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On Education

The Crex Crex Collective

Abstract This chapter presents educators with a conundrum: *how to change educational systems so that they can in turn promote learning relevant to and commensurate with the multiple crises we face, without being co-opted by dominant cultural norms.* Instead of seeking to integrate environmental and sustainability education into existing educational institutions, the challenge is rather the reverse. The task at hand is really to renegotiate, in conjunction with Earth and the more-than-human world, the idea and practice of education itself. Beneath what appear as crises, such as climate

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change and species extinctions, a more profound crisis lies in the way that many humans relate to the world—that is the dominant modernist way of being in the world. A renegotiated and renewed vision of education must include structures, curricula, and pedagogies that are fundamentally disruptive to these ways of being.

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Many people who have been initially drawn to wild pedagogies share similar experiences. In their educational lives, they know that the most significant learning—learning that has actually been transformative in the way that their lives have been lived—has often been encountered outside of formal education or at the margins of their schooling by brave, insightful, and rebel teachers. Sometimes this learning has even occurred without a teacher, in a conventional sense. By rebel teachers we mean those often quiet educators that work alongside many others in response to the ecological and social injustices, even catastrophes, of our era. They know that they must find something to do in response to these challenges. And they are the ones that often generate the experiences that live on in learners' lives.¹

We suspect that those drawn to wild pedagogies, know that bringing different visions of education—or ideas like “nature as co-teacher”—into the mainstream is easier said than done. Many rebel teachers and education students know this well, particularly those who come to education with real-world experiences outside of the kind teaching that most often occurs in formal settings. Some have been outdoor and environmental educators who worked in camps, for wilderness operators, with non-governmental organizations, and as interpreters. Some have been involved in social justice issues and have worked with grassroots organizations committed to fairness, justice, and equity. Some have worked in alternative programmes both within and in response to mainstream education. Some have imaginatively toiled within the system itself, closing their doors (or maybe opening them to the playgrounds and parks beyond) and doing their own thing.

What unites these teachers is a passion for making a difference. Their experiences have taught them that education can be more inspirational, and pedagogy more transformational, than that which what they may have experienced during their own schooling. Yet students and teachers often struggle with an education system that has pushed to the side much of what they most value. As it turns out, most of their best learning experiences do not fit neatly into the prescribed “teachable” subjects.

Perhaps the keyword here is “prescribed.” When educational experiences are prescribed student learning tends to serve the ends of an education process based on predetermined outcomes—preferably those that are measurable. There is plenty of research suggesting that curriculum content and pedagogical strategies are bent to align with testable outcomes. Learning that is less amenable to testing is edged out.² Even in education faculties, enormous efforts are made to prescribe and control narrow versions of how education is defined and how it looks. Yet, as Arjen Wals reminded us, “What you can’t measure still exists.” And despite curriculum control and testing pressures, many committed teachers find ways to resist, to create, and wiggle into spaces for what they consider “real teaching.” For the immeasurable.³

One such space for resisting control is in curriculum theorist Elliot Eisner’s⁴ “expressive outcomes.” These are the consequences of activities that are planned to provide rich learning opportunities, but without explicit or precise objectives. The aim here is to shift emphasis away from evaluation and back to considering what good learning opportunities would look like—first and foremost. As Eisner says, “The tack taken with respect to the generation of expressive outcomes is to engage in activities that are sufficiently rich to allow for a wide, productive range of educationally valuable outcomes.”⁵ A key point is that focus shifts to creating good learning environments where outcomes arise from a combination of activities and context such that educators cannot possibly pre-determine everything that will happen and what learners might take away. They are in important ways self-willed, uncontrolled, and even wild.

On a cautionary note, this wild education is not the same as “going wild” or “out of control” in the more colloquial sense. The activities are carefully selected—and in this sense remain mediated. Yet they still give learners’ innate wildness and curiosity more space to flourish. Intriguingly,

this kind of pedagogy can inspire the opposite of the out of control wildness as learners find ways to exercise their own self-regulation. For, with freedom like this comes responsibility to oneself, to others, and to the learning project itself.

A Conundrum

For the last forty years or so, people involved in environmental and sustainability education have been occupied with questions about how to integrate their ideas, their approaches to education, and their pedagogies into the mainstream. To some extent, this effort has been successful. Globally, there are policies, programmes, curricula, pedagogic practices, and research agendas centring on environmental and sustainability education that together form a significant movement. However, despite this achievement, the overall pattern has been one of accommodation. The dominant educational paradigm is a powerful force capable of absorbing and bending new ideas back towards the *status quo*. So, while environmental education may appear to provide contrary and critical perspectives, the culture of mainstream education can render it largely ineffectual.

This kind of pervasive force that protects the *status quo* can take differing ideas and minimize—or flatten out—the inherent contradictions. The flattening out of conflicting points of view, or controversy, or differing social assumptions—it can be framed in many ways—does not come about through direct challenges. Rather, it comes about “through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale.”⁶ Rather than confront the challenging ideas of our times they are incorporated into our cultural texts. For example, instead of confronting ideas about sustainability, neo-liberal forces have embraced the term to talk about their own interests, like sustainable growth, or sustainable mining, or even sustainable excitement. When sustainability talk becomes ubiquitous, and is used to represent such a wide variety of interests, it loses its ability to disrupt dominant attitudes and assumptions. Similarly, environmental education can be embraced within mainstream education, but only if it can be shown to

help meet existing learning outcomes, or otherwise support the mainstream system. These forces don't really "want" you to make a difference in any fundamental way. They want you to conform to acceptable norms. Today we call it co-option.

In many ways, much of environmental, sustainability, and outdoor education has been conforming, rather than rebellious. The mainstream culture remains, by and large, unaffected. Indeed, we as authors and members of environmental, sustainability, and outdoor education communities, acknowledge that to varying degrees, these educational approaches have been co-opted—their potential to act as grit in the oyster has been curtailed. They have underperformed. They have been made safe.

The mainstream system adjusts sufficiently to accommodate any challenge, but in a way that ensures the system remains essentially the same. Mainstream education and the educational paradigm that underpins it—informed in the past 20–30 years by neo-liberalism—is itself a resilient system. It does not change radically, or easily.

In the meantime, we are convinced of two truths. One is that the world—the planet—is in an unprecedented climacteric state that threatens the survival of myriad species including our own. Second, courageous learning and teaching are absolutely key to the bold experimentation and generation of imaginative possibilities required for fundamental change and for supporting learners through such changes.

So, here we are presented with a conundrum: *how to credibly change educational systems so that they can in turn promote learning relevant to and commensurate with the multiple crises we face, without being co-opted?* Instead of seeking to integrate environmental and sustainability education into existing educational institutions, the challenge is rather the reverse. The task at hand is really to renegotiate, in conjunction with all-our-relations,⁷ the idea and practice of education itself. Beneath what appear as crises, such as climate change and species extinctions, a more profound crisis lies in the way that many humans relate to the world—that is the dominant modernist way of being in the world. A renegotiated and renewed vision of education must include structures, curricula, and pedagogies that are fundamentally disruptive to these ways of being.

And this is where the ideas of wild pedagogies—as characterised in this book—comes into play: going beyond the norm, achieving critical reflexivity, seeing the shoreline and puffins as co-teachers, in order to facilitate different practices, new insights, novel ways of working that spur imagination and vision, nourish creativity, build connection, and counter feelings of alienation and isolation. But at heart, we affirm a role for nature as co-teacher. And we affirm the wild spirit of people, particularly young people, which are all too often impoverished by testing and admonishment around “performance”—but whose passion for life needs to be freed up and nurtured if they are to be able to secure a future.

Stepping Out

The young toddler, not much more than one year old, and not walking yet, is at the top of the stairs. Let's call her Amy. She's looking down, wondering about whether she wants to try to descend. Before she can gently lower one podgy limb to the step below—which is a long way down for her—mother picks her up. Too dangerous, mum thinks. She might be right.

But supposing the mother constrained all her toddler's instincts to explore her environment, to experiment, to make sense of her world through touch, smell, hearing, trying things out, and to take risks? Of course, the baby would be impoverished.

Years later, Amy and her peers will likely pass through an education system that constrains possibilities, that disallows surprise discoveries, that frowns on what is deemed error, that rewards those that conform to the rigidity of set schemes, learning outcomes, and assessments.

But look! Amy wants to follow up something that has piqued her curiosity, she has questions that don't seem to be on the syllabus, she wants to be in the outdoors, and experience wonder. She is interested in ethics, in politics, in the state of the world. In the kind of world she and her friends are inheriting, and the kind of futures they might have. Well, she is told, that's all great, but it won't help you pass your exams.

So she makes it to her 20s. She's qualified. And so are lots of her friends. But Amy feels something is missing in herself. She's unsure who she is. She is a little apprehensive when she finds herself in an unfamiliar environment. She lacks social skills. She knows she is ignorant of nature, beyond simple labels—daisy, dandelion. She feels deeply—she wants to make a positive difference in the world, but feels unprepared and ill-equipped.

Wildness of Learners

Amy's experience, described in the "stepping out" vignette, is not unusual. For her, and thousands like her, the culture, values, and practices of the mainstream educational system have become increasingly limiting in recent decades. More instrumental, more technocratic, more mechanistic, under the wave of neo-liberal thinking that has seeped into and reshaped very area of public life, and even reconfigured what counts as normal discourse.

It was once very different. We talked of the intrinsic value of education, of child-centred learning; of holistic approaches and of head/hands/and heart; rounded education; collaborative and active pedagogies; teachers as learners; teachers as curriculum developers and collaborators; nature in the classroom; the classroom in nature; place-based education; art, music and drama held in equal esteem as more technical subjects, whole school approaches. And so on.

This was an education that honoured its etymological origins—the Latin *educare*, meaning to rear or foster, and *educere* which means to draw out or develop. Now, educational thinking, purpose, policy and practice has been squeezed. And it has been reduced to two dimensions. Horizontally, the bandwidth of what counts as important and legitimate has narrowed. So the arts are seen as increasingly marginal in the drive towards "harder" and "more technical" subjects. The vertical dimension is the depth of the learning experience. Here, the emphasis is on first order learning—content-based learning that is examinable and assessable. So deeper learning—that changes your perception, that touches your values, your sense of self, your relationship with nature and others—is not important.

Yet, given the unprecedented and multiple crises that face societies across the globe, this is the kind of education we need to embrace. One that allows and encourages boundaries to be questioned, broken, penetrated, or hurdled over—whether relating to curricula, teaching methods, assessment, or more deeply, to perception, values, attitudes and world-views. We desperately need to let our latent (but hitherto squashed) potential be realised. To flourish. Creative, inventive, collaborative, explorative, and—importantly—risk taking, into the unknown. Wild pedagogies. Stepping out.

Amy, described in the vignette, was taking the first steps all those years ago—but somehow between then and now, mainstream education got in the way.

Re-membering

In the chapter on the Anthropocene, we noted that Earth has always been an agent of history, but that this is often overlooked in modernist thinking and culture. In a sense then, a key aspect of the educational task can be framed as “re-membering.”

Re-membering is an evocation: a call to action. It is counter to, and an exposition of, the forces of dis-membering or dismemberment. By this we mean that our task is more than remembering how things might have been done differently, and perhaps better, in former times. It is also includes rebuilding human capacities—physical and emotional—that have atrophied or have even been excised from our physical being. How else can we describe the human estrangement from nature—and wilder-ness—so frequently lamented in these times? These are also times where denying the physicality of children often appears to be a virtue in contemporary education: “get back to the basics; maintain standards!” Re-membering challenges these forces.

Re-membering asserts the need for putting things back together—for integration, for healthy complexity and sustainable systems, and for wholeness. The word holds both richness and power, implying critique and healing. And it assumes increasing importance in a world where communities, nature, and persons are torn apart, put asunder, and their integrity compromised. But, in the process of re-membering, we find ourselves engaged, more whole, and more fully present. We suggest below a few possible layers or forms of re-membering, which, taken together, might serve as part of a trend towards a healing pattern.

One way to think about re-membering derives from the experience we, as authors, shared during our boat journey amongst the islands of the Inner Hebrides. Consider, for example, the subtle emergence of trust and communication amongst our colloquium group members. Here the collective experience enabled us to build a level of shared meaning and

purpose, which embraced both the individual and collective participation. This point should evoke some resonance amongst many readers for whom field experiences and collective projects are a staple of their educational vision. Still, this remains important and bears repeating.

In another sense, this experience, of being a member of the group—and of immersion in the inspiring landscape of the west coast of Scotland—invites a gradual re-remembering of ourselves as whole persons—cognitive, affective, emotional, spiritual, practical—that hints at a state of being that is so often distorted and squashed by the pressures of what we refer to as “ordinary life,” including “ordinary” education.

Re-remembering also connotes re-learning—opening to the practicality and wisdom of previous generations, particularly evoked in this beautiful but stark landscape where the ghosts of once-living cultures whisper through Gaelic place-names. It invites us to see again, through ancient Gaelic poetry, how monks of old and maybe learners of the future can live in a different relationship with Earth. Re-remembering invites—in fact necessitates—sensitivity and receptivity to the other, such that identity—who we are at that moment—is affected by our engagement. Re-remembering is seeing with new eyes, is renewal, is wonderment, requiring an extended ethical sensibility. And so it also carries pain and sadness for that which is lost without the hope of retrieval along with anger for senseless and structural violence against people and nature.

In yet another form, re-remembering carries a vision and lays down a challenge—to defend human and natural communities, to build cultural and ecological diversity, to value and recognise wholeness and integrity. It asks us to re-integrate humanity and nature, renegotiate the relationship between and betwixt, and points to the illusion—delusion—that humans can survive without striving for the mutual flourishing of both, without recognising our crucial co-dependency.

For wild pedagogues then these ideas of re-remembering can offer some coherence to our critique of dominant pathologies of our culture but also, they can act as a reminder to us as we go about the work of teaching. We, and our students, are bodies situated in communities, with histories and myths that still are, or once were, intimately connected to the bodies and communities of the other-than-human world.

The Joy of Not-Knowing

As a group of authors travelling together in Scotland, discussing possibilities for wild pedagogies, we were also experiencing new landscapes, making new friends, and enjoying each other's company. At the same time we were wrestling with concepts, writing, and trying to crystallise ideas! These are all important activities that would be part of commonly accepted forms of scholarship. But, we also sought include the natural world, as an interlocutor, and an active contributor in our work. This process was, and continues to be incomplete. However, we did find that immersion in the physical space enabled our coming to nature. And we found the entry of the other-than-human was aided by approaching the place with an open, generous, attentive, curious, and maybe even welcoming mind.

In the string of qualities of mind just listed, perhaps the idea of an “open” mind is the most contentious, confusing, and even paradoxical. For example, as authors, our heads were full of stuff—conceptual stuff, writing stuff, and memories of past experiences. And, this stuff sometimes played out in unfortunate ways. For example, one member of our own group noticed, during a walk on an island stopover, two other participants vigorously discussing wild pedagogies. Suddenly, the rest of the group stopped to listen to the howling sounds of a seal colony off in the distance. The discussants stopped, too, but continued their conversation unaware that the others were trying to listen to these voices of nature. It is easy to overwhelm nature with mind stuff—to be enclosed in a social bubble.

A Welcome Interruption

As the light faded, shrouding the shoreline, my social bubble was interrupted by a distant hooting sound coming from the shore. To me it sounded just like the beginning call of a barred owl, a familiar sound from home. My social bubble partner and I walked to the stern of the ship and found others listening to the calls. Doug, who helped us all become more aware of the Scottish wild voices, shared that the calls came from a colony of seals. The sound was much clearer at the stern and I for some unexplained reason sent

out my barred owl call. It seemed like the seals responded as their calls intensified. Whether or not they actually responded to me, I felt a connection that I cannot explain—it bordered on elation. This same feeling envelops me in the spring when the world awakens; the symphony of peepers as dusk approaches, the call of the sandhill cranes, the pink hue of the spring beauties. This listening is something I would like to nurture more in my life—both personally and in my work with early childhood education students and children.



Image 4.1 A seal presence. Photo credit: Hansi Gelter

We do not think our experience is unique. Even during educational activities set within physical landscapes it is easy to slip into this kind of bubble. Part of this bubble can be social. Travelling in wild places can be full of activity—monitoring each others' well being, finding the route, sharing food, anticipating difficulties, yarning about last time. These are all important; these are not comfortable places to

make a mistake. Beyond these tasks, socialisation often involves other cultural activities—singing favourite songs, talking about politics and pop culture, and joking around. These things are important, too, but they are not enough. And, paradoxically, they become themselves bubbles that filter out the voices of nature. They sometimes overwhelm the intended purposes of journey even when the point is so explicitly framed as a journey to develop something like wild pedagogies.

It is not easy to intentionally quiet the chatter in our minds and be receptive to a multitude of more-than-human voices. Anyone who practises meditation understands this. But, part of our task is to try and just be. It is to be open to experience without immediately bringing preconceptions, and a busy-mind analysis, to the situation. Sometimes, in our heart-felt desire to be closer to nature by thinking the issues through so carefully, we trip ourselves up. Nature itself, can evoke a range of emotions that can include fear and anxiety. But with care, it is sometimes enough just to *be*. It can be enough to be close to nature—to embrace our, and indeed its, physicality and sensuousness—and see what arises in that space. And in this, there can be joy in not knowing, in not bringing preconceptions to experience.

In the next chapter we will introduce a series of touchstones that we have found helpful in guiding us through the kinds of conundrums that have been presented in this section. And it is here that we will explain how nature can be a co-teacher, what some of the important tenets of wild pedagogies are, and what questions wild pedagogues might want to be asking themselves and each other as they continue along this challenging, yet necessary, road.

Acknowledgements *Crex crex* is the taxonomical name given to the Corncrake. We have chosen this bird to represent our collective because it was an important collaborator in this project and because its onomatopoeic name beautifully mirrors its call—a rasy crex crex. For some reason, it chooses to fly over England and breeds in Scotland and Ireland. Presumably this is due to loss of habitat in modern England, but perhaps these birds sense some epicenter of empire there? Who is to know?

Notes

1. Sean Blenkinsop, and Marcus Morse, "Saying Yes to Life: The Search for the Rebel Teacher," in *Post-Sustainability and Environmental Education: Remaking Education for the Future*, ed. Bob Jickling and Stephen Sterling (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 49–61.
2. See for example: Janice Astbury, Stephen Huddart, and Pauline Théoret, "Making the Path as We Walk It: Changing Context and Strategy on Green Street," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 14 (2009): 158–178; Wayne Au, "Teaching Under the New Taylorism: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of the 21st Century Curriculum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 43, no. 1 (2011): 25–45; Bob Jickling, "Sitting on an Old Grey Stone: Meditations on Emotional Understanding," in *Fields of Green: Restorying Culture, Environment, and Education*, ed. Marcia McKenzie, Paul Hart, Heesoon Bai, and Bob Jickling (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2009): 163–173; Bob Jickling, "Self-Willed Learning: Experiments in Wild Pedagogy," *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 10, no. 1 (2015): 149–161; and William C. Smith, ed., *The Global Testing Culture: Shaping Educational Policy, Perceptions, and Practice* (Oxford: Symposium Books, 2016).
3. Arjen E.J. Wals, "What You Can't Measure Still Exists," *The Environmental Communicator* 12 (1990): 12.
4. Elliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination*. 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1985).
5. *Ibid.*, 121.
6. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964): 57.
7. Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (Boston: South End Press, 2008).

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