

On Being Part of an Ecological Community: Relational Ways of Being and Classroom Dialogue as Foundations for Ecological Sensitivity and Response-ability

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Abstract

This paper explores how ecological ways of being—through careful listening, relationality, and dialogue—can have a foundation in everyday classroom practices. Beginning with the question of what it means to be an educated person in the way that our planet and local ecologies currently need, and countering assumptions about more instrumental and economic purposes for becoming educated, I propose that ecological practices begin in the very ways we relate to each other in contexts of learning and the culture we create in our classrooms. This work is spurred in part by an experience of speaking out for the preservation of a neighborhood wildlife corridor, only to be met with instrumental views of the land. Exploring ontological questions around what kind of human being we want to educate for in a time of ecological necessity, I make a claim for dialogical and relational practices as foundations for developing ecological sensitivity and response-ability. Since the context of any class is itself an ecology, it offers an invaluable opportunity to develop qualities of ecological responsiveness, sensitivity, empathy, and caring, while being part of an interconnected web. Thus, I look toward how classroom culture might take on perspectives closer to the kinship views needed to make possible the flourishing of human and more-than-human community members alike, and how dialogical practices also prepare students for meaningful engagement with local ecologies outside the classroom. While my context is that of undergraduate education, the practices are relevant to any context of learning.

Keywords: *dialogue, ecological community, classroom community building, relational ontology and practices, kinship worldview, environmental ethics*

What does it mean to be an ecologically attentive and sensitive person? In this paper, I pose this within the more general question of what it means to be an *educated* person, where my focus is less on knowing facts around biological and ecological

processes and the threats they experience—though of course these, too, are important. Here, I turn toward engendering a sense of receptive reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2013), toward attentiveness and cultivation of our own *experience* among the

dire ‘facts’ (Campbell, 2023) and toward a subtle and *thoughtful place awareness* infused with empathy for the various life-forms who dwell there, curiosity about their experience, and care for their well-being. Such a sense of life-connectedness with all who share our ecologies (Macy & Brown, 2014) asks us to go beyond a skills and knowledge approach (Miller, 2022) we often see in higher education, and toward the question of what kind of human being we want to cultivate and educate for (Donald, 2019). Specifically, I’m curious about approaches, contexts, and *ways of being* educators might engage with to help engender ecological sensitivity.

This inquiry is in part a kind of self-study in that it explores “a stance toward understanding the world” (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2009, p. v), looking at how to invitingly engender a meaningful sense of ecological awareness with learners who did not necessarily sign up for such topics. While my context is undergraduate General Education courses, often taken as electives by students from across the disciplines, the principles can apply over any educational setting. This work stems from the beliefs that ecological learning is determined by the *culture* within educational contexts (Blenkinsop & Kuchta, 2024; Fettes & Blenkinsop, 2023) and that *all* education has ecological consequences (Orr, 2004). It also works from the position that ethical learning needs to be experiential—rather than merely ‘about’ ethical ways of being and doing—so as to be meaningfully impactful (Bai, 2006) and that it needs to occur through respectful, yet deeply intentional, *invitation* into ontological perspectives rather than through instruction about what to *know* or to *do* (Vasko, 2022; Vasko et al., 2023). *Becoming* an ecologically attentive and learned person is exactly that—our deepening understanding focuses on ways of *being*, as an integral compliment to

content knowledge¹. To begin, I consider ethically relational, intrinsic and decolonial ways of being and learning in a higher education context, after which I delve into the value of dialogical practice as a learning process that engenders attentive listening. Then, I explore how such practices of caring and respectful relations, once practiced in the classroom, might expand to include the more-than-human. My work here stems in large part from a personal experience with my local municipal government which showed a disappointing lack of respect for community members—human and more-than-human alike. Thus, I look toward engendering the kinds of human beings who might, in positions of decision-making around community planning, consider with care the voices of all involved, including those of the more-than-human ecological community. I would like to begin with an experience that spurred my thinking on what it means to be an ecologically learned person, and how, in our current tipping point of ecological precarity, this needs to be inseparable from the question of what it means to be educated.

Just north of my home, behind the houses on the opposite side of the street, is a large fifty-acre green space of meadows, tree clusters, and areas of wetland. On a morning in June, when the sun streams into my windows from the northeast early as the earth tips toward solstice, the birdsong from the trees echoes into me. A group of warblers, not visible within the dense foliage, clearly have much to say; their chorus is punctuated by comments from the throatier crows who toss their voices into the more delicate chirps. Each morning when I rise, I am greeted by the stand of enormous cottonwoods in the middle distance. They guard over the smaller cedars that hug the line of Coho

¹ Such an approach that sees *knowing* as married with *being* (rather than focussing primarily on accumulating knowledge) is also compatible with Indigenous scholars’ teachings on the importance of emphasising verbs and active processes over nouns which reduce the world – and our learning – to ‘things’ (Kimmerer, 2017; Little Bear, 2000).

Creek or are dispersed here and there; the cedars, in turn, watch over the younger alders that always find their way up through everything. Behind all this, the twin-peaked contours of T'lagunna mountain, known by settlers as Golden Ears, provides the dark green horizon that shelters us all. Because it is June, the obligatory occasional cottonwood tuft floats through the air; as the evanescent light comes into full slant, the warbler chorus relaxes a little as the day warms up.

The living presence of this place comes into me whenever I give it my attention. The birdsong, the rich layers and shapes of various greens are a welcoming embrace, breathing life and magic into my morning. I try to put out of my mind the discomfiting knowledge that our city council has decided, despite protests from residents to protect this wildlife corridor, to rezone this place into industrial land—an 'Employment Park'. Their justification is appealingly simple: with the large number of residential properties in this developing region outside Vancouver's urban centre, there is a shortage of 'employment land'. An urban development consultant some years ago deemed this area—with its open, flat land and its proximity to major routes—to be 'underutilized.' It should not surprise me that instrumentalist tendencies, so often part of the colonial framework of our relationship with land, would see the land primarily in utilitarian and anthropocentric terms (Armon, 2023).

Because we are also close to the thick forests further north and connected to the corridors and tributaries of the Alouette River, natural passages for deer, bears, and coyotes bring these animals close. Yet the boundaries between human and more-than-human life are often precarious, and too often in favor of the former. At a council meeting, I tried to make a case for the wildlife. Clearly this land is already 'employed,' I said, showing slides of images offered to me by willing neighbours: a bear in a large meadow of buttercup, herons

roosting, multiple deer browsing close to back fences, eagles perching high, hawks, a bobcat; even an owl with its smaller bird prey.

Saying the land is already 'employed' came closer to the utilitarian, economy-driven language that seemed necessary. I did not think they would be open to language I had used at a similar presentation five years before, when I had said the land was a living entity. This time, I spoke instead of our community, and how the wildlife was a part of that. While one council member expressed favor for maintaining the wildlife corridor, all voted for the industrial plan to go to the next reading. The mayor's response was that they need to 'balance' social, environmental, and economic commitments. Otherwise, he said, they would never build anything.

For some years now, I have been asking my students what it means to them to be an educated person. Their responses usually give me hope: qualities they often voice include being open-minded, being caring, being humble, listening well to others, and considering diverse perspectives. They also speak of the value of having a broad range of interests, and of being curious about lives and worldviews very different from our own. In response, however, to the more general question of 'why get an education?' replies tend to be more instrumentally oriented around financial gain, mirroring the market-focused and neo-liberal societal culture.

I have yet to hear that an educated person is one who is sensitive to the land and to natural ecologies, who listens well not only to people but to forests, winds, rivers, and the myriad beings who share our ecosystems and biotic communities. In other words, that those who we care about and take open-minded interest in, extend beyond the human. The marks and harms of colonialism and the market economy are not only deeply ingrained,

they are part of the whole foundation upon which we have built what it means to be a learned person and why we educate our children (Irwin, 2017). One might be inclined to respond that these qualities of generous listening to others of all kinds, including to the land, are perhaps best developed outside of institutional education altogether. Indeed I cannot help but smile at Rasmussen's (2011) sharing that the key motive for his graduate studies was to inquire into how Inuit elders became so wise without institutional education. My continued interest in what it means to be an educated person stems from a struggle to reconcile how our education systems might create leaders who make decisions in the manner I encountered with our municipal government. If many see education in part as a preparation for leadership and making societal impact, and if such leaders are to exemplify and speak for what we value, I cannot help but find this a frightening disconnect. Hence, my purpose here is to assert that becoming educated needs to include learning from the myriad voices of the land and ecological community.

What Kind of Human Being Do We Want to Educate For?

Findings in recent decades show that reasons for getting a post-secondary education have shifted from away from deepening one's sense of what it means to be human and to live well holistically toward motivations focused primarily on income and social standing (Chan, 2016). Levine (2007) observes a shift "away from the values of community, spirituality and integrity, and toward competition, materialism and disconnection" (as cited in Gereluk et al., 2016, p. 69).² Students repeatedly share with me their sense of having been conditioned to believe that success is seen as material gain, and that the purpose of higher

education is largely to achieve this kind of success. One even wrote of reports and online discussions examining the most 'profitable' majors and the most 'regrettable' ones, economically speaking.³ An outlook which assumes that life contentment—and, presumably, ideas around living well—are directly synonymous with income correlates with a primarily instrumental view of one's own education, efforts and work. This is very different from valuing the process and experience of one's learning intrinsically. I have even seen upper-level students share in their reflective writing how they have come to see *themselves*—their own work, achievements and personal attributes—in instrumental terms. Others, even earlier in their university careers, speak of academic validation and how their sense of self-worth is contingent on grades. When delving deeper into their experience through an ethical lens, they often find that this realization points toward—and partially explains—the source of disconnection they feel from themselves, from others, and from the world around them (Bai et al., 2013).

If we wish to bring a greater focus toward *being*, in the sense of *becoming* (ecologically) educated human beings—as opposed to accumulating knowledge as a commodity and means to an (economic) end—a relevant question is around what *kind* of human being we are seeking for education to create. Indigenous scholar Dwayne Donald (2019) observes how this larger, and much more existential, question occurs within "age-old contentions... regarding the purpose and meaning of life and living" (p. 103). Being deliberately thoughtful about the kind of human being our curricula seek to create—especially, I might add, at a time in students' lives when they are asking big, personal questions along these lines—reshapes our

² A quick online search in response to 'why go to university or college?' offers responses focusing largely on income and employment benefits, as do many university websites.

³ See, for example, a CNBC report that claims, "Graduates entering the workforce with good career prospects and high starting salaries are the most satisfied with their major" (Dickler, 2022).

focus beyond the acquiring of knowledge or skills we conventionally associate with becoming educated. While these remain ever important, I find the focus on *being* particularly potent in a time when we desperately need to understand how to live well *within* the capacity of our living ecosystems. We might take a cue from Leanne Simpson (2023), who proposes the task to “fit within the network of life”—making everyday choices that better enable all members of the ecological community to flourish. I am particularly interested in how one might become someone who considers and listens well not only to their fellow human beings and takes seriously their perspectives and needs, but who accords this same respect, consideration, and reciprocal care to the larger biotic community—most notably, the ecological relations close to home.

A main struggle many educators such as myself encounter is that the mainstream current of what it means to live well and have the kind of life—and therefore education—envisioned for young people goes in quite a different direction from such an ecologically sensitive, aware, respectful, and caring person. Donald (2019) shows how in an economically driven culture, our curricula tend to assume that thriving well within—and promoting—the market concept is seen as a most ‘common-sense’ and rational approach. The ideology of *homo economicus* has become so strong, in fact, as to be the ‘path’ that is considered inherently normal within a colonial society built around the key ideologies of individualism and progress as undisputed means toward well-being, alongside practices guided by anthropocentrism (Donald, 2019). This is indeed the mindset I encountered in my local city hall, where it felt that my plea to include wildlife in planning decisions by seeing them as part of our community felt hopelessly out in left field. I was looking toward a paradigm shift that would need to first disrupt the ideology that implicitly assumes the prioritizing of

human progress and sees the flourishing of other affected beings as far less relevant.

The danger of assuming such normality and common sense lies in the tendency to dismiss other ways of ‘being’ as desirable, or even plausible, in the minds of young people. It is precisely because market concepts are framed as normal and commonsense (Donald, 2019), that we fail to see them as the cultural ideologies that they are.⁴ I find it heartening to see this further debunked for the myth it is from an economic anthropologist’s perspective—Jason Hickel (2020) puts it this way: “There is nothing natural or innate about the productivist behaviour we associate with *homo economicus*. That creature is the product of five centuries of cultural re-programming” (p. 72).

The deeply ingrained focus on vocational and economic reasons for education (Irwin, 2017) further contributes to the long-term consequences of people choosing where to live based on work and economic opportunities, treating land and place opportunistically (Kimmerer, 2013) and disembodiment—also dis-embedding—ourselves from a sense of ‘place’ and all kinds of relations and kin. Donald (2019) and Simpson (2023) look instead toward human beings who live humbly within their ecosystems and the parameters these ecosystems afford us. I see this sense of humility as a relevant extension—and ideally, an integral part—of the humility my students suggest is part of being a learned person. Donald (2019) in fact claims that according to Cree and Blackfoot traditions, “real people,” in the sense of “true human beings,” (p. 121) cannot be otherwise.

⁴ A student of mine recently asked, in response to a chapter titled ‘Are students becoming consumerist learners?’ (Gereluk et al., 2016), how educating for a civic identity instead of a consumerist one might even be possible, given the immersion of youth identities within market culture. The ‘learning’ young people receive from non-school sources such as social media are themselves inundated with messages of how to ‘be’.

The post-growth (Irwin, 2017) and de-growth (Hickel, 2020; Plomteaux, 2024) movements appear to take a similar view, seeking to redefine the relationship between economics and good living. What interests me most here is the inevitable encounter with the ontological questions it raises—such as when Hickel suggests that current economic questions must go beyond economic realms: “It is a struggle over our very theory of being. It requires decolonizing not only lands and forests and peoples, but decolonising our minds” (2020, p. 224). The query of ‘how to be’ has dimensions that are spiritual and existential in how we relate to other beings and to the world, which returns again to the very essence of who we *are*. Wade Davis illustrates its importance this way:

A child raised to believe that a mountain is the abode of a protective deity will be a profoundly different human being from one brought up to believe that a mountain is an inert mass of rock ready to be mined. A Kwakwaka’wakw boy raised to revere the coastal forests as the realm of spirit beings will be a different person from a white Canadian child taught to believe that such forests are destined to be logged. (Davis, n.d.)

Responsibility to the land and to our fellow species, fundamental and committed awareness of being part of a larger web of life rather than at the top of a hierarchy—these are deeply relational ontologies that involve intrinsic rather than instrumental valuing of the world (Bai, 2001). Taking it even further, the animistic sense that other beings have lives, *experiences* and therefore perspectives that are worth learning about—and *from* (Tippett & Kimmerer, 2016)—makes their stories worthy of our careful attention. I cannot but sense an urgency to educate for the kind of human being who humbly accepts their part, and their *response-ability*—their willingness to perceive and respond in life-affirming ways—within the larger web of life. It also becomes essential to question curricular goals that train young people to “believe

that their emerging identities as human beings are directly connected to neo-liberal market logics and consumerism as necessary lifestyle choices” (Donald, 2019, p. 113). Donald goes so far as to say that such a notion of common sense is “a form of ontological violence that has direct impacts on the well-being of youth today” (p. 113). And further: “How responsible is it to insist on the ongoing production of *homo economicus* when there is every reason to believe that within a generation, people will no longer be able to ‘be’ that way?” (p. 115).⁵ I would like to now consider how relational ways of being—practiced right in the classroom—may bring us closer to the ecological sensitivity needed to create flourishing ecological communities, and what it might look like in everyday practices of learning and teaching.

Values of Sensitive and Relational Listening

A significant frustration I encountered with our municipal government was not only the dominant narratives of human progress and anthropocentrism Donald (2019) refers to, but also a despairing lack of being sincerely heard. In a ‘public hearing’ that occurred later, many community members voiced concern and fervent pleas to preserve the wildlife corridor, and their views on this preservation were unanimous. Yet Council soon announced that re-zoning would go ahead; no genuine regard was given to the voices of concerned community members or to how the concerns raised, though different from their own position, might be taken seriously (Ingold, 2018). It is difficult to listen open-heartedly and well when one is committed to a particular agenda and ‘hearing’ concerned community members is a perfunctory formality. It is equally difficult when we think we ‘know better’ or assume we are above those whose

⁵ Here, Giroux’s well-known statement that “All education is a struggle over what kind of future we want for young people” (CCCB, 2019) presents another facet to Donald’s and my more ontological question of what kind of human being we want to educate for, so as to create a healthy future, ecologically speaking, for future generations.

concerns—human or nonhuman—we are listening to. I appreciate Ingold’s (2018) proposal that taking others seriously means that we “face up to the challenges they present to our assumptions about the way things are” (p. 15)—a practice that requires us to open ourselves to the other and to the rich perspective their experience can offer.

In the foundational and general Education courses I teach, my sense is that most students care about the environment in a general way. They express care toward their local ecologies when invited to reflect on their relationships with them. Expressing care when prompted and even identifying as pro-environmental are not the same, however, as practicing ecological thinking and feeling in daily life and accordingly shifting one’s ways of being and doing (e.g., Crawford, 2024; Eagle et al., 2015). Coming to a place of attunement with the more-than-human in ways that are genuinely reciprocal is an additional series of journeys in their own right. If ecological ways of being are to take hold in meaningful and long-lasting ways, we need fundamental cultural change within educational contexts themselves (Blenkinsop & Kuchta, 2024; Fettes & Blenkinsop, 2023). As a teacher, I cannot but feel a deep sense of responsibility to bring about this cultural change within my courses and classrooms; I also appeal to the biophilic wholeness (Wilson, 1984) that I feel is within all of us, and aim to ignite that fire within students. Yet because many of my students take Education courses as electives and often major in disciplines such as Business or Economics (areas which may have different aims from my own), I want to be thoughtful and measured in my purpose to invite them into perspectives that value all of life intrinsically (Bai, 2001). Scholars like Kimmerer remind us that intentionally prioritising the flourishing of all beings over motivations of profit and self-interested human personal gain assumes an ontological position quite different

from that of more common conversations around ‘sustainability’ which essentially seek to allow us to keep taking from the earth (Kwantlen Polytechnic University, 2024). In my aim to create a culture and context of being deeply respectful of and curious about the experiences, perspectives, stories, and voices of others, I work with a kind of faith that creating kind, relational, openness and trust within a human community creates the possibility, with time and practice, to afford more-than-human community members the same attentive respect and empathetic listening.

Dialogical Practices in the Classroom

Indeed, how might practices of sincere and careful listening through conscious and open-hearted dialogue in the classroom be a valuable foundation for offering our fellow species a similar kind and caring attention? I would like to begin by considering the principles of dialogue with a view toward how it engenders ways of being that are deeply relevant to relating to ecological neighbours. In his work on how dialogue contributes to ecological identity, Charles Scott (2023) proposes that an essential part of becoming ecologically learned is to develop a relational sense of self. He refers to Buber’s episteme of “becoming aware of the fullness of the other” (p. 49) as a foundation of dialogical practice. To put this in different words, we have “an intentional desire to recognize, respect and honour the other” (Scott, 2021, personal communication, July 26, 2021). Scott further clarifies a clear distinction between such a practice and more common forms of academic discussion. In simple terms, the latter might focus primarily on the ideas at hand and on speaking convincingly, even persuasively. A key component of dialogue, however, is attentive and relational *listening*; rather than focusing largely on constructing argument, our aim becomes that of *mutual* meaning-making. Scott (2023) outlines three elements of dialogue: being aware of the other, confirming who they are—which involves

“affirming the irreducible wholeness of the other as a being (a wholeness that is both individualistic and relational)” (p. 55), and having the intention to include participants with an empathetic resonance and understanding. In classroom practice, these elements of awareness, confirmation and empathetic inclusion are not ‘taught’ but rather embodied, practiced and exemplified by the teacher. With Scott (2023), I find the cultivation of “a relational, ecological sense of self and ‘identification with surrounding ecologies’” (p. 49) to be an integral part of any (environmental) education. He describes how recognizing that “one is a relational being, intimately connected to others...through a web of relationships” (p. 50) brings about the understanding that “one’s actions have varying degrees of influence on this web just as one is influenced by it” (p. 50). Once this web comes to be appreciated not only as inevitable but also as life-affirming, my deep sense is that seeing—and *honouring*—our entanglement with ecological others (Haraway, 2016) becomes more possible. Through classroom dialogue, we also now have a community who might affirm and support the work of inter-species reciprocity, empathy and the kind of care that brings about healing.⁶

Bringing the focus more intentionally to classroom practice and *process* in ways that shift our ways of being in the world, what might this look like in everyday terms? Heesoon Bai offers an affecting proposal for students in their interactions: “How about seeing each other as a most unique and precious person?” (n.d.). We can create a container of safety, working with the wisdom that students have the potential to learn much from each other, have ethical responsibility to each other and feel caring within the class community. These help create a fundamental cultural shift toward a relational ontology and the sense of *responsibly*

participating in the lives of others. We are in an age when we no longer need personal contact with each other to gain information. Yet, allowing learning to become *personal*—to facilitate personal growth and transformation, in a way that then serves the greater good—can only be done, claims Bai (2006), through the caring attention we give to, and receive from, each other. This paradox of becoming unique beings precisely through our thick involvement with each other, and through becoming “actively and consciously involved in each other’s learning” (Bai, n.d.) presents a valuable counter approach to the myth of individual progress that Donald (2019) questions. We have the ongoing intention to be present for the other, to be receptive to their perspectives, life experience and contributions, and in turn to welcome the other into our own presence and to allow ourselves to be *affected* by theirs.

Dialogue practices in a classroom can take many different forms. For my own part, I am fond of activities where students sit together in small groups, rearranging the seating so they can comfortably face each other. Rather than the conversation being a free-for-all where outgoing voices tend to dominate, I ask that students go around the circle so that each voice can be heard in turn. I emphasize the importance of listening with care to the person as a whole, not only their ideas. Taking a cue from Mehrmohammadi (2004), who claims that “the ability to generate thoughtful questions is the most important characteristic of the educated person” (p. 1), my class preparation involves generating rich, open-ended questions that invite students to delve into how the matter at hand may relate to their own lives. My aim is that these conversations might expand their thinking, feeling and personhood. I invite students to bring their whole selves to these encounters, to speak genuinely from their life experience; rather than being a merely cerebral activity, this work calls upon our heart-mind, spirit, and embodied selves. Students share with me how they appreciate that

⁶ I mean this as opposed to a stance that seeks to ‘save’ other species, which may often assume a position of being above them.

their lives and personal values matter in this kind of communal context, and the contrast they experience from courses where their learning is largely solitary—or worse, where systems put them in competition with each other. A compassionate stance of inviting others into our own presence while entering humbly, sensitively and *intersubjectively* into theirs, giving them our caring attention—these are exactly what is needed in our encounters with our ecological relations and neighbours.

Classroom as Ecology

As a place of gathering, learning, and collaborating, a university classroom can be an ideal context for opportunities where young people can *practice* (dialogue, being a learned art) ways of being in relation with each other that might be different from less helpful, previously learned ways - ways we have all been subject to in an instrumentally and production-oriented society. Gunnlaugson et al. (2017) describe the intersubjective within higher education contexts as “a position that is represented spatially as *between* us” (p. vii), one that can bring about co-emergent learning as a valuable partner to the necessities of content knowledge. Honed and developed, dialogical practice creates openings to the inclusion of other beings within our circle of careful listening, awareness-seeking and befriending. I cannot help but feel that, without intentional formative practices of empathetic and careful listening to other humans whose experiences, perspectives and stories differ from our own, our ways of being are much less likely to include attentiveness to ecological relations whose lives may seem more obviously different from ours. In the intersubjectivity practiced in dialogue—whether with course peers or fellow inhabitants of an ecosystem—neither objectifies the other, nor do we impose our will to suit ourselves (Bai, 2004). Rather, it is “a sense of participation in the other’s reality, a reality that is

ultimately a mystery. A mystery is not something to be explained away or solved but only to be participated in” (p. 61).

We might think of an ecology as a field of relationships (Chaney, 2012). In this regard, the classroom—or students coming together in joined learning for the purpose of a course—is an ecology in its own right. Donald’s incisive observation that colonialism is the denial of relationships (Donald, 2023) is important learning here.⁷ I cannot help but feel that our responsibility to create a field of relationships (in bringing students together for the purpose of learning) is significant: if we are unable to honour the web or relationships within this space, how might students learn to honour them in other spaces and contexts? How might they come to know these relationships matter and are life-giving? How might they value relationship with their more-than-human neighbors?

In addition to being a practice of receiving and giving attention to our fellow beings, dialogue is a process of truth-seeking, world naming, and co-creating (Freire, 1970). As such, it offers valuable opportunities for students to explore their relationships with local ecologies—human and more-than-human. Freire’s statement, “If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings,” (1970), connects quite strongly with the ideas of Donald and Davis, in that the *way* we are taught—explicitly or otherwise—to see the living world significantly affects how we function in the world and who we *become*. When the process of naming the world together occurs with a genuine

⁷ Donald (2023) describes three layers of relationships that have been severed through colonialism: relations between various parts of the self with the emotional, spiritual and embodied considered inferior to the intellectual; relations with each other -especially those whose worldview is different from ours, and relations with all that gives us life in our ecological surroundings, often with the assumption that our (human) needs are superior to theirs.

aim toward truth-seeking and empathetic mutual understanding, it can relevantly shape how we view and relate to the life forms around us. Keeping in mind Scott's (2023) emphasis on empathetic inclusion and being present with each other, this deep relationality together with mutual efforts of understanding and truth-seeking, the world itself becomes named, formed (in our minds and hearts) and further *included* in our circle of relations. In response to Freire's (1970) subsequent statement that "Dialogue is thus an existential necessity" (p. 88), it would seem necessary that dialogue, as a valuable form of self-cultivation and becoming-in-the-world, be given intentional and ample opportunities in educational contexts. It is an act of mutual searching for truth: quite different from imposing an agenda that serves the interests of a few (Macy & Brown, 2014). Since dialogue cannot exist in the absence of "profound love for the world and for people" (Freire, 1970, p. 89) how essential this mutual naming of the world then becomes—especially within contexts of learning and becoming.⁸ Some of the truth-seeking and world-naming might include, for example, that hawks, ferns, bears, and cedars have experiences of their own that are intrinsically valuable; they are worthy of our attention and can contribute to our learning. While I have emphasized here our own, human, beingness as worthy of our educational cultivation, our understanding of the 'beingness' of non-human entities is equally relevant, educationally speaking (Ingold, 2018). Bai's (n.d.) proposal to see our fellow humans as "unique and precious" beings becomes the foundation for seeing our ecological relations in similar light. Beings whose lives are very different from ours also have ways of being/living/doing that are valid for *them* (Breytenbach, 2023). The more we can

appreciate and learn from these, the more our sense of humanity is expanded (Wilson, 1984).

To return for a moment to my experience with our leaders at city hall, the pushing through of an agenda without listening to fellow humans—never mind the more-than-human—clearly lacked these dialogical foundations. Well, one might say, that is how decisions in government are often made so that things 'get done'—it is not generally possible to consult with everyone. Yet in my view this makes it all the more important to create more dialogical contexts within the classroom. Recalling Donald's (2019) notion of practices and ideologies that have become so 'normal' so as to be assumed to be common-sense, I would argue that in the classroom, we are in the position to create a new sense of what is, or can become, healthily normal.

I see the dialogical practices I describe here as invaluable preparation for excursions outside the classroom, when we engage in shared truth-seeking of our 'place' within our local ecologies.⁹ If establishing dialogical practices is the first part of forming an ecological community, going outside into the physical more-than-human community is the second. The sense of collective and relational trust that has been engendered through dialogue forms the foundation for field trips to a local green space, or an outing to a trail on campus or nearby park. The dialogical foundational work is also relevant for individual projects, where students engage in contemplative or arts-based projects seeking to deepen their connection with a place or wilderness area of their choosing. Because we do this work collectively—that of opening our relatedness to include the more-than-human and the land herself—students are invited into a community of caring for their local places. I have found it

⁸ I use the term 'becoming' here - and throughout this paper - in the sense that university learning experiences can be deeply formative for young people. The becoming occurs both in-the-moment as well as in a longer-term developmental (and indeed existential) sense.

⁹ An integral part of this work is coming to know whose ancestral lands we dwell within, and engendering curiosity about their histories, culture, practices and ways of being in relation with the earth.

particularly heartening when, for example, toward the end of term a student shares with us his experience of finding a trusted friend in the Fraser River, to whom he imparted his sadness and troubles on repeated walks upon first coming to Canada as an international student.¹⁰

Being Part of an Ecological Community

In the wintertime, the stand of cottonwood trees I see from my windows each day remain there as steady companions, their strong skeletal filigree standing tall and beautiful against the northern sky. Sometimes in fast-changing weather, the sun illuminates their branches almost to a glow, bone-like against dark pewter clouds. I know their lines by heart, the branching patterns not unlike my own vascular system: complex, purposeful, and intricate. I recall the branch where an eagle once perched for most of a morning. The surrounding cedars have become somewhat scragglier in recent years—cedars are particularly sensitive to drought, and these have suffered with the recent extremely hot, dry summers. One cedar has become so sparse I wonder how much life she has left. In moments of deep fatigue and times of overwork, I find myself contemplating these trees and feeling a sense of commonality. Though their suffering is immeasurably greater, the sources of what harms them is not dissimilar from those that harm me: the unceasing push for production at all costs, characteristic of an industrialised society. These trees and I have shared years together in this place and whatever sense of belonging and kinship I feel here includes them.

Kinship, says Ingold, “is fashioned in the shared experience of humans and non-humans growing older together” (2021, p. 113). Disrupting the idea that kin are formed only through genetic connections, Ingold emphasizes that we are shaped by others—including more-than-human

others—who are *present* in our lives; the love and affection we feel for them need not be less significant. As our lives overlap, we become “part of one another’s stories” (Ingold, 2021, p. 115). When I first came into relationship with these trees my children were toddlers; they are now adults. I wrote of these cottonwoods in my master’s and doctoral theses; they are part of my writing still. Almost twenty-four years we have lived together; to me they are indeed a part of my family.

As required by policy, City Council called a public hearing. People gather outside the Council Chambers as well as on Zoom for the hybrid meeting. When allowed to enter, we sit in front of the Mayor and Council in the amphitheatre-like seating of the formal space. We are given protocol on how to speak. One by one, neighbors and community members go up to the podium with the microphone; some are nervous, not being the kind to speak publicly, but their love for the place allows them to overcome this. For two hours and late into the evening residents share their concerns for this place that is their home, and make sincere pleadings. They do not want to lose the green space that offers solace, peace, and life-giving presence so that an industrial park—no matter how ‘light’ the industry—may take its place. One hundred percent of the speakers are against the development.

One of them is me. I muster the courage to speak from the heart to a mayor and council who scarcely hide their detachment and their strictly perfunctory presence, their wish for this event to be over. To those of us who have lived with this wildlife, I tell them, with these meadows and trees in our lives for many years, losing it all would not be different from losing a loved one. Some short weeks later, the city announces that the industrial rezoning is going ahead.

Ecological Purposes of Education

¹⁰ My thanks to Weimin (Devin) Jiang, who has allowed me to use his example here.

I frequently wonder how, as an educator, I might engender in students a sensitive connection with special places¹¹ in their lives, or to nurture and give these place-relationships voice when they already exist. How might we, as Longboat and Sheridan (2006) propose, “think with and through” (p. 371) a multispecies place, a forest, a creek? Brayboy (University Innovation Alliance, 2021) speaks of ‘land’ as a physical entity, and ‘place’ as the meaning imbued into that land by those who inhabit there. I am drawn to ponder, how might the sense of *place*—this generative sense of place-meaning Brayboy speaks of—be part of a collaborative ‘naming of the world’ in the Freirean (1970) sense? Cajete (1994) says something similar when he speaks of the “power of thought and language to create the worlds we live in” (p. 30). And so more specifically, how might this sense of generating place-meaning through dialogical practice be a *formative* part of the lives of young people in the spirit of what Cajete refers to as foundations of learning where “thinking and knowing has to do with one’s physical place... where one physically lives. One has to know one’s home... and then the land, the earth on which one lives” (1994, p. 47).¹² These questions were very much with me when I was asked to redesign a course titled Finding Voice and Place in Academia: I felt compelled to expand notions of place and belonging beyond the social/emotional sense of ‘having a place’ to include the geographic and bioregional senses of the term.

I’d like to return to my question of how we might educate for human beings who feel deeply enough the ethical responsibility to consider with sensitive care the voices of all involved, including those of

¹¹ David Suzuki (Ayed, 2023) speaks of the importance of having ‘special places’ close to home that we connect and grow up with, where nature might contribute meaningfully to our development as human beings. Richard Louv (2008) has a similar argument.

¹² I am grateful here to the rich range of Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders to whom I turn, and who ignite in me a deeply resonant sense of holism.

our ecological neighbours—especially when making planning decisions. I am much taken by the work of Yukon Indigenous land planner Joe Copper Jack (2023) and his Land and Peoples Relationship Model; his teaching is that all affected parties be heard in decision processes round land-planning. This includes those with ‘no voice’—the lands and waters, animals and trees, as well as future and past generations—for their contributions and perspectives are critical to the decision. When they cannot be physically present at a planning session, a symbolic object represents them. Copper Jack shares how an important life learning for him has been “to be able to understand what the land is telling you” and to implement this communication in the spirit in which it was conveyed. Echoing Bai (n.d.) as well as Fettes and Blenkinsop’s (2023) and Blenkinsop and Kuchta’s (2024) beliefs that the *culture* of a gathering is foundational and requires thoughtful implementation as a first step, he cites the importance of going into decision-making with a posture of caring and respect for all knowledges, including those of the non-human. His advice is to “feel as much as you think” which helps to better understand the no-voice perspective, and importantly, to listen to understand rather than just to respond. The principle is that we take care of those who take care of us. Kimmerer would agree. In a similar way that Bai (n.d.) asks students to see each other as unique and precious beings, giving each other our presence and attention, Kimmerer speaks of how giving our loving attention is one valuable way to return this gift (Kimmerer, 2014).

When I posed the question ‘what is an educated person?’ to our faculty’s Indigenous teaching fellow, Carolyn Roberts, her response eschewed any ideas of knowledge being a commodity and put the emphasis instead on learning through careful and continuous listening to others over time. Kimmerer shares with us that an educated person is one who knows their gifts and how to give them to the world, that education might be a

process of discovering and honing our personal gifts so that we may use them to contribute to the earth community (Kwantlen Polytechnic University, 2024). Among the various things the earth asks of us, she says, is to raise good children; I would add that the earth asks us to educate good people, and to include her (Earth's) perspectives and voice in this education. Perhaps we might see an educated person as one who apprehends and listens with care to the experiences and needs of their local ecological community as a whole, and who knows these experiences matter. An educated person is one who takes on moral responsibility toward this ecological community, is present for them, and gives back to them. And as for the question of why get an education? Perhaps a worthy response might be so that we come to know and cultivate our own personal gifts through an inter-relational process of becoming 'real human beings' (Donald, 2019), humble among a network of kin and belonging, able to contribute our gifts generously.

It is one of those evenings in June when the late-waning light gives me energy to rush through some much-needed tasks. The grass, after spurts of growth, stands in uneven tufts. Rain is in the forecast if not mowed now, the lawn will be a ramble of buttercup and dandelion from all that is about to seed. My son, twelve years old at the time, has decided his evening adventure will be to climb on the roof of our one-storey rancher. I let him. It's better than alternatives which would have him hunched over a device.

I keep half an eye on him as I mow the front lawn. He calls from the rooftop to get my attention over one thing, then over another. I do my best to remain patient with him as the evening falls, but I want to get this done before dark, before the rain. Then he calls to me a third time. By now my patience has dwindled and it shows in my voice

when I look up to ask what he wants. He pauses, quiet. Then he says, "look behind you."

I turn to see two deer, a mother and fawn, walking gingerly along the length of the street, pacing themselves with caution. They have come out of the creek greenway one house over from us and are heading to a corridor between houses on the opposite side to get to the open greenspace behind. In that moment, in the silence after the mower's motor, the gentle touch of their hooves on the asphalt is barely heard. A warm twilight glow bathes the whole scene and evening birdsong echoes around us. It is the presence of this area of wildness that allows for all this: the deer, the birdsong, the way sound travels when it has many soft surfaces to meet, foliage taking it in differently than endless buildings would. In that moment I felt the magic presence of the place and how the deer, together with all else, are part of it.

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