

# **“Under the Tough Old Stars”: Meditations on Pedagogical Hyperactivity and the Mood of Environmental Education**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores some of the root causes of what the author calls “pedagogical hyperactivity” in our schools and suggests ways in which education itself might become more environmental in its character and mood.

## **Résumé**

Cet article explore les causes fondamentales de ce que l'auteur nomme l'«hyperactivité pédagogique» en milieu scolaire, et propose des avenues de changement pour que l'ensemble du processus éducatif à l'école adopte un caractère plus environnemental.

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under the tough old stars -  
To the real work, to  
“What is to be done.”

Gary Snyder, from “I Went into the Maverick Bar”

## **1**

The term “environmental education” can give us pause to consider how ecological awareness, ecological attunement, might be more than simply a particular topic among others in the classroom. It might help us glimpse how it is that *education itself*, in its attention to all the disciplines that make up schooling, can be reconceived as deeply ecological in character and mood.

Ecology can provide us with images that help us reconceive the traditions and disciplines of education as themselves deeply ecological communities of relations, full of long, convoluted

histories, full of life and lives, traditions and wisdoms that require our “continuity of attention and devotion” (Berry 1986, p. 34) if they are to remain generous, sustainable and true, if they are to remain *liveable*. For example, mathematics can become conceived as a rich, imaginative place, full of topographies and histories and tales to tell, full of relations of kin and kind, full of deep patterns and powers (Jardine 1995). Mathematics might become conceived as itself a deeply interconnected, Earthly phenomenon, linked to patterns of breath and bone, bearing kinships to patterns of language and song, linked, too, to symmetries etched in stone, to the spiral doings of leaves and to the sun downarching towards *sol stasis* and return.

Ecology can also provide images of what it would mean to talk of the classroom as a real, living community, full of traces of the old and the young, the new and the established and the often difficult conversations between them. Classrooms, too, can become full of a commitment working out and working through those wisdoms and disciplines and traditions and tales, shared and contested, that have been handed down to us all. It can be a place full, in a deeply ecological sense, of “real work,” (Snyder 1980; Clifford & Friesen 1993).

## 2

. . . the connections, the dependencies, remain. To damage the Earth is to damage your children.

Wendell Berry, from *The Unsettling of America*

Ecological awareness, in the richest sense, always and already involves the presence of our children. Ecology thus always already involves images of pedagogy and the teaching and learning of the tales that need to be told for all of us to live well. As with pedagogy, ecology is always already intergenerational (Friesen, Clifford & Jardine 1996).

In this way, we can conceive of disciplines such as “poetry,” or “negative and positive integers,” or “the histories of this land,” as large, generous places, full of relations in which we might learn to live well, adding our work to these places, our memories and voices,

our arguments and alternatives and difference. We can now ask of education itself that it help to develop:

. . . the sense of “nativeness,” of belonging to the place. Some people are . . . try[ing] to understand where they are, and what it would mean to live carefully and wisely, delicately in a place, in such a way that you can live there adequately and comfortably. Also, your children and grandchildren and generations a thousand years in the future will still be able to live there. That’s thinking as though you were a native. Thinking in terms of the whole fabric of living and life. (Snyder 1980, p.86)

Understood in this Earthy, intergenerational way, education (and not just “environmental education” as a sub-branch, most often, of science education) has the opportunity, perhaps the obligation, to slow down the pace of attention, to broaden out its own work into the long-standing patterns and places we inhabit and which inhabit us.

It has the opportunity, perhaps the obligation, to take on a mood not unlike ecological mindfulness.

### 3

Manic pace is cultivated as a virtue in elementary schools. Teachers getting kids to run from place to place, activity to activity. All noise and no *sounds*. Quiet is undervalued as only the quiet of straight rows -- *made to be* quiet by somebody, not *being* quiet.

Patricia Clifford, a teacher at Ernest Morrow Junior High School

It is fascinating to consider how, in these ecological desperate days, just as ecology is heralding the need for a continuity of attention and devotion, our schools are, in so many cases, full of attention deficits (itself a wonderfully co-opted marketing term along with its dark twin, “paying attention”). This is coupled with a sort of hyperactivity that precludes the slowing of pace and the broadening of attention to relations and interdependencies that love and devotion to a place require of us.

This all-too-apt image - “kids running from place to place, activity to activity” - is clearly not a phenomenon that appears simply in elementary schools. Rather, it is endemic to what is now

widely described as post-modern culture in North America: an onslaught of frenetic, disconnected, fragmented images and free-floating meanings, a twirling free play of signs and signifiers and surfaces, none of which requires or deserves care or attention, none of which has a strong or vital link to any other fragment. In this flickering place, nothing *pertains* and therefore, of course, we can do whatever we desire. We make all the patterns or connections and they can, at our beck and call, always be undone and redone as we like. Loosed, here, is an image of the human subject as isolated from any deep obligation or complicity or relation to anything. Loosed here, too, is the portend of ecological disaster.

Think, for example of television channel surfing, or, more recently, "surfing the net."

If the surface is all there is, then surfing is all that is required.

I can always, as one Grade Seven student put it, "flip out" if things get demanding or bog down or become no longer amusing or stimulating.

And, of course, as with surfing, if one loses momentum, if one hesitates for a moment, you're sunk.

Consider this horrible image:

the subject of postmodernity is best understood as the ideal-type channel-hopping MTV viewer who flips through different images at such speed that she/he is unable to chain the signifiers together into a meaningful narrative, he/she merely enjoys the multiphrenic intensities and sensations of the surface of the images (Usher & Edwards 1994 p. 11)

And, in light of such a subject, the corpus of the world and the traditions we are living out become "part of the emporium of styles to be promiscuously dipped into. It becomes yet another experience to be sampled - neither intrinsically better or worse." (p. 11-12)

In this milieu, meaning and significance and connection get reduced to glinting surface stimulation. And since stimulation is inherently always momentary, new stimulation is always needed - new "activities" are always underway. And so we have a common feature of many schools - a relentless rush from activity to activity, all in the name of "keeping the children's interest."

Once this occurs, it is little wonder that panic sets in. And it is little wonder that Wendell Berry (1986) suggests that it is

precisely this sort of unsettled panic that makes us excellent consumers of yet more and more activities.

Just as ecology has been suggesting, it is too easy to find ourselves in schools helplessly feeding the voracious activity beast, finding ourselves sometimes taken in by the exhilarating rush of it all, and finding ourselves unwittingly equating the ends of education with being able, in deft post-modern fashion, to manipulate surfaces to one's own ends and to live consumptively.

#### 4

Perhaps the "Attention Deficit Disorder" (ADD) children in our classrooms can be understood to be like canaries in a mine shaft - warnings, portends, heralds (Jardine 1994; Clifford & Friesen 1995; Clifford, Friesen & Jardine 1995), that things have thinned and relations have been broken and need healing. Perhaps their psychopathological labelling of ADD prevents us from understanding the ecological message they might offer us about not only their lives but ours as well. Perhaps their dis-eases should be read as signs that education needs to become a form of ecological healing (Clifford & Friesen 1994) - mending "all my relations." This goal for education is surely huge, surely daunting. But it is also peculiarly small, intimate and immediate. It can be conceived as a mending done through the recovery, through our teaching, of the generous wisdoms and patterns of the world, but these wisdoms and patterns are always particular, always close at hand, always local.

This is the juncture where education can become environmental in a deep sense. It can be the place where we might slow the attention and broaden our relations to the Earth, not in some huge way, but in the face of the stubborn particularity of things.

Consider, for example, the deep pleasures to be had in the mathematical symmetries and geometric curves of just this yellow leaf corkscrewing down from a late fall Cottonwood, and how it heralds the arc of seasons and the movements of planets and suns, and the bodily desires for shelter, and how many have stood here like this, stock still, trying to read the deep patterns and dignities and eloquence of this place:

I think probably the rhythm I'm drawing on most now is the whole of the landscape of the Sierra Nevada, to feel it all moving underneath. There is the periodicity of ridge, gorge, ridge, gorge, ridge, gorge at the spur ridge and the tributary gorges that make an interlacing network of, oh, 115-million-year-old geological formation rhythms. I'm trying to feel through that more than anything else right now. All the way down to some Tertiary gravels which contain a lot of gold from the Pliocene. Geological rhythms. I don't know how well you can do that in poetry. Well, like this for example. Have you ever tried singing a range of mountains? (Snyder 1980 p. 4)

Consider this reminder that the desire to utter this place up into the eloquence of language and rhyme is itself ecological work, the work of a place, and the work of the breath:

The rhythm of a song or a poem rises, no doubt, in reference to the pulse and breath of the poet. But that is too specialized an accounting; it rises also in reference to daily and seasonal --and surely even longer -- rhythms in the life of the poet and in the life that surrounds him. The rhythm of a poem resonates with these larger rhythms that surround it; it fills its environment with sympathetic vibrations. Rhyme, which is a function of rhythm, may suggest this sort of resonance; it marks the coincidences of smaller structures with larger ones, as when the day, the month, and the year all end at the same moment. Song, then, is a force opposed to speciality and to isolation. It is the testimony of the singer's inescapable relation to the earth, to the human community, and also to tradition. (Berry, 1983, p. 17)

Consider that perhaps our rhyming utterance of this leaffall "leads one to hear an ancient cosmology" (Meschonnic 1988, p. 93) that is folded into language and breath itself.

. . . so that just this leaf opens countless tales, each one of which is about all the others, each one of which holds and deepens and quiets and places all the others.

. . . the pace of attention slows and broadens and becomes more stable, less frantic. We don't need to speed ahead, to keep up, to crowd and cram the classroom with activity after activity. We can slow and settle and return.

. . . so that just this leaf becomes the portal or opening in to a Great Council of All Beings gathering in interweaving relations and

suddenly, it sits still, settled, and the whole of things starts to corkscrew around its stillness.

And then, just in time, Coyote shows up, the wise old trickster-fool that poet and ecologist Gary Snyder takes over from Native tales told to the young to help them understand who and where they are. There he is, watching the selfsame:

beautiful little gold coloured Cottonwood leaves floating down to the ground, and they go this ... this ... this ... this ... this this this and he just watches those for the longest time. Then he goes up and he asks those leaves "Now how do you do that? That's so pretty the way you come down." And they say, "Well there's nothing to it, you just get up in a tree, and then you fall off." So he climbs up the Cottonwood tree and launches himself off, but he doesn't go all pretty like that, he just goes bonk and kills himself." (Snyder 1977, p. 70-1)

But, as we know, "Coyote never dies, he gets killed plenty of times, and then he goes right on travelling" (p. 71), teaching a little lesson on the way, that these patterns of leaves falling are their own, and remember where you are and who you are, and it's getting cold and enough writing and it's time to get the wind kicked up to hot breath walking again.

## 5

Just as with much of our lives, many classrooms are full of cheap, trivial, laminate-thin hyperstimulants meant to titillate, amuse or seduce us into wanting more.

Many schools are full of teachers ravaged by the skittering activity that has become their daily work.

Education, environmentally understood, requires that we refuse to participate in this ecological disaster. It requires that we find work to do, for ourselves and our children, that bears some dignity and Earthly discipline - good stories, large fields of thought, "big ideas" (Clifford & Friesen 1993) that need children to re-think them, that are *that* generous and true. Again, a huge task and a small one, worked out in small ways, here, and here.

As always with ecological work, the work begins at home. I have had the pleasure of working with several local teachers in

which issues of good, generative, generous work are being addressed and practiced, and in which all the difficulties involved are not hidden or ignored, but faced with precisely the sort of heart (one might say “courage”) that ecologically minded work requires. And, in my own work as a University teacher involved with student-teachers and practicum experiences, I have had the painful realization that it is always first *my own* attention and devotion to the world and its ways that is at issue, my own ability and willingness to pursue experiences that deepen as they proceed, and to refuse, when I can, as I can, experience-as-activity, experience-as-distraction. Hard work. “Real work,” (Snyder 1980) with all the deep pleasures that ensue.

Clearly, healing the flittering of attention that underwrites much of our lives cannot be had quickly or painlessly or finally. Remaining alert, remaining open to new experiences, is always a task to be taken up again, from here, with these children, this year, with these wisdoms of the world.

We cannot do to children what we have not already done to ourselves (Clifford & Friesen 1994). We cannot deepen their wisdom of and attention to the Earth and its ways until we have first taken on the work of this wisdom and attention ourselves.

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