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## Six Touchstones for Wild Pedagogies in Practice

The Crex Crex Collective

**Abstract** The touchstones presented in this chapter are intended to help sustain the work of wild pedagogues. They stand as reminders of what educators are trying to do. And they challenge us to continue the work. These touchstones are offered to all educators who are ready to expand their horizons, and are curious about the potential of wild pedagogies. The touchstones can become points of departure and places to return to. It is suggested that they be read, responded to, and revised as part of an evolving, vital, situated, and lived practice. As such, these initial touch-

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stones are not intended to be dogmatic, but simply a best gathering of ideas and practices at this time. These preliminary touchstones are, thus, intended to assist educators in practicing wild pedagogies.

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## Making Landfall and Touching Stone

The islands of the Inner Hebrides are a geologist's paradise, drawing experts and rock hounds from across the globe. Within a small area, there are multiple epic tales of the earth's formation being told. Pre-Cambrian tectonic plates have collided, rebounded, and collided again, crumpling sea beds, exposing the hidden and cracking the surface which in turn has allowed volcanoes to form and lava to flow. And then there has been the ice, entire ages of it covering the region, causing seas to rise and fall while scraping and sculpting the surface and leaving behind erratics, moraines, and notes carved deeply into the bedrock. For those literate in the language of deep time and slow history, the landscape is storied. It is in these glacial notes, these beaches sprung from the depths when the ice melted and the land rose up, it is in these basalt sculptures, and it is in these rolling ancient hills. These stories, like any good epic, are filled with creation, destruction, change, strong emotions, and on-going possibility. For our small group, each time we came ashore, stepping directly into the narrative, the great geostory, and literally "touching stone," we entered a seemingly unique part of the tale. Each island has its own geology but each is also a necessary part of a larger whole, the tale told by Islands of Hebrides. Like any story, there are possibilities afforded and limits implied once pen has touched paper and the copy is printed. Thus, the following thoughts, suggestions, and questions that we have called "touchstones" are limited, too.

Our hope for the touchstones in this chapter is that they sustain the work of wild pedagogues, to be held, and returned to over and over, for

guidance, reference, and support. They stand as reminders of what we, as wild pedagogues, are trying to do. And they challenge us to continue the work. We offer these touchstones, to all educators who are ready to expand their horizons, and are curious about the potential of wild pedagogies. Touchstones can become points of departure and places to return to. We suggest reading, responding, and revising them as part of an evolving, situated, and lived practice. As such, these initial touchstones are not intended to be dogmatic, but simply our best gathering of ideas and practices at this time. We hope that these preliminary touchstones can assist us all in practicing wild pedagogies. We welcome further discussion, research, critique, and practice-based elaboration.

In presenting this work, each touchstone begins with a short geological observation drawn from the places we visited. This, in a small way, sets the scene for the reader, it gives a flavour for what we encountered on our journey. This observation is followed by a short “we believe” statement that summarizes the touchstone and serves as a quick reminder for the harried wild pedagogue. The bulk of each touchstone is then comprised of explanatory text with short vignette intrusions that also draw from our experiences in Scotland. The vignettes attempt to bring the natural world actively into the touchstones, and, in different ways, offer a wider range of voices than is usually possible with regular prose. The final section of each touchstone is a series of questions that we hope can prompt readers as they go about practicing and developing wild pedagogies.

## Touchstone #1: Nature as Co-Teacher

*Passing the Treshnish Isles, raised beaches and wave cut terraces belie a rebounding and resilient crust relieved of the thick weight of the icy Pleistocene. These open aerie platforms, that outstripped the rising seas as a result of melting glaciers, are now carpeted with bluebells, more recent ecological memories of former woodlands.*

**We believe that education is richer, for all involved, if the natural world and the many denizens that co-constitute places, are actively engaged with, listened to, and taken seriously as part of the educative process.**

\* \* \*

This touchstone reminds educators to acknowledge, and then act, on the idea that those teachers capable of working with, caring for, and challenging student learning include more-than-human beings. This implies more than simply learning from the natural world; it includes learning with and through it as well; and thus, its myriad beings become active, fellow pedagogues. We acknowledge that this can be a challenge for educators “marinated” in a modernist worldview. Yet, we recognize that there can be tremendous benefits to questioning the idea that a single human teacher should be at the centre of teaching and learning, and to expand consideration of what and who an educator is and might be.

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*Finding my sea legs ... we are three days at sea and I am no longer slipping and flopping around the deck like a fish recently pulled from the water. My body has begun to both respond and anticipate the ship's movement in reply to the waves and wind. I am, like an infant, beginning to enter into dialogue with the world around me. Intriguingly, this has not only taught me some important things about walking, the bruises attesting to a tough mentor, and movement but it also appears to be influencing my thinking. My spoken metaphors are more fluid in nature and I am beginning to read particular waves and stretches of water and understand their meanings in my own context of trying to remain standing and move about the ship.*

\* \* \*



**Image 5.1** Bluebells blooming. Photo credit: Hansi Gelter

Consider how the field of bluebells described in the opening vignette of this touchstone are telling us where forests once were, and, how the “floating beaches” found 100s of feet away from Treshnish’s current coastline tell the tale of lands rebounding from the weight of now melted glaciers. All of these—waves, flowers, and orphaned coastlines—are participating in the process of our coming to know the world and ourselves in it. What can these observations tell us about nature as a co-teacher?

If we take seriously the notion that the natural world is not made up of inert entities; but, rather, it is filled with active, self-directing, and vibrant participants, then our attention towards the affordances of place-based education changes. In seeking to teach *with* nature, educators become open and available to the range of facts, knowings, and understandings that places have to offer. Such attention involves carefully listening to available voices and building partnerships with seashores and forest dwellers. And it will, at times, involve actively de-centring the taken-for-granted human voice and re-centring more-than-human voices.

Such re-centring of more-than-human voices requires openness to the educational opportunities arising in places. For example, a young robin landing on a branch, only to have it snap and fall under its weight, is learning about itself and the nature of a tree branch. But if this is

witnessed by us, the experience can become the grist for learning. It can lead to a quick lesson on trial and error, a conversation and future exploration into flight, or an opening into humour—what is funny and for whom. If we take seriously the role of co-teacher, we need to be attentive to moments when our fellow co-teachers are engaging students meaningfully. We need to acknowledge these co-teachers might be offering something more and something different—something beyond our ability. And when these moments arise, we need to provide time and space for the lessons to run their course.

In acknowledging this touchstone, educators are encouraged to encounter the natural world, and its members, in non-hierarchical and equitable ways. This may pose an on-going challenge in conventional education settings. For example, it can mean spending more time outdoors, pushing back against tightly scripted timelines, and changing the contents of classrooms. And it will be an on-going challenge with respect to pedagogical approaches. Here, it can mean less human teacher voice, more independent and place interactive time, and significant changes in the relationships between and amongst natural beings, students, teachers, and subject matters. Changing relationships within educational settings—and also within the schools, communities, and systems from which those same settings arise—will require some radical shifts that are not easily recognized in mainstream settings.

\* \* \*

*We are standing on the walls of a ruined thirteenth century luxury home, an armed outpost overlooking Ardtornish Bay, when one of our party recognizes the cry of a stressed herring gull. Shifting focus in the vast blue (yes, it was a sunny day in Scotland) and finding our sky eyes, we locate the disturbed bird and there above it circling and closing in is a huge white-tailed eagle.*

\* \* \*

When educators and students attend to the particulars of their places, as in the vignette, they can begin to acknowledge and accept pedagogical invitations offered by the natural world. And at the same recognize affordances and pedagogical possibilities that exist throughout their locales. Many rich conversations about life and death, evolution, binocular vision, self-protection, and working in community can be started as we observe the drama playing out around us. It is important, however, that human learners recognize that these experiences cannot be completely encapsulated by the human imagination. We do not fully understand the interaction between gull and eagle, or bird and sky, or even sun and sight. It is important to be aware that the natural world is not simply an educational opportunity arranged for humans; it is not there just to be picked through by the thoughtful human teacher for the sole benefit of a particular group of students. This awareness requires humility on the part of the human educator, both because human knowledge is now understood as being necessarily incomplete and because sometimes the co-teacher is not just a support teacher, but will take the lead and the learning might go in unexpected directions.

For most human co-educators this touchstone will be a substantive demand, involving re-thinking the concept and role of the educator and reflection upon curriculum and practice. It will require noticing, naming, and even changing metaphors, traditions, and systems that have tended to shut out or devalue the natural world.

**With this discussion as background, educators might want to consider questions such as:**

- **What habits in my teaching do I tend to fall into that can place at a distance, background, undervalue, or denigrate the natural world?**
- **How can I invite the natural world to be present as a co-teacher in my practice?**
- **How might we as a class contribute to the potential flourishing of each other and those that live lives in proximity to our own?**
- **How have we been able to learn about, with, through, and from members of the natural world?**
- **And, how might we be able to make space for other teaching voices to be heard in their own ways?**

## Touchstone #2: Complexity, the Unknown, and Spontaneity

*Poured by Vulcan, Staffa, the island of pillars and Fingal's Cave, broods and waits. Spectacular hexagonal basalt columns rise from the sea as a testament to slow cooling and the power of deep cracking. Equally amazing as these vertical columns are the waves and curls of their discarded relations strewn in a multitude of "woodpiles," a sculpted memory of a long completed thermal tai chi, the surprise of witnessing the rhythms and ballets of solid rock.*

\* \* \*

**We believe that education is richer for all involved, if there is room left for surprise. If no single teacher or learner can know all about anything, then there always remains the possibility for the unexpected connection to be made, the unplanned event to occur, and the simple explanation to become more complex. Knowledge, if given space, is wondrously dynamic.**

\* \* \*

For the most part, education is now conceptualised as the transference of a canonized body of knowledge from those who know to those who do not. What is considered knowledge, and what is worth knowing, is largely predetermined by those in control, And yet, even in this carefully constructed space, there lurk shadows and forgotten strands of complex interconnections. Wild pedagogies seek to open up possibilities for embracing complexity and spontaneity in ways that imply re-negotiating educational practices. Embracing complexity will require encounters with that "which cannot be known," which cannot be predetermined and prescribed in advance. Complexity can be understood as dynamic, fluid, and unpredictable, and is best described in reference to qualities without fixed boundaries. It stands in contrast to a static, deterministic, and linear view of the world. As Noel Gough suggests, "complexity invites us to understand our physical and social worlds as open, recursive, organic, nonlinear and emergent, and to be cautious of complying with models and trends in education that assume linear thinking, control and predictability."<sup>1</sup> This implies that educators need to, at least in part, relinquish the



control and self-domesticating forces that are ingrained in our pedagogical thinking and practices. And it implies that they will need to be more open to spontaneous, and sometimes surprising, occurrences.

\* \* \*

*The sea has gone quiet. After yesterday's tempest, this placid, slate-grey surface seems to be asking us to forget the storm, but that is impossible. As we climb down the precarious ladder tied to our sailboat's hull and settle ourselves in the tiny unreliably motored dinghy for the 300 m ride to shore, we are quiet humbly remembering yesterday's power display and our own limitations in the face of such violence. And yet, it is this ecozone, this risky space between 82 acres of basalt monolith that is the island of Staffa and 100 feet of sailing vessel where the seabirds really make themselves known. We are surrounded by rafts of guillemots and razorbills, while above us flying in huge circular patterns from cliff homes to sea feeding and back, are hundreds of boisterous puffins. These avian wonders and their expressive cacophony tell us clearly of the abundance of this interstitial zone between safe havens.*

\* \* \*



Image 5.2 Basalt columns on Staffa. Photo credit: Hansi Gelter

Mainstream education often seeks to position itself in the safe places, the solid ground of land and boat, and yet it is often in those interstitial spaces where productivity and possibility exist. Wild pedagogies challenges ideas of control in education by embracing complexity, inviting risk, and allowing for emergence. For example, what might spontaneously arise, unpredictably and unplanned, from interactions between learners and nature?

First, complexity challenges our notions of linear and reductive understanding as it underpins many current educational systems and practices. And second, leaving space for the unknown and spontaneity is a way to respond to dominating tendencies of educational control. For example, universal and measurable standards are created based on a set of concrete truths; schools function to define and legitimize the places in which learning can occur; students are managed via timed programming, normalized instructional locations, and prescribed outcomes; and knowledge is understood to be amenable to fragmentation and deliverable in parts independent of the context from which it arises. But maybe there is something important going on in that zone between the comfort of the boat and the solidity of the land, something unpredictable that can arise from this interstitial space.

This second suggested touchstone for wild pedagogies involves actively embracing the unknown, complexity and emergence, allowing space for the spontaneous. All three of these components involve a kind of pushing off from the safe centre, an undoing of the human as centre of the world, as managerial arbiter of everything, in order to allow other ideas, possibilities, spaces, beings, and imaginations to emerge.

\* \* \*

*We are coming to the end of our first full day together and we have gathered in the saloon as a group in order to try and put the finishing touches on our proposed community norms. This facilitated process of trying to determine who we want to be as a group and how we want to interact with one another is a classic activity, but our process seems to be grinding to a halt.*

*People are tired. It has been a busy day of meeting, greeting, and dealing with the whys and wherefores of the boat, this colloquium, and more. Suddenly there is a wild clatter on the deck above us. The voices of several raucous gulls breach our gathering. The excitement draws our attention and yet hesitation. Some wish to respond, some seek to stay with the current work, and some are caught in-between. But the disruption continues and there is a rush deck-side to catch three gulls in the throes of a dispute over a bit of food. What is striking is that in the dispute much of the food is lost and nobody really benefits in the end. Everything quietens down in a few minutes and a solitary gull establishes itself high in our rigging while the others fly off in search of new plunder. Our little group of humans remains on deck, quietly, our impasse disappears and we unanimously agree to change our norms such that we will seek to actively include the natural world as much as possible.*

\* \* \*

The spontaneous nature of an encounter with hungry gulls reveals educational possibilities. The gulls were a clarion reminder that the world exists; and it was good listening to them. In some ways, our own ideas, limitations, and impasse were played out in front of us. Active intrusions can lead to powerful “aha” moments. Just as positions and perceptions were overturned by this encounter, wild pedagogies might allow for spontaneous encounters that challenge implicit ways of knowing and being, and even disrupt cultural norms. For us, our preferred norms were literally rewritten as a result.

Viewing and understanding the world as complex, spontaneous, and mysterious is difficult. For educators this means climbing down the outside of the sailboat and sometimes puttering out onto the giant unknown in a somewhat unreliable dinghy. This also means resisting the urge to grab the textbook, to offer the “right” and simple answer or do what has always been done. This resistance to the solid and controllable might require questioning current metaphors, practices, and understandings of what it means to learn and to know. It also involves overcoming mainstream education’s reliance on defined outcomes, known standards, and

measured results. There must be more room for learning that is fluid, flexible, and diverse.

**Educators might want to consider questions such as:**

- **What might I do to embrace complexity in my teaching today?**
- **How was I able to empower learners to journey into the complexity of knowledge and not reach for the easy, seemingly final, answer?**
- **How did my practice today take risks in moving away from the full control of assumed ends? And how might it continue with that tomorrow?**
- **Is there room for the unknown, spontaneous, and unexpected to appear and be taken seriously in our educational work?**
- **Did learners encounter the incomplete nature of knowledge today?**

### **Touchstone #3: Locating the Wild**

*Awe inspiring insights into paleo-climates and unsorted Precambrian glacial tillites create a ragged western wall protecting early monks from the worst of the sea's rages while they gently and tenderly settled in this wild place. Their rudimentary accommodation and places of worship are now in ruins, though not so the objects of their devotions enduring gaze or reasons for choosing this site.*

\* \* \*

**We believe that the wild can be found everywhere, but that this recognition and the work of finding the wild is not necessarily easy. The wild can be occluded, made hard to see, by cultural tools, by the colonial orientation of those doing the encountering, and, in urban spaces, by concrete itself.**

\* \* \*

The Norwegian eco-philosopher, Arne Næss, was once asked about what teachers can do in urban areas, and how teachers might meet some of the challenges in taking children outside. He replied:

In the schoolyard itself, you find a corner where there is just one little flower. You bend down—you use your body language—and you say: “Look here.” And some answer: “There is nothing there.” And then you talk a little about what you see: “This flower here, it’s not the season for it. How can it be there this late in the year? And look at it. It certainly has need of a little more water; it’s bending, look at the way it bends. What do you see when it’s bending like this?” I call teachers who behave like this “nature gurus.” It is a little more like an Eastern kind of education. More in terms of personal relations. Try to make them see things they haven’t seen before. Use your body language. And even inside the schoolyards you find nature’s greatness.<sup>2</sup>

As Næss suggests, there is potential to encounter the wild in a range of settings. Given that the growing majority of us live in super-urban, urban, and suburban places where the wild may not be easily and immediately apparent this touchstone presents both fertile ground and difficult work. In bringing students to encounter the wild there are no educational guarantees: there is no simple solution to the problem of how to facilitate students’ encounters with the wild, the self-willed, and self-arising others that surround us. There is no simple way to nourish that curling wiggling, reverberating, upending version of wildness that exists within us.

\* \* \*

*It is a beautiful spring day in the Hebrides. Here and there we can see yellow irises just coming into magnificence. There is lush grass in the low-lying fields and in the distance, beyond white sand beaches that remind us of those in the Caribbean, the sea sparkles. We are surrounded by the burbling and murmur of waters on the move, shore birds creating homes, and small trees coming into full leaf. But, as someone has just pointed out, our group of humans has turned into a noisy gaggle. Attention drawn to each other’s voices, to the lines of discussion connecting mouth to ear. Our focus has turned inwards, as it so easily does in this world where humans are the*

*centre, and the sun, the colours, the voices of others have slid into the background yet again. We have, in spite of ourselves, created a human “social bubble.”*

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Many of us have spent days facilitating groups in remote areas only to have students turn away from encounters with the wild. We have witnessed them retreating into the comfort of their tents, social groups, or their own intellectual voyages and other unconscious habits. On the other hand, many have also experienced moments, immersed in deepest urban jungle, when a single green sprout has leaked through the pavement, and punctured the human ecology. By raising a leafy resistance to the “power of humans” story, a wild seed can be planted in an unsettled student. The wild is everywhere, and yet we also note that encountering it often appears to be easier in wilder, more self-willed places. One wonders if the poetry of those early monks living on wild, ragged, and isolated isles would have been different if they had done their writing in the quiet of a Dublin monastery. What would have happened to their humble odes filled with the voices of corncrakes and cuckoos? Their ideas of God and land? The challenge for many urban-based environmental educators is, then, that the murmur of wild can be overwhelmed by the noise, smell, and dominion of human constructions.<sup>3</sup>

Encountering the wild provides educators with complexity, opportunity, and challenges. The anti-colonial literature of Tunisian scholar Albert Memmi,<sup>4</sup> for example, when read with an eye to the modern human relationship to the natural world, offers a troubling analysis for wild pedagogues. Following Memmi as he develops themes exploring how the colonizer operated in order to oppress the peoples of North Africa, it is not a difficult stretch to see those same themes played out in relation to the natural world. Such an analysis implicates educators in a complex project that is not simply about providing opportunities for students to encounter the wild. It also requires helping students to see their own privilege in light of the destruction that western human-centred culture has wrought on the world. This move to see and respond to the

“natural world as colonized,” particularly in urban spaces, is complicated by the psychic challenges that all decolonizing work entails. It can help to build students’ fortitude so they can stay with, and even welcome, difficult and emotional discussions. Yet, this educational project is challenging because language, ways of being, structures of schools, and urban settings are all oriented in ways that draw students’ attention away from the wild, concealing both their alienation from it and their privilege.

**Educators might then consider questions such as:**

- **How can I make it possible for my students today to have encounters with the wild and/or self-willed communities that inhabit the spaces we are in?**
- **In what ways can I notice, and respond to human-centred and colonizing perspectives that we might encounter today?**
- **What can I do to provide ways for the wild in our encounters to be acknowledged?**
- **How did I notice and overcome my own and my students’ colonial habits in relating to the natural world?**
- **How might we recognize and how might we encourage acts of resistance enacted by wild beings? And how can we help students to develop the ability to “lean in to” and even welcome difficult encounters with privilege, alienation, and colonization?**

## **Touchstone # 4: Time and Practice**

*Our trip began with a circumnavigation of the island of Mull. A place dominated by layers of lava that have poured out of the earth at different geological times. The constant upheaval has meant that older lava is shot full of intrusions. And the unpredictable nature of flows and cooling has meant that there are dykes and small cliff edges all over the island. Landing on Mull is to dip in and out of deep time, dip in and out of ecological and cultural history.*

**We believe that building relationships with the natural world will, like any relationship, take time. We also believe that discipline and practice are essential to this process.**

\* \* \*

This touchstone is about process, and we are offering two key components for assisting individuals in the process of change—time and practice.

For our current purposes we are thinking of time in two different ways. The first way is the one we are most familiar with: clock-time. Much of the work described in the previous touchstones requires this kind of time. It is required for building relationships with beings, things, and places. We must spend time—lots of it—immersed in, dialoguing with, and learning with, from, and about the natural world. The second way we are thinking of time suggests a less linear, more organic, deeper form, similar to the one encountered on the island of Mull.

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*Approaching the Garvellachs on a breezy spring day is an adventure. There is no landing site so we are forced to scramble onto barnacle-encrusted rocks as the dinghy noses into a small bay. From a distance, the island appears too small and rugged to have served as home for anyone and yet, after scaling the rocky shoreline, small flat enclosures and pocket sized dwelling sites become visible. These run up the slope next to the tiny, permanent, two-litres-per-hour, freshwater stream. Across a low hill we find the best preserved of the monks' cells. A beehive structure built from stone and physics stands 15 feet high. It is a quiet place for a life of discipline, perched precariously and exposed to the vagaries of wind, weather, and wildlife.*

\* \* \*





**Image 5.3** The Lady of Avenel in the Garvellachs. Photo credit: Hansi Gelter

Clock time is also required to support learners as they grow into new, wild habits. For pragmatic philosophers, the process of habit change is understood as one of deep examination of self and culture. In light of this, learners must come to recognize that they have already developed many habits to enable them to navigate the existing cultural waters of their time and place. Educational moments may arise over the course of a wild curriculum that offer opportunities for learners to recognize that such habits exist and to open them to critique and revision thus making

it possible to engage in a process of self-creation where learners begin to enact new ways of being in the world. However, this process is challenging and clock-time consuming. Previous habits are resilient and embedded, well-practiced response mechanisms used for navigating the world.

One wonders what habits the monks were forced to recognize and change as result of living on these tiny islands with very little fresh water. And how were these habit changes linked to deeper discoveries as a result of living in these isolated and exposed islands? Were they inspired by these places to change their regard for the natural world and their own place in it?

By contrast the second way of looking at time involves seeing it as an organic and living process rather than a linear steady tick-tock. Sometimes it is called “deep time.” Learners come to recognize that they are continuously having new and different experiences that appear at odds with each other, that are on-going and incomplete, that are complex and uncontrollable. Reason is of limited usefulness. Sometimes the world around seems much larger than we can comprehend. It was like this for us when, crouching on exposed shores of the Gravellachs, we tried to imagine sixth century monks inhabiting that place, or when encountering the ancient stone on Mull, we contemplated its age. Here intuition, a product of deep time, plays a more important role than reason, which is a product of more recent cultural history. Finding a place for intuition, sustained by organic time, is needed to allow for more expansive wild encounters. And it will be needed to tell a different, renegotiated, geostory. Acquiring intuition, and a relationship to organic time, will require discipline, even practice, and will only be learned over time. Yet it is important to wild pedagogues and can lead to what Arne Næss might call a deeper and bigger self.

\* \* \*

*We are meeting, on this beautiful calm evening, in the forward saloon of the sailboat. It is where we, as a group, seem to do most of our living. We eat here, we gather for meetings and discussions, and we often just hang out in this comfortable space. Low windows surround us on three sides and from a slouched position I can see out to the darkening sky. The discussion*

*this evening is slow and somewhat desultory. We have had a full day and our bunks are calling. Then all of a sudden our lethargy is interrupted by a chirrup from an unexpected visitor and a shiver of excitement runs through the group. Quickly and quietly we gather on the outer decks to watch an otter frolic and even engage with its audience. Five minutes later it disappears from sight, but its input guides our discussion for another 90 minutes, as the wind lightens and the sun sinks into the sea.*

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Closely associated with time are invitations to practice. The first invites teachers to develop their own practice in a way that deepens relationships with local places and beings. This work, sometimes likened to meditative practice, requires listening more deeply and becoming attuned to more-than-human co-teachers. It can be a first step leading towards a radical reworking of relationships. This form of practice, like all others, suggests on-going work. Environmental relationships that blossomed in childhood, or that occurred in short time bursts in the backcountry, while at the cottage, or at an outdoor learning centre are often important starting points, but insufficient to be considered a practice unless they have been developed and sustained. Wild pedagogies, as a practice, requires the kind of on-going attention and discipline that any other practice might entail.

Our second invitation to practice involves teachers developing the will and ability to rework their own pedagogies. Consider the earlier vignette of the distressed seagull and the hungry eagle. In this case, someone needed to have an acquired practice with the natural world in order to recognize that particular vocalization of the gull. This educational practice first allowed one of our companions to draw attention to the “noise-maker” and, second, to follow the lead of the noisy co-teacher up to the eagle. Then he shared that interaction with the rest of us while finding ways to respond to the different reactions of the group members, the learners took. He also needed the intuition to make use of this particular event at this particular time. The success of our group experience rested on our teacher’s lifetime of attentiveness.



**Image 5.4** Voices amongst us. Photo credit: Hansi Gelter

Developing new practices will require reflection, risk taking, experimenting with possibilities, examining successes and failures, and then repeating this process over and over. Students and teachers need opportunities to practice. Wild pedagogues and their students will also need time in that interstitial space between old habits of practice and traditional relationships with the natural world, and new radically different ones.

**Educators might want to consider questions such as:**

- **Can I leave enough space in my teaching to allow my students and myself to engage with natural places and with beings that are nearby?**
- **Can I recognize that we often go at different speeds, and that some will need more time than others?**
- **How are we, together, able to find ways to step out of the linear time of the school system and encounter time working in different ways?**

- Was I able to notice, respond to, and support students who were trying out new habits?
- How can I maintain and nurture my own practice of immersing in and building relationships with the places and beings I encounter?
- Am I noticing my practice, trying new things, reflecting on what has been attempted?
- Were there opportunities for my students to develop their intuition?

## Touchstone #5: Socio-Cultural Change

*Stepping ashore on Iona takes us deep into the Archean gneisses at the core of the country. These appear where the earth has been moved alongside ancient schists. Sprinkled across the surface are Silurian and Devonian granites brought much later as glacial erratics. We find all these rocks carefully positioned in the islanders' stonewalls and the abbey buildings celebrating St. Columba.*

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We believe that the way many humans currently exist on the planet needs changing, that this change is required at the cultural level, and that education has an important role to play in this project of cultural change. We also believe that education is always a political act, and we see wild pedagogues embracing the role of activists as thoughtfully as they can. Current norms of the dominant Western culture, many of which infuse mainstream education, are environmentally problematic. In response, we seek wild pedagogies that are actively and politically aimed towards telling a new geostory of a world in which all beings can flourish.

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We have seen plenty of evidence that the Earth is in the throes of geological change. The stable climate and diverse eco-systems of the last epoch are rapidly changing. As educators we have always aspired to play an important role in preparing students for the future. But what happens when the future is no longer predictable? This touchstone seeks to respond to this question by first encouraging wild pedagogues to challenge the dominant versions of education that serve to confirm the *status quo*. The current educational “normal” is dangerously replicating the kinds of society and culture that enabled this geologic change and loss of bio-diversity in the first place. Disrupting current trends and preparing learners for an unclear and virtually unknown future requires a conscious shifting of values and educational priorities that is fundamentally political in its purpose and practice.

\* \* \*

*There is an interesting cultural clash starting to appear on the boat. One group more informed about Scotland and the social realities of crofters and clearances, has a more complete agenda for things to see and important places to visit to further the discussions we are having. As a result of limited and directionally troublesome wind this group is suggesting more time spent under motor. The other group, folks who were less privy to the original organizing and who are currently intrigued by the ocean landscapes and its movements, has been pushing for more time under sail, even without wind, released from the demands of wind, current, and agenda. For the first group this desire to float is a kind of classic forgetting that human histories are part and parcel of landscapes, and that behind their agenda lies the history of colonialism and human intervention. For the latter group, the no-motor advocates, the first group seems to be falling into a common “be productive” myth, needing to be doing rather than recognizing the importance of not-doing. They worry that the motor is obscuring the water world around us and setting at a distance our relations to the natural world.*

\* \* \*

Wild pedagogies call upon educators to engage in these complex, contentious, and challenging situations, as described in the vignette above. It requires dialogue that brings out a deeper motivation and belief in learners, and that they consciously embrace their role as political beings. Acknowledging oneself as a political being or activist means recognizing that the choices we make are negotiations of power. Such a stance has often been seen as anathema to the professional educator. While it is widely acknowledged that education is value-laden, how to respond to this realization remains contested. There will always be disagreement around the introduction of politics into education and the danger of its politicization, particularly in an era of ideologues and demagoguery. Educators rightly fear teaching that imposes their own political or religious views onto students in ways that affect students' ability to choose for themselves in a secular, inclusive state.

However, it is clear that any choice made in classrooms by teachers is political and has implications for the world that is being brought to the students, to paraphrase philosopher Martin Buber.<sup>5</sup> To teach to a supposedly impartial curriculum is to acculturate the students to a *status quo*, a specific paradigm, and a set of beliefs and practices, those of the dominant culture. Such an unquestioned and unexamined curriculum presents the student with the prevailing political norms and, since both students and educators are immersed in that same cultural and social environment, the political message goes unrecognized. This invisibility and normality makes *status quo* politics extremely potent. It is, after all, the daily bread of the society.

If an educator's work is to teach about the world, then she must help students to see, and name, the politics that shape our collective norms and relationships. Teachers can remain unpartisan, but they cannot remain politically neutral in their work. We are exercising power and positing value in the choices of: what content to share and what pedagogy to use, which ideas will be followed up and deemed worthwhile, which power dynamics are condoned or disrupted in our classes, and which histories are told. Despite the plethora of prescribed curricula, policies, and bureaucracy that can constrain educators' options for content and pedagogy, our work can still be a force for cultural change.

Thus, wild pedagogies are explicitly and deliberately about enabling mutually desirable socio-cultural change. In choosing content and pedagogies there is an aim—humbly submitted—for this work to change the relationship humans currently have with the natural world. We hope for a relationship that is much more equitable and interactive, that pursues flourishing for all beings for the express purpose of stopping the massive destruction being wrought and to mitigate accompanying problems such as climate change.

Where does the educator fit in to this type of transformation? Does the educator herself act strategically to influence the dominant power structures? We answer “yes.” Our actions always influence power structures, but often subconsciously. When we are unaware of this influence, we are in danger of aligning with the *status quo*. As long as we can acknowledge this, we have options for understanding our own power, how it is currently being used, and how we wish it to be used. Wild pedagogies proposes that we exercise our options with consideration for our relations with other beings, that we tend to the earth and our relationship with it, and that we see the more-than-human world as political actors. In doing all this we will wild our conceptions of socio-cultural change. A small example may help to clarify the point.

\* \* \*

*The sails are up and the boat catches the wind. The engine's hum goes silent and the ship leans (or heels) at an angle, starboard side sinking into the sea. The dominant presences now shaping our lives are water and wind. They set the agenda, continuously breathing into the ship, into our balance of legs and feet, hearts, and minds. Intriguingly, with the sails up, the boat has become a new conduit for a different kind of communication. We are offered a new way of understanding and encountering air and wave, each playing with the other. Our concepts and understanding are being shaped by the sensory organ that is the boat itself. The wind is translated by the waves into the hull of the boat which in turn translates that into our bodies and we become interpreters of sea and sky.*

\* \* \*



This touchstone is genuinely wild, for we cannot know in advance what the outcomes will be or how future learners will enact their learning. We are, in some ways, under sail without a clear sense of the destination and much to still learn. What is intended is that wild pedagogies will change education, how it is conceived and enacted, and this will disrupt the invisible politics of the *status quo*. It may even result in learners who are more loving and compassionate in deploying their power, more vigilant and careful in the values they support, and who consider themselves players in healing or resisting, restoring or creating, doing or not-doing as the situation requires.

**Educators might want to consider questions such as:**

- **How does my practice respond to the existing curriculum and values that are embedded in my workplace? Am I satisfied with my response? Why? What are my criteria for satisfaction?**
- **Were there situations that arose in my lessons that allowed learners to consider their current relationships with the natural, and did they have the right to change them?**
- **What politics of the natural world did we encounter and how was that brought into our work?**
- **Where are my habitual ways of doing things still limiting possibilities?**
- **What possibilities for future scenarios am I raising with my students? Am I offering realistic tools to support proposed change?**
- **What am I doing to help students develop political agency?**
- **What human and more-than-human voices are included and/or excluded in the histories, explanations, and readings that I share with my students?**

## **Touchstone #6: Building Alliances and the Human Community**

*Our trip ends as we reach the Easdale slates of Luing and the windswept, dark grey, relict quarries of a once thriving worldwide trade. Open pits are scattered everywhere, homes built from the stone that was at hand, and soli-*

*tary sheep grazing on the open hillsides all act as testament to the intrepid and insidious nature of the resourceful beings who carved out life here.*

\* \* \*

**We believe that the colonial ethos of resource extraction is not separate from, but is yet another shade of the many hierarchies of dominance that exist amongst humans. For this reason wild pedagogues seek alliances and build community with others not only in the environmental world but across all people and groups concerned with justice.**

\* \* \*

This touchstone acts as a reminder to wild pedagogues of their interdependency with communities and considers their presence and role in wild pedagogies. Community is most often thought of in human terms, and there is good reason for this. Like many creatures on earth, humans depend on social relationships with their own kind for love, support, and protection. All humans, whether they are headed into wilder areas or creating the best curricular opportunities they can are nodes in networks of rich and reproductive human labour. Without communities of people and more-than-humans caring for us and enabling our lives we are incapable of even beginning to act. And yet, the ways in which we humans interact with one another can also be more or less wild. It is not difficult to imagine social scenarios where wildness and freedom appear amongst us. Educators interested in wild pedagogies might well seek those wild interstitial zones just as we humans might seek scenes of healthy wildness in our communities where people can express themselves freely and not feel stifled. Although we may feel uncertain and intimidated when first entering such places, there is also a sense of liberation and comradeship that we experience. Groups that come together in this way have more autonomy and a greater sense of empowerment, as do the individuals involved in them. It is a “wild” process, characterized by the equitable sharing of all voices and a need for decisions to be made collectively by all concerned. Like wild pedagogy, such spontaneous democracy is con-

cerned with the notion of “will;” it is about the self-will of the group or of the community, and an ever-present struggle to identify and make decisions according to that will as equitably as possible. In the context of wild pedagogy, democracy of this type helps us remember that there are communities, made up of humans and more-than-humans, affected by all decisions, and that all involved ought to have a say, in whatever language, voice, and form is their own.

\* \* \*

*We have anchored in a shallow bay for the evening and the boat is pulling gently on her long chain. The wind has been slowly shifting directions for the past few hours and we have swung from east to west. The sky is trending from radiant blue to resplendent black as the sun hides behind the flank of the nearest island. The few clouds scattered in the sky are touched with colour as yellows slide to oranges and then fade into reds. There is a restless creative energy in the group. We are nearing the end of the trip, have encountered, thought about, and explored much. We have been immersed in a wild scape and the Inner Hebrides is rubbing off on us. From somewhere in the ship, a guitar appears, and then another. Soon the cabin is filled with music, there is dancing and eclectic movements, there are invented instruments (e.g. spoons on tables, fingers on glasses, cardboard whiskey containers on resonant foreheads), and there are voices coming together and being proffered out. This small human community is becoming wild together, turning in and turning out. And in the distance, the seals howl an answer.*

\* \* \*

But as much as community is everywhere, it can often be forgotten or neglected in a culture that is predominantly individualistic. Hence, the first suggestion this touchstone makes is that educators identify the multiple communities of which they are a part, and the complex interdependent composition of those communities that always implicates the more-than-human. Once identified, educators are better able to recognize and maintain those that are positive, attend to and heal those that are troubled, and even remove themselves and their students from those

that are limiting and destructive. And in tending to our communities in these ways, educators expand the possibilities for their learners to understand themselves as belonging to and being responsible for others.

A flourishing, wild community is one that sustains its members, allows them to flourish. They also challenge us in important ways by helping us to become different, potentially better. When we have hard and uncomfortable work to do, communities can be positive spaces to simultaneously encourage and challenge us. They support and help us to do the work while reminding us of our commitments. In this way, communities help build individual and collective resilience. Healthy communities are places where people can take risks, where we can try out new ideas or practices, where we can depart from the *status quo*. People find belonging, friendship, and joy in their communities. We all need supportive communities as we attempt to re-wild our lives, pedagogies, and places where we live.

Communities are also locations where the important work of all the previous touchstones occur. On our own, we are prone to the limitations of our own imagination and often end up recreating the same systems and relationships that we seek to transform. Multiple perspectives allow each of us to see beyond our own limitations. We also recognize that socio-cultural change and issues like climate change and environmental justice is not the work of wild pedagogues alone. We encourage wild pedagogues to identify allies and seek synergies that help respond to the challenges while empowering learners.

\* \* \*

*We are moored in a sheltered passage between a small islet and the island of Iona. It is evening, the wind has disappeared and the sky is trending from radiant blue to resplendent black as the sun hides itself behind the low flank of the bigger isle. The group, pleasantly worn out from excursions across Iona, and happily sated after a meal, is spreading out around the ship. Quiet conversations, gentle strains of music, and silent witnessing of the sunset seem like appropriate responses to place and time. Suddenly that changes as a voice in the stern rings out, "dolphins!" A shiver of excitement runs through the boat. To the south and moving rapidly towards us through the passage are several*

*dolphins. At each surfacing the disappearing light reflects deep hues of magenta from their sleek backs and fins. We are entranced. As they come parallel with us, one dolphin explodes out of the water, performs a full somersault, and slides cleanly back into the water with a skill and precision beyond anything I could imagine. The reverberations of its joy and power leave us breathless, as it clearly performed for our benefit. Mixed in and amongst the emotions of joy, wonder, and desire to see more, I am touched by a sense of responsibility as well.*

\* \* \*

This touchstone suggests that we can “wild” our communities when we seek collaboration amongst allies. We can be proactive, too, by asking ourselves questions: Who are the people in the community? Are there like-minded people amongst them? What values are shared by the members? How can we find common ground with them? As we answer these questions, we learn from each other about how our concerns are mutually shared and, by carefully working with each other, we can identify areas of contention and seek to resolve the differences. This is part of the work of wild pedagogy. There are no “right” ways to do this work, it evolves. Re-wilding of our communities is about recognizing the agency within all beings, including human beings, and the ways in which that agency has been ignored or oppressed, and then striving for a positive resolution equitable to all, including the more-than-human world.

**Educators may want to consider questions such as:**

- **Who makes up my communities when I think of doing wild pedagogies work? Why? Who is not included, and then, whom do I want to be included? And why?**
- **How do the various communities I am part of make decisions? Who is impacted by the decisions we make? How are all those affected included in the decision-making process?**
- **What might I do that would bring the natural world more explicitly into community decision-making?**
- **How do I support and make better my communities and how do they support and make me better? How can I bring these questions into my classroom?**

- **How may my communities encourage one another to imaginatively depart from the *status quo*? How do we encourage one another, allow for mistakes, and also challenge and push each other?**
- **How have I worked to build trust within my communities?**
- **What are the affordances, skills, and possibilities that already exist in my communities, and how might we connect in ways that benefit all?**

### THESE SEA-WORN ROCKS

These sea-worn rocks will be here long after me  
 and you will see them with my eyes  
 these black wet rocks will remain  
 when we are long gone  
 we see them with the eyes of those  
 who beached their currachs on this bay  
 and sheltered under these cliffs  
 and those who unlocked slate  
 to makes roofs and walls  
 tonight we gaze in wonder  
 at the ceaseless rush of sea on shore  
 and you will think of us this night.

*Norman Bissell*

**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. Noel Gough, “Towards Deconstructive Nonalignment: A Complexivist View of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 27, no. 5 (2013): 1220.

2. Arne Næss with Bob Jickling, "Deep Ecology and Education: A Conversation with Arne Næss," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 5 (2000): 54.
3. Michael Derby, Laura Piersol, and Sean Blenkinsop, "Refusing to Settle for Pigeons and Parks: Urban Environmental Education in the Age of Neoliberalism," *Environmental Education Research* 21, no. 3 (2015): 378–389.
4. Sean Blenkinsop, Ramsey Affifi, Laura Piersol, and Michael Derby, "Shut-up and Listen: Implications and Possibilities of Albert Memmi's Characteristics of Colonization Upon the 'Natural World,'" *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 36, no. 3 (2017): 348–365.
5. Martin Buber, "Education," In *Between Man and Man*, trans. Reginald Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002): 98–123.

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