existence are marked throughout tree. As I move closer I see old pieces of furniture lying next to tree. It makes me sad to see how natural deaths for trees carry on so much life like this fallen tree at my feet. Yet when we cut down trees before their natural end they turn into lifeless and often times discarded furniture and materials that we just throw away. There is no connection between tree and product. We cannot connect with a table or chairs. We can connect and engage with tree in the forest though...

#educ483



Kelly educ483pickfordk



Park, you're nestled snugly amongst multi-million-dollar properties and hugged by highways and roads. Yet, from afar I hear you calling out to those who pass by. Cottonwood, straight like a church tower, beckons to those seeking refuge and sanctuary. Your boundary is marked clearly, your side marked by green, mine marked by grey. How do I cross over, bringing myself back down into the reality of our entangled lives? Feet step further along the path; I know you, Park. For years we have watched Salmon come to bear the next generation and to feed Bear, Coyote, Raven, and Eagle. They will be here soon, and tend to the roots of Cottonwood, giving him strength to call others in to your sanctum. Coming low, I look to the edges of the path, Hazelnut dances with Sun and guides me in how to keep the "edges open" (Haraway, 2015). In coming to my knees I make a new connection to this place. Park, I wonder what other perspectives I have overlooked as I've used my paths to commute, a grey gash contrasted against green.

#educ483 #openedges #boundednature #ForestChurch #entangledparks
#overlookedconnections #naturalsanctuary



Kelly educ483pickfordk

Imagining Nature as something that exists beyond me and my lived experience is easy to do as that message is given to us each and every day. How can I come to see you, Nature, all around me at all times? How are we touching one another in every moment? My light shines on you, not unlike the sun, and highlights the facets and textures of your trees and plants. Weed dances, waving to me from the curb, usually Wind lifts her up, but today it is my car.

Nature and Woman envisioned so separately is a fallacy, "we act as if our daily lives have nothing to do with the situation of the world" (Hanh, 1966) yet here she is, calling out to be noticed, recognised amid concrete and blaring lights. Can we feel what she feels?

#educ483 #thesunmyheart #natureculturedivide #entanglements #dancing
#shining #noticeme

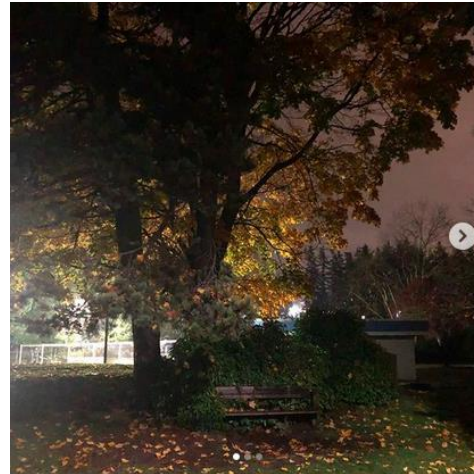
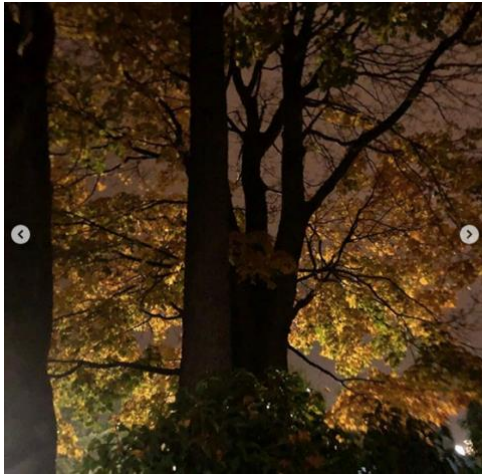


Queenie educ483yuq

One of my favourite things in the Forest on campus is still the Cedar nursing log. To me it's a symbol of selflessness and sacrifice. I am constantly amazed at how the death of one is supplying life and wellbeing to others. I remember when I first met the nursing log I was taken aback by the roots of Tree growing on top. The claw-like feature of the roots like Spider's legs made me uncomfortable. Learning more about nursing logs, however, I learned to see past its appearance & instead appreciate the relationship between each entity within this assemblage. It's fascinating to see how the presence of the receding log has made a lasting impact on the shape of the roots.

I am also in admiration for all the entities that are thriving because of the nursing log, like Huckleberry and other more-than-human entities seeking shelter in the log. It reminds me of our redundancy in nature, as more-than-human entities are thriving without human interception. Yet Nature is gracious and welcomes our presence and participation. There is so much to be learned from the selflessness of the nursing log.

#educ483 #natureteachingus #nursinglog #anthropocene



Kathleen educ483mageek

Last night I felt called by Rain to once again come out from my warm home to fully experience its magical echoing orchestra, but this time in relation with ocean and trees. As I walked with the entities and the rain all around me I slowly became attuned to the rhythms of falling rain. Each drop vibrating and working with others to create an almost deafening whisper. Yet as I am paying attention to the way rain moves and reacts with the world I am still struck by the beauty of a tree as I move past its roots. More specifically I am struck by the way the rain and lights in this place bring your attention to tree. She sits overlooking the grey swirling ocean, watching and waiting for my attention. I stand and just stare in amazement and how the light dances through her limbs and leaves, creating a beautiful master piece of shadows. The light revealing her changing colours. The mix of natural and artificial light illuminated her trunk and reveals her true form to me. She is so beautiful and so wise. The light makes me reflect on how much we focus on light for revealing what is there, often neglecting our other senses and the mysteries they can reveal to us. My last video is a response to this thought, what mysteries lay in the darkness beyond my camera lens?

#educ483 #nightwalks #amblesidebeach



Michaela educ483woodyardm

During my walk today, I stumbled upon a lonely Dandelion standing tall in amongst wet blades of grass. Puzzled by her presence after a rainy night, I approach her. Crouching down, I greet her with a soft and gentle stroke of her damp seedlings. Despite the relentless Rain storm from the previous night, she remained standing tall, towering over fallen leaves. Even with the beauty of a flower, she is often referred to as a weed. I am challenged by this label: a weed. Why do we feel the need to identify and describe more than human entities based on their apparent “usefulness” to the human race? Who gave US the right to decide what is bad or good? Right or wrong? Worthy of our attention or automatically disregarded as incompetent? I am reminded of children’s excitement as they run up to Dandelion, eager to spread her love as they blow her seedlings across Grass. Then, I am saddened by our (adults) reactions to stop children because of her assumed label. As I step back, not only do I find myself admiring Dandelions beauty, but I am also admiring her sheer strength for protesting the destructive behaviour of humans as we attempt to “weed-out” our gardens.

#educ483 #entanglements #awespiring #flowersnotweeds



Michaela educ483woodyardm

Walking through Lynn Canyon, I am challenged by the man-made structures that have produced these wooden pathways that occupy Forest. Over the last few years, I have noticed an increasing amount of wooden human “trails” being built. Every time I see one of these “trails” being installed, I cringe thinking of the beautiful forest floor that is being covered up and hidden. By doing so, we are essentially stating that our (human) convenience and needs are more important than Forest himself. My mind fills with questions as I attempt to dwell in spaces of hesitations and wonder...why do we feel the need to build these human “trails”? For our convenience and accessibility? But for who’s convenience/accessibility? We are tearing apart animals’ homes just so we don’t get our shoes muddy...this just emphasizes how selfish and human-centric our society has become. It makes me question, why are we visiting Forest if not to be with him? But are we truly with Forest if we continue to alter him for our convenience? I further wonder, where is this wood to build these “trails” even coming from? I realize that to make these pathways “for” Forest, we are ultimately contributing to the deforesting epidemic in BC, essentially cutting trees down in one Forest, just to bring wood into another Forest. How ironic. My mind continues to wonder and continues to question the ways in which we have to come to live with more-than-human entities. I leave Forest today, missing the way he used to be when I was a young child.

#educ483 #entanglements

Discussion

As the instructor of this course my intention with this assignment had been to bring together theory and practice; to have students experience what it might be like to consciously attune themselves to what Nature had to offer. To dissolve the nature/human divide and have them see the interconnectedness of all entities on this Earth. It was important that students felt a personal and visceral connection with Nature before they ventured out to work with children if they ever hoped to support children in building relationships with Nature.

At the end of the seven weeks, students were asked to submit a reflection on what stood out for them in this experience. What had they learned about themselves? What had they learned *from* and *with* Nature? What were they going to take from this experience to their work with children and families? The majority of the reflections spoke about finding the experience awkward at first and many spoke about having to force themselves to set aside time to ‘do’ the assignment, but after the first week or two, they found themselves craving time in and with Nature. They discovered they were able to listen more closely; to hear what Nature wanted them to hear; to be more fully present to what was right in front of them. Many spoke about a new or renewed sense of gratitude for more-than-human entities and what they offered in terms of lessons of how to be in the world and how to work together as a cohesive unit. For the majority of students, this experience of intentionally setting aside the time to be with Nature and to attune themselves to her was profound and it altered how they now view their place in this world.

The intent with this article was to allow the voices of my students to shine through so the focus was on their words and their thinking. With this in mind then, I’d like to end with a reflection written by Kelly Pickford on her time with this *Nature Teaching Us* assignment.

I am a Part of You, and You a Part of Me

During this assignment, being obligated to take the time to be with the natural world rather than just moving through it felt like personal validation. As somebody who doesn’t drive, I find myself outside for significant portions of my commute. During these walks, I have always noticed aspects of non-human existence. Some might call this being ‘distracted’ or daydreaming but I prefer to think of it as being connected to wherever my body is in that moment. I felt excitement deep in my core that finally I had a platform to share my ponderings about some of the things I see. I specifically chose to take a lens



looking for moments where non-human existence chafed against human. As I journeyed through the second half of this semester my mind kept returning to Thich Nhat Hanh's evocative writing from *The Sun My Heart* (1966) and this way of thinking of the world as all made up of the same stuff.

Life is one. We do not need to slice it into pieces and call this or that piece a 'self.' What we call a self is made only of non-self elements. When we look at a flower, for example, we may think that it is different from 'non-flower' things. But when we look more deeply, we see that everything in the cosmos is in that flower. Without all of the non-flower elements – sunshine, clouds, earth, minerals, heat, rivers, and consciousness – a flower cannot be. That is why the Buddha teaches that the self does not exist. We have to discard all distinctions between self and non-self. How can anyone work to protect the environment without this insight?(para. 18)

How, then, if we are all made up of each other can I write about and document my time spent with the Natural world? I learned that this is a challenging experience. It is hard to find ways to speak for trees, birds, light, land, and fish. To try and know something at the same time as understanding it as part of you, and you a part of it – intertwined at the very essence of each of us – is almost paralyzing. For my whole life, I have understood myself as separate from everything outside of my house. Even when working as a professional environmentalist, camping, or meditating beside the ocean I never came to focus on this intrinsic connection. Wrapping my mind around being not only on the same level as that world but also being atomically part of it literally changed the way I view every material, entity, or being that I encounter.

*This world-view stands in contrast to much of modern-society. As we learned from Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) in her book, **Braiding Sweetgrass**, Indigenous ontologies tell of interconnectedness that goes beyond need and desire. In the story of Skywoman, the seeds become the teachers to the inhabitants of Turtle Island, something scientific research dismisses as impossible (Kimmerer, 2013). Indigenous world-views position each plant, animal, river, and rock as having a purpose related to the other and always in a non-hierarchical fashion. Working alongside Hanh (1966) and Kimmerer's (2013) thoughts will bring a depth to my practice that has no choice but to run like a fine thread through each and every encounter. How I speak about materials in the classroom, the plants and animals we see outside, the cars we drive, and the machinery we see constructing buildings for our use is forever changed. The simple act of speaking about things routinely positions the*

human as above – I must find ways to resist reproducing that truth. I can't say exactly what this will look like, I just know that I will be bringing attention to the things we encounter in the world as full of life and forever connected to everything around it – including ourselves.

One way I do see this evolving is in what types of materials I bring into the classroom. Like many others, I find the affordances of natural materials to far surpass those of many pre-fabricated toys. But, how have I thought about the materials I bring in from outside? What of all who call this place home? The fungi, bacteria, bugs, and seeds don't have that voice to let me know – 'no I was happy where I was', 'I won't do well in your dry, warm environment', 'I had plans to feed the forest'. By seeing all around me as a part of me I feel more drawn to wondering what those beings do in the world apart from me. I am affected by the movement of the log in the same way I am affected by a person who tells me to get out of my seat because they want it. I am affected by somebody hacking at branches the same way I am affected by a child hitting another. I am affected by ladybugs in jars the same way I am affected by being shut into a room all alone. I am affected by all of these circumstances because they exist in the world as a part of me, and I as a part of them.

Does this mean I will police children's behaviour all the time? I don't think so. But I do think that I will act with a specific intention that fosters curiosity about the meeting places between. Relationship-building is the first step. Getting children outdoors more frequently in ways that challenge and encourage them to touch, taste, smell, look, and listen to the world moving around them. I picture myself asking questions that guide children in wondering about the feelings, lives, and stories of all those they meet. By nurturing children's natural anthropomorphic story-telling I think an understanding of interconnectedness is inevitable. Feeling is a very human-centric notion, yet it is what gives us passion, hope, despair, and courage. If children continually experience the natural world as full of feeling and agency, then I think it is more challenging for them to be positioned above and in control of non-human life.

Resisting notions of education as a site for disseminating knowledge from adult to child, I venture to take up a position that acknowledges how we are all implicated in the movement of the world and are as affected by those movements as much as we affect them ourselves. This assignment honestly shifted my perspective in a way I couldn't have foreseen. As an environmentalist from an early age I have taken up many opportunities to better the world or conserve resources – but not once was I inclined to think of myself as part of that world, relationally, physically, and metaphysically. I feel it was because I was inspired by teachers and leaders who hadn't yet come to experience this truth of inter-relationality. I only hope that I can be successful in creating contexts for children to experience the world in this way. I'm not sure if I will ever know for certain if I have, but I



can endeavour to listen to the world and anticipate the reverberation through the trees, salmon, air, rocks, light, and land breathing a sigh of relief as they acknowledge and welcome us as equals, “I am a part of you, and you a part of me”.

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