Crafting as a Practice of Relating to the Natural World

Zabe MacEachren, York University, Canada

Abstract

This paper begins with the author's personal experiences and interest in relating to the land through crafting activities. It then briefly outlines some historical context about the ways craft curricula has been associated with environmental education. The significance of using crafting activities as a way of attending to embodied knowing and creating a practical context for learning/making is discussed. Crafting activities are recognized as a way of engaging and interacting with the environment in a manner which may encourage a sense of reciprocity with the earth and ultimately a deeper relationship with the land. Based upon a collection of crafting narrations, the author outlines eight guideposts and how each guideposts can be used to explore various perceptions of the environment.

Résumé

L'auteur commence par présenter ses expériences et son intérêt personnels quant au rôle de l'artisanat dans la création d'un lien avec la terre. Il replace ensuite dans un contexte historique l'association des programmes d'études en artisanat avec l'éducation relative à l'environnement. Il signale l'importance d'utiliser les activités d'artisanat comme mode de prise en compte du savoir implicite et de création d'un contexte pratique pour l'apprentissage et la fabrication d'objets. Il reconnaît les activités d'artisanat comme un vecteur d'interaction avec l'environnement, pouvant favoriser un sentiment de réciprocité avec la terre et, à terme, une relation plus profonde avec la planète. À partir d'une série de récits ayant pour thème l'artisanat, l'auteur propose huit jalons pouvant servir à explorer diverses perceptions de l'environnement.

A warm breeze was rustling my hair and leaves. Hands were stitching a large bark winnowing tray made from my skin. Kids were laughing and playing as each of their footsteps tapped out a rhythm I felt through the ground on my roots. Ahhh, the pleasure of being a birch forest on a fall day during the wild rice harvest.

As I picked and gathered wild rice with others that day, I floated in and out of a human-centered identity. Later as I pondered what had made that experience so special to me, I recalled my previous crafting activities. All my experiences of making items, like birch bark baskets, canoes, paddles and winnowing sticks, had somehow accumulated to allow me to feel intimately a part of a birch forest. Although I have participated in extended wilderness trips, lead adventure-based activities at outdoor education centers and have designed nature interpretation programs, it seems that my deepest connection with the natural world comes from the simple act of making something.

Intrigued by this realization, I sought out any information that addressed the importance of crafting traditions or placed crafting curricula within an environmental education context. I started to seek what it was about crafting activities that made them such fulfilling and satisfying experiences despite these times of ready access to machine-produced items. I sought to understand and to express the significant aspects of crafting experiences so that making activities can be better utilized in environmental education curriculum.

The association between making experiences and feeling a part of the land created in me a desire to know if others had ever had similar experiences. Explorations into the narratives of other crafters and environmental educators has led me to accounts of others who share this interest in learning to define who we (humans) are on this earth, by better understanding the context for the creation of the artifacts in our life. I presently am pursuing what I like to joke is a doctorate in naturecraft. In reality I believe my study addresses some essential issues about environmental education. My research is best described as a study into the ways one can learn about the environment by making things. I am specifically interested in the ways that our perceptions about the natural environment are shaped by specific aspects of our creation process. I propose that crafting experiences aid environmental education because they serve as a bodily-based practice for forming a relationship with the natural environment. I believe that a relationship with the world, which is built upon more traditional, holistic practices of making things, encourages a sense of engagement, interaction and reciprocation with all that is around us. Such a relationship encourages an attendance to the fleshes of the material earth over the technological processes by which human's increasingly find themselves surrounded.

Many people, in the movements that they have founded, have placed great emphasis on the importance of craft processes in the interrelationship between sustainable communities and ecological processes. Unfortunately, few of these programs have contributed to a significant understanding of the linkage between craft education and environmental education. For example, William Morris (Lucie-Smith, 1981; Spretnak, 1999) initiated the Arts and Crafts Movement in the later decades of the 1800s. This movement emphasized the importance of the preservation of craft skills amidst the demeaning labour and shoddy workmanship resulting from the Industrial Revolution. Considered a master designer by many, Morris based his own graphic designs and designs for utopian social communities upon the processes he was aware of in the natural world and his understanding of the role craft work served in fulfilling a person's life. Although his work is still known and recognized today, his efforts to lessen the impact of industrial design and mechanized work in society never materialized.

Another person who recognized the importance between nature education and craft-making experience was Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946), one of the initial founders of the Boy Scout organization in North America. His educational activities for youth resided upon the principle that making things from natural materials, as many Native people demonstrated, was very important in the formation of concepts of respect for the earth. He wrote many books, such as his woodcraft series, that demonstrated how craft, nature, and social activities overlapped. Many individuals and camp programs were initially influenced by his ideas and writing. Unfortunately Seton's departure from the influential Boy Scout organization provided an opportunity for curriculum based on competition and regimentation to be implemented instead of his original "woodcraft" ideas.

Kurt Hahn, (1886-1974), whose ideas would eventually lead to the creation of the experiential education movement and programs such as Outward Bound, was a firm supporter of learning through wilderness exposure and craft-based learning opportunities (Hahn, 1965). He believed that craft projects developed patience, care, and compassion. Although many of the programs founded by Hahn continue to run, since his death, the emphasis he placed on encouraging craft skill and care shifted to simply an emphasis on skill.

Waldorf education (Blunt, 1995) is a current educational system that emphasizes the importance of handwork and crafting experience in the development of a child. It is based upon the philosophies established by Rudolf Steiner. Waldorf education exists primarily as a private school program so its emphasis on craft-based learning experiences is not well known

by public educators. It therefore lacks an influence on the larger western populations of citizens as a whole.

It seems that despite the work of many influential educators and craft movement leaders, the importance of craft knowledge and its fit with environmental education has not been clearly made or emphasized. The link between environmental education notions and crafting experience is vague but does consistently arise. Further historical analysis on this might be beneficial.

Today craft programs within educational settings seldom receive adequate funding; when they do receive support it is usually far less than what art education or computer technology programs receive. Neither art nor computer education provide the opportunity to connect with the natural environment in a holistic and practical context as craft making experiences do. Although criticism may exist of the negative effects of computer technology and hyper-reality stimulation, I seldom hear concern addressed towards the many art projects (including those called "eco-art") which disregard or are unaccountable toward the impact they have on the land. Too many art projects unintentionally serve as a disguise for an event that creates litter, encourages the use of harmful materials and ultimately removes material from its original state on the earth. These actions are usually all done to allow the human ego an opportunity for self-expression instead of an opportunity to encourage an extended sense of self that includes awareness of the places the art material originates from or is disposed to once the art project is over. Defining what we make as art, craft, or even technology can get complex quite quickly. I recognize there are many gray areas, especially as studio crafts today are basically art items made of clay, wood, and fiber.

It was during the Renaissance that the terms art and craft became separated. I purposely emphasize the term "craft" instead of art in an attempt to reclaim its pre-Renaissance meaning which once included a demonstration of skill (as in a bodily way of knowing material) and concepts of beauty. The functionality of craft became devalued as the pure intellect and genius of people was recognized and emphasized through fine art. During this time of massive environmental degradation it may be necessary to ask why we do not surround ourselves with craft items that are both functional and beautiful instead of complex technology that has a facade of beauty superficially attached.

Contemporary educational theories tend to implicitly support notions of craft education because they support the development of tactile and sensory stimulation, hand-eye coordination, bodily awareness etc.—all things developed through crafting practices. What frequently lacks in educational theories is learning activities based in a context of meaningful daily living

skills and not simulated assignments. Environmental education needs to develop a crafting curriculum (or continue to explore and justify the crafting curriculum of the previously mentioned educators) in order to make more explicit connections between the act of making a craft with natural material and a meaningful reason for creating items in our lives. We need to ask what ways of knowing the environment are lost when we no longer explore the world through our need to make artifacts. For instance, why is the northwoods country perceived differently by a person who paddles a canoe they have made them self (through the efforts of gathering and shaping material from the land directly,) a person who has only paddled a store-bought plastic canoe, or a person who prefers to just paint the landscape scene of a passing canoeist?

Our need and ability to make items of beauty and utility is a fundamental experience that both individuals and cultures have used to define and distinguish their worth as humans. It is ironic that the environmental impact that results from the things we make is predicted by some to be the very thing that may lead to our own destruction. It is worth questioning how our present making practices have failed to inform us about the massive degradation of the land resulting from our desire for more material, to make even more things. My experience of making or creating an item has been that some processes can aid environmental education because they serve as a practice for re-establishing patterns of attending to an environmentally-based relationship with the world while others only hinder it. These patterns are what are important to recognize and not the discussion about whether our making activities should be referred to as art or craft. I will continue to use craft or crafting as the practice of making an item which encourages relationships with the world that reaffirms our sense of body, extended earth body, and interconnection or limitations existing between the two.

When we can demonstrate skill by making something useful (or perceived necessary for survival, as in an item that serves to fulfill a basic need) then we gain some sense of self-worth, bodily affirmation, and confidence in a practical skill required to live well. By completing a craft, our skill or bodily knowledge is demonstrated and confirmed. The more we succeed in making the variety of items we need to live, the more we trust our bodily way of engaging and relating to the land through the process of finding various materials and the process of shaping, transforming, and using the completed craft. The physical qualities of the material becomes the land informing our physical being. Acquiring crafting skill may be about learning to attend to the land through the interchanges that go on between the earth's flesh or material's physicality and our own flesh or body's physicality.

The person who completes a craft (using minimal power tools) demonstrates an ability to attend to, listen to, learn from, and play with the land through the physicality evident in the material. Bending a branch into a hoop reconfirms our bodily understanding of limits, of sustainability, and of something not easily expressed in words but still known.

Today, it may not be practical to make all our items by hand, but I contend that every child should have the experience of walking out onto the land, gathering supplies, shaping them into some functional item and then using that item. I recognize this experience as the very basis of environmental education—of being human. Yet the limited extent to which such basic experiences now occur in a student's education must be questioned. Most of us surround ourselves with items we have not made nor do we even understand how we could make similar items (especially if we must start from scratch in collecting the materials we would require to shape.) By entering into settings that allow making processes to be based mostly upon intellectualized procedures and not bodily informed processes, we have lost our ability to attend to a bodily awareness; we encourage a perspective of the world which separates it from ourselves. It is like a "technology-based surgeon" has anesthetized the creation process so we no longer are aware of what enters or leaves our understanding. We have become numb to the impact the making process creates as our physical reference for it is abstracted when we produce industrial-based items. With no reference point of ever having to make something totally from scratch, we become unaware of the impact on the earth body our consumer habits encourage. We no longer feel the impact of taking and leaving on our extended body—the earth.

Our ability to live was traditionally based upon our ability to make something useful and not upon abstraction. A few holistic making experiences in our early education may provide a reference point for us to use later when we try to question the hidden impact of waste and energy consumption which goes into commodity production. Through crafting experiences perhaps we empower ourselves by reconfirming we have the ability to make what we need and therefore do not need to purchase so many commodities which seem superficial, even destructive, to our well being.

Without the means to engage, interact, and reciprocate with the land, our relationship with and dependency upon the land becomes artificial, distant and theoretical. It has become relatively easy to forget to affirm what our body knows as only experience with simulations and models that are acknowledged and confirmed. Crafting experiences confirm embodied knowing. They encourage us to attend to perspectives obtained directly from the "nature of the material." Paint brushes, computer keyboards

and nintendo stick handles do not encourage a person to relate to material as if it comes from the natural world and was once a living tree. To carve wood a person must focus on the grain and fiber in wood. Handwork that requires a person to use their own physical body in relationship with the physical body of plant, animal or mineral (all crafting material) necessitates that the mind attend to the body's knowing. Environmental education curricula that is based upon written, oral, and representational expression does not ensure that a sense of embodied knowing is affirmed or a natural environment is attended. The ability to make a craft can demonstrate this. When environmental education programs create the opportunities for crafting experiences in their curriculum, they encourage participants to explore their world through their sensory and tactile abilities, thereby reconfirming their embodied knowing and demonstrating their bodily knowledge.

A meaningful context for learning is created when we need to make an item and want to make it beautiful. The utility and beauty in a craft provides a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction when one learns how to create something important and worthy. Items which are made to be displayed are valued based upon effectiveness of a representation and not a sense of life fulfilling purpose. What provides a more meaningful experience than having to use your own hands to create something you truly need in order to survive? When environmental education programs purchase craft supplies to use instead of providing participants with the skills to find and sustainably harvest material, we are unintentionally removing the practical context for learning; then, later, a simulated context for learning is introduced. For instance, we purchase lumber and paper supplies for students then ask them in math class to determine hypothetical questions like what is the sustainable harvesting limits for forest this particular size. The opportunity to relate to the world through a physical give and take experience is absent. Completing a well made item demonstrates, to some extent, that bodily skill has been acquired and that participants have the knowledge to engage and interact with the world in a direct practical relationship. They ultimately acquire pride and satisfaction as they make the fundamental items which human life requires and culture is built upon.

I have witnessed the pride and satisfaction crafting programs can instill in others. One summer I taught about 45 students how to carve spoons for use during their second week at a camp. During our final closing ceremony the campers were asked to describe the highlight of their time at camp. Almost half responded that making their spoon was the highlight. Hearing such responses makes me question and wonder why environmental education curricula does not stress the importance of making functional items

anymore. Such crafting experiences develop an eco-centric relationship with the world. Engagement with the land is initiated as a person gathers materials directly. Interaction results as a person attends to the grain of the wood as they carve. The comments stated and care exhibited for students' spoons demonstrates their sense of reciprocity for the land. A relationship for loving their body's capability and the tree's offering are both reflected in the spoons, which are admired and well used.

As an environmental educator, I feel it is my responsibility to provide students with the opportunity to explore and relate to the world through meaningful crafting experiences. This means I continually question the hidden assumptions and focus awareness on the context making experiences can take today. I ask what are we engaging with (a tree or lumber), what kinds of interactions are being encouraged (bodily awareness or intellectual analysis)? After instilling a deeper engagement and interaction, I find a sense of reciprocity with the land will emerge on its own if a safe place for such a relationship is also provided. For instance I once watched a student break into spontaneous dance with a paddle she had just completed carving.

Eventually the engagement, interaction, and reciprocation of the crafting process will all seem to intertwine and will nurture a deeper sense of relationship with the natural world. Students will acknowledge their dependency upon the land, appreciate what their own hands are capable of doing and want to express appreciation for the ability to mix their hands with the materials of the earth in order to create something wonderful. I recognize this as a spiraling inwards on a trail which affirms our relationship within the natural environment. (See Figure 1 and later imagine it layered upon Figure 2 to provide a three dimensional effect).

After reflecting upon my own crafting experiences which brought me a sense of deep relationship with the natural world, I also began to gather similar accounts from others. Eventually I began to see patterns or common threads in the ways these experiences might be encouraging deeper or broader perceptions of the natural world. I refer to these ways as guideposts that serve as theoretical places from which to take bearing and further explore crafting experiences. These guideposts encourage me to better understand the environmental awareness limited to and offered by specific components within a process of making a craft. Each guidepost is outlined below and presented in summary in Figure 2.

For purposes of brevity I have not included examples of narrations I have collected or the stories I sometimes tell which pertain to each guidepost. Some sources for narrations for each guidepost are referenced. I have shaped each guidepost with a brief definition and then followed it with a

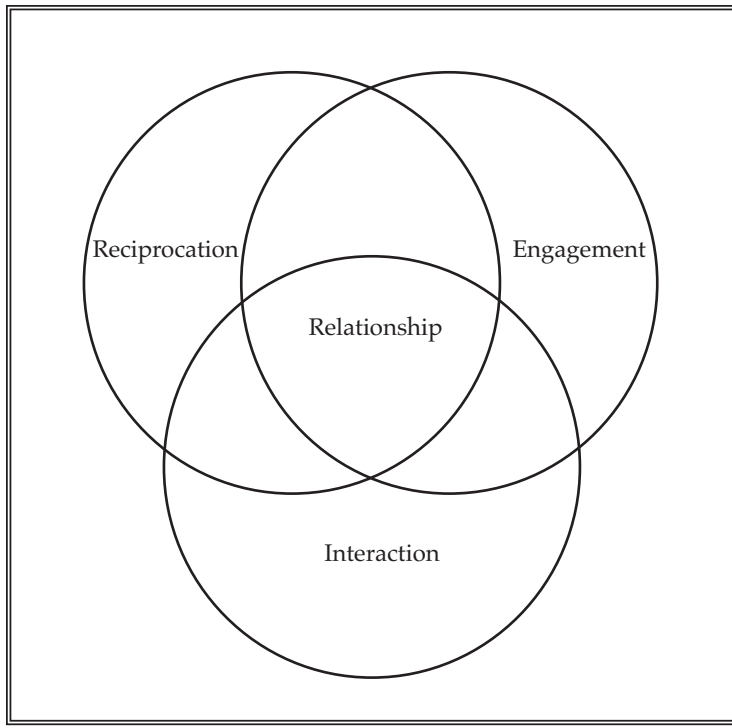

Figure 1. Aspects of experiences which encourage an attendance of a deeper sense of relationship.

sampling of questions that pertain to the range of opportunities and layers of awareness each guidepost offers for exploration. The questions probe our ecological, spiritual, moral, ethical, holistic, and other perceptions. I choose what sort of question to explore, depending upon the characteristics of the participants or the specific crafting activity chosen. For instance in the guidepost *Resonance of motion*, I might shake a rattle at various paces while students stitch something and then later ask them how this effected their experience. Not all guideposts might be encountered with every crafting opportunityexperienced, but an awareness that other guideposts were absent can aid our understanding of what may be missing or what to aim to include when designing crafting curriculum. For example, learning where to look for material and how to harvest material sustainably is often the most significant part of the crafting process which directly engages us with the land. Unfortunately it is also typically the first experiences eliminated in environmental education programs. Ideally participants should experience making several different things which involves handling different local

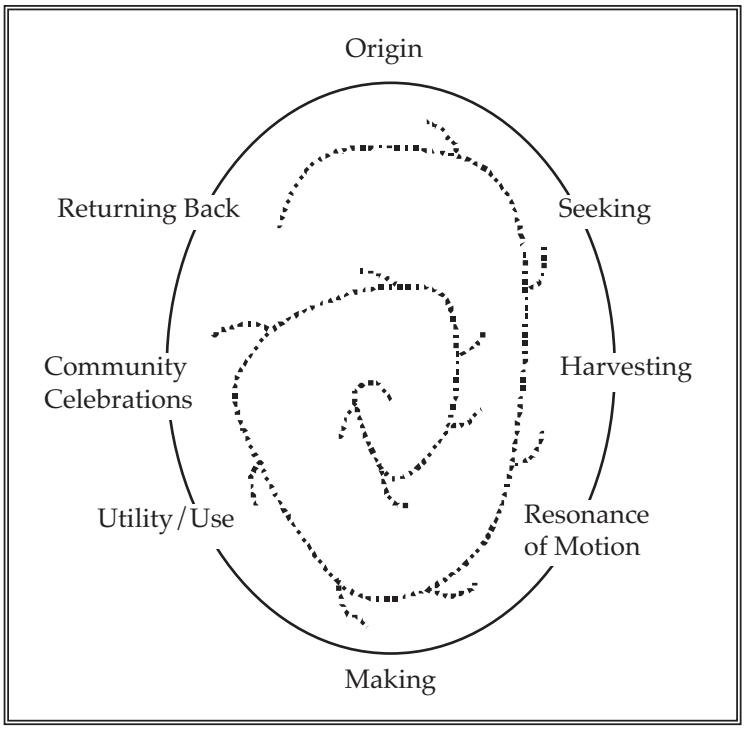

Figure 2. Relationship through crafting.

materials (i.e. plant, animal and mineral material). This might encourage them to feel more like they are spiraling deeper into a relationship with the whole environment as they participate in various practical crafting activities.

Guideposts

Origin: What informs us whether we should proceed to make something or not.

Should any activity directed at encouraging imagination be considered worthy of pursuit, despite the environmental impact associated with the activities' material? Does human ability to imagine, or need for something, create the right to pursue making it? Who has the right to determine what is to be created? How is this right decided? Who should monitor the impact of created items and inform others of this impact? How does one determine and justify the creation of something which may benefit an individual but impact negatively on the group? (For example, does a person painting a scene of clean water understand that the manufacturing process and cleaning solvents required, result in polluted water for all?) How do we

learn to attend to, describe, and validate our knowledge of whether we should proceed to make something or not? (For example, some cultures require an individual to receive permission before they can make or possess such crafts as a drum. This sense of permission may come in various forms depending upon cultural traditions, e.g. guild initiations or dreams). Does our culture encourage us to attend to anything when determining the value of continuing to pursue an idea to make something (e.g. ecological or economic value)? Has our technological ability to make something been matched by an ethical development? (Kazimiroff, 1982, p. 9)

Seeking: The experience of traveling on the land seeking suitable crafting material.

What features of our local landscape must we attend to in order to locate appropriate crafting materials (for example elevation, soil conditions, weather, season)? What do we miss knowing about our material when we only encounter its packaged, store bought form? What can we learn about a locale when we regularly visit the land to forage for material? Do frequent trips to an area to seek supplies encourage a sense of stewardship and/or a sense of sustainable harvesting practices? What has shaped our sense of property relations? Do we really believe that land, trees, and animals, etc. can be owned? How does purchasing crafting material encourage perceptions of only commodities? Does a price tag on material influence our value of that material? (For example, does wood become known as lumber or as part of a living forest?) How does the difficulty or ease in procurement influence our value and eventual care of that material? (Nelson, 1991, p. 55)

Harvesting: The method and acknowledgment involved in the moment of actual taking, of another life form, in order to obtain crafting material.

Do we recognize the plant, animal, and minerals we harvest as animate or inanimate material? Does direct experiences harvesting material increase our understanding of our dependency on that material? How does our perception of the animacy of our materials influence our harvesting methods? (For example, do we cut a limb from a tree in the same manner we would like to have our own limbs removed?) Do we acknowledge the sentience of material through verbal expression such as that of a song for someone or a prayer for another being—a more-than-human-being? What understanding or purpose do rituals and offerings, done at the time of harvesting, promote? How and why might direct experiences of having to procure our own materials alter our consumer habits? What traditions and practices influence our understanding of how to harvest sustainably from an area?

(For example, do we have an elder who guides and informs our collection practice based upon her or his long term traditional gathering activities or are we accustomed to just following the scientific-based computer print-out, which indicates harvesting limits?) (Drew, 1992; Beittel, 1997, p. 27-34)

Resonance of Motion: The perception of the repetitive moments involved in making something.

Are we encouraged to experience repetitive motions as a boring tedious task or moments of introspection, which encourage the body to slow down in order to understand? Do we seek repetition to soften our busy minds and/or recall the soothing, rocking, relaxed state of other worlds, such as ripples upon a beach? Have our hands been stimulated and exercised to come to know the feel, grain, texture, and rhythms embedded in handling various crafting materials (for example, the difference in carving hard and soft wood)? (Brown, 1994, p. 167)

Making: The engagement with forming and shaping the craft.

To what extent is the outcome influenced by the concept of a master blueprint or the nature of the material itself? How are we encouraged to listen to the material? What are our hands capable of sensing? What are the boundaries between the material's body and our own body? (For example when we bend a branch, where does our body and the branch's body begin and end?) How do we perceive the material's limitations and potential? How does the local in which the craft is to be used, influence the final outcome? (For example, snowshoe designs traditionally varied due to very specific local knowledge of typical snow conditions and terrain.) (Richards, 1989, p. 115)

Utility/Use: The distinguishing factors which reside between balancing beauty and utility.

Will the item made, find use as just decor, something to be displayed and observed, or will it continue to engage the person with the environment? (For example, a picture of canoeing when compared to a paddle or canoe, hold two different potentials for coming to understand canoeing, canoes, water, etc.) (Brown, 1984, p. 182)

Community Celebration: The cultural ways we express our dependency on and relationship with the land through the items we make and our ability to make them.

What is our knowledge of traditional celebrations which use crafted items or honour the items we make with our hands (e.g. Gaelic songs sung when the cloth comes off the loom, Hopi basket dance, snowshoe and drum dances of woodland Native cultures, etc.)? How does using hand made items in ceremonies deepen the ceremony's intent? What is the difference between receiving a hand-made gift or a purchased commodity? (Baragwanath, 1978, p. 44)

Returning Back: The actions we perform to acknowledge our understanding of the natural cycles, materials participate in on Earth.

In what ways do we perceive material left over from the crafting process (e.g. as resources, scraps, or remnants)? What informs us about where to place our remaining crafting materials (e.g., in the garbage, drain, landscape of origin or recycling bin)? In what ways are we encouraged to think about the impact of our disposal practices? In what ways are we encouraged to be better stewards with the local from which our crafting material originates? (Nelson, 1991, p. 55)

The links between crafting experiences and environmental education do exist, although they are not always readily apparent or well expressed in documents. On the whole crafting knowledge is best demonstrated rather than theorized. During these times of readily available mechanization processes, to make something using some element of handwork can be considered a form of resistance. By choosing to participate in handwork, we reclaim and reaffirm a sense of body time or pace of the hand. This opens us to the possibility of relating to the world in an ancient manner that is not presently encouraged in industrial growth-based societies, where what can be written about or commodified is preferred.

Charlene Spretnak (1999), in *The Resurgence of the Real*, describes the Arts and Crafts Movement started by William Morris as one of the largest and "most significant *f*s which profoundly resisted modernity by making a non-modern relationship to nature and/or spirituality central to their social vision" (p. 133). By continuing to offer crafting opportunities in environmental education curricula and by continuing to strive to express the significance of crafting experiences, we establish a significant environmental education praxis. This praxis is rooted in a long human history of recognition of the need to make things in order to survive. The process of how we make these survival things shapes our perceptions and relationship with the world. We can resist the trends of modernity by re-experiencing the ancient wisdom of relationship which resides in craft-making activities.

The guideposts I have described, and the overlay of the importance of curricula based upon engaging, interacting, and reciprocating with the natural world, provide a place to begin to explore a theoretical understanding of the significance of crafting experiences in environmental education. As environmental educators we walk our talk when we craft a knowing. Crafting activities hold potential within environmental education and should be justified and reclaimed as a valuable component of curriculum. Through crafting education we can establish a practice for attending to the natural environment, broaden our awareness of the world and create a deeper sense of connection. By encouraging crafting activities that explore the outlined guideposts, we are truly relating with the natural world in a practical context that acknowledges a relationship based upon engaging, interacting and reciprocating with the land. Such experiences may prove themselves to be critical in recognizing how we are part of nature. Crafting provides a beautiful example of the union of nature and culture and, for this reason, serves environmental education well.

Notes on Contributor

Zabe MacEachren is a PhD student at York University in the Faculty of Environmental Studies. She awaits her graduation day so she can return to the adventure of learning to make all of her own camping gear. She then plans to go for a long canoe trip with Instinct, the cedar canvas canoe she has already crafted.

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