

# Editorial: *Ecopedagogy and Nature-based Teaching and Learning*

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## Abstract

Paul Freedman, Co-Editor of the Holistic Education Review (HER) summarizes the content of the May 2022 issue. We invite those who have long been a part of this community to contribute to the critical conversation we have begun, and to boldly, and respectfully, critique and examine our own assumptions and privileges.

*Keywords:* nature, pedagogy, nature-based education

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One touch of Nature makes the whole world kin – William Shakespeare (Shakespeare, 1998)

*Mitákuye Oyás'íŋ* “We are all related” – Lakota phrase (Mitakuye Oyasín, ND)

Since time immemorial the biotic community, from protozoa to Australopithecus have struggled and thrived, have breathed and swum, have hidden, hunted and communed, inseparable from their organic and undulating environment. And countless generations of *Homo Sapien Sapiens* have conceived of their own existence inextricable from the ecological context that sustains life and community. Humans have derived life's deepest meaning: art, spirit and dreams from the tangle of living organisms amongst which they eked out their very existence. In the deepest places of our genetic past and from our very soul we are *connected* to our selves, *connected* to one another and *connected* to the cosmos. It is firmly within this world view of wholeness and connection that the indigenous roots of holistic education emerged. There is no “I” in breathing, WE breathe – me *and* the forest *and* the sea, the banana slugs and the nudibranchs. It is the same with singing, laughing, crying. It is always WE who are the subject of each and every action.

In the comparatively brief 500 year span since the inception of the “scientific revolution,” we have chosen a different course. Humans have created an ontology of reductionism, atomism and objectification. And despite the amazing technological achievements of our modern era, we have marched steadily and inexorably towards the place we now find ourselves: on the brink of the Anthropocene extinction.

We find ourselves staring social and ecological crises squarely in the face. The WE has been reduced to *me-and-other*. This worldview builds on an epistemology of separation, where knowledge depends upon distance and objectivity between the knower and the known. It is no coincidence that education has followed suit in this compulsion to separate. Students are sequestered from the “real world,” held at distance from each other through grades, ranks and test scores, from the teacher through the mechanisms of authority and power, and from the object of their study as objective researchers. Disciplines, subjects, and courses are separated from one another. And most tragically, the teaching and learning encounter has been utterly extracted from nature – held separate from the one model of wholeness and the tangled web of life that could offer the visceral and undeniable counter narrative, a vision of hope and wholeness.

We “educate” students under fluorescent lights and soundproof ceiling panels, as we all shuffle over linoleum floors and industrial carpeting. The sacred and intimate act of teaching and learning, this profound living encounter, has become just another abstraction. The landscape is sterile and barren and, as a result, lacks much of the opportunity for emergence, adventure and nuance. Transformative learning is supplanted by standardization and assessment. We scramble to “cover” curriculum at the expense of exploring depth, luxuriating together in all the richness and complexity it affords.

We formally and intentionally educate our youth and adults out of any meaningful relationship with nature. The result is

a society that fundamentally lacks any inherent sense of responsibility or mutuality with respect to the natural and wild places on which we depend. Our Mother Earth and our four-legged and hundred-legged and legless brothers and sisters are merely more objects to manipulate. And we creep slowly and steadily towards our own destruction. Despite increased discourse about climate change in recent years, the absolute miracle of Gaia and the living earth and all the lessons it has to share, lessons about patience, about relationships, about sustainability and so much more go largely unnoticed. Tragically, we have educated our way out of enchantment.

Commenting on the importance of nature-based approaches within indigenous traditions, Greg Cajete wrote,

Indigenous forms of education and teaching are primarily built around natural insights, insights about how relationships and things get transferred in natural places, natural worlds... There are a lot of relationships between Indigenous ways of thinking and knowing and Western theories about systems ecology or complex adaptive systems -- the notion of place and how different elements of the place synergize with each other to create a full expression of a natural community. And those same notions of those ideas -- because Native people were so involved with their places in which they lived -- move into how we approach the notion of education, the notion of knowledge transfer. (Cajete, 2016, p. 2)

### Contents in this issue

Dear readers,

The HER editorial team is delighted to offer this issue as a counter-hegemonic vision for holistic education. Included in these pages is the scholarship of true sages and leaders in the field. Here you will find the words of visionaries who for decades have been documenting the critical need to reconnect education to its natural and living environment. We are privileged to have assembled contributions that explicitly name and feel into an indigenous worldview. Here you will find an article by Four Arrows (Wahinkpe Topa) aka Dr. Don Trent Jacobs, *The worldview required for holistic thinking* and a contribution from Kurt Donald, *Reflections for alternate education for Inuit adult education*.

We are also proud to include the transcript of a conversation I enjoyed with Richard Louv. *Dialogue* documents a wonderful opportunity to hear reflections from the coiner of the term "Nature Deficit Disorder" and his decades advocating that young people spend time in nature, and what is at risk if we fail to do so.

David Orr, *Education and the great transition?*, David Sobel, *What do we mean by ready: a review of research on nature-based early childhood programs* and Greg Smith, *Education and metamorphosis* represent some of the great scholars and thinkers in this field. These folks have written some of the most significant research on learning and nature over the past 30 years. We are proud to be able to offer a glimpse into these writers' continuing scholarship, reflection and insight.

I am particularly excited to share with our readers an offering from David Jardine, *From the town by a spring*. Twenty years ago, I came upon Jardine's *Under the Tough Old Stars: Ecopedagogical Essays* and ever since I have considered his poetic prose to be some of the most beautiful, lyrical and compelling writing I have encountered. This current piece is no exception. Rich with images and metaphor, just allow these words to seep into your soul.

I am thrilled to include the emerging scholarship of friends, old and new. West Wilmore, *Ecospirituality: a teacher's path towards wholeness and wellness* features the striking work of this scholar who has been steeped in holistic K-12 education for many years. My new friend, Dylan Adams, *Exploring cynefin -being in place* explores an ancient Welsh word that has no direct English translation but implies and evokes precisely a deep sense of place that would be transformative for educators to employ. And David Greenwood, *Rachel Carson's material Immortality*, shares a moving personal journey to the coastal Maine cottage of one of history's great naturalists and preservationists.

Also in this issue, we are so proud to feature some innovative practitioners who utilize a lens of ecological pedagogy as they ply their craft with an explicit objective of connection with and reverence for the natural world. Here we feature Beth Sutton, *The wilderness within: the Enki approach to education*. Sutton has created a widely adopted holistic approach to elementary education that utilizes a multicultural orientation and reminds educators and learners to embrace nature's rhythms with reverence and awe. Sarah Anderson, *Plants as co-teachers and co-healers: joining place-based education and wellness at the Cottonwood School of Civics and Science* shares her urban K-12 school's inspiring approach to place-based education. And I am so excited to feature both a chapter from Kelli Nigh's newly published book, *Learning In Nature*, as well as an even newer article, *Learning from life and Earth*. Nigh teaches at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and as co-editor of the International Handbook of Holistic Education has been a hugely important voice in the field. Here Nigh helps us make the explicit

connection between learning in nature and the foundational principles of holistic education.

Also included in this issue are a number of items not strictly related to the theme of nature-based education and ecopedagogy. These articles include Neill Korobov's *Poetry as a Way of Creating a Soulful Pedagogy*, as well as Bob London's *Pedagogy consistent with a holistic approach: Ten key principles*. London has been such a consistent and important voice in the holistic education movement for many years. We offer you Sheryl Morris' *Holistic education and systems change: Transcript from a live panel discussion*, with a link to the session recording. We also offer a link to a podcast discussion emerging from Southern Oregon University's Center for Holistic Education. And a book review from Sunnya Khan of Jack Miller's beautiful book, *Love and Compassion: Exploring their Role in Education*. And finally, from Studio 180, we have a breathtaking video documentary of a project involving growing rice at the Green School in Bali, with an introduction to the video written by Robin Martin.

#### Teaser – future issues

Our Fall '22 issue will include conference proceedings from a conference hosted by HER Advisor Ashwani Kumar. The conference is entitled *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts*.

We are also very excited to include a very special updated article from HER Advisor Ron Miller, originally published in his book *What Are Schools For*. We are also delighted to offer a beautiful essay by acclaimed author, Richard Brady, Founder of the Mindfulness in Education Network. And of course, there are a number of other submissions already in the pipeline!

And our Spring '23 issue will be another themed issue guest-edited by HER Advisor, Four Arrows (Wahinkpe Topa) aka Dr. Don Trent Jacobs. This issue will be themed: *Indigenous Scholars Speak About How Our Original Kinship Worldview Can Re-balance Life Systems*.

#### Conclusion

As you can see, we have been more than busy at the HER. Please do consider sharing this journal widely within your professional networks. And consider submitting a manuscript. We are so grateful that you are part of the expanding HER family.

May this issue provide a spark of inspiration and a warm glow of hope as we all work to reanimate and re-enchant education through an approach that reintegrates this work into an ecological context.

Sincerely,

Paul Freedman  
Co-Editor

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#### Acknowledgement

Paul Freedman has been a K-6 teacher for 28 years. He is the Founding Head of Salmonberry School on Orcas Island, WA. He has served as President of the Graduate Institute for Transformative Learning and is currently a member of the faculty of TIES (The Institute for Educational Studies) and the Transformative Learning Foundation. He has served as a Contributing Editor for Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice. His TEDx Talk is on "Deep Education." He is the Co-Director of the Holistic Education Initiative and co-editor of this journal: the *Holistic Education Review*.