OF LAND & LIVING SKIES
A COMMUNITY JOURNAL ON PLACE, LAND, AND LEARNING

www.landandlivingskies.ca
I used a DSLR camera for the first time when I was in grade 11. It was during my time in a stellar outdoor education program called Trek School—the catalyst in my passion for photography and the outdoors.

I usually shoot incidental encounters with nature while birdwatching or backpacking, but with the odd bout of inspiration, I may set out on a photo specific outing.

I love that behind every photo is a story and memory. Intimate moments with nature become frozen in time.

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COMMUNICATING HOME PLACE

With this inaugural issue of Of Land & Living Skies: A Community Journal on Place, Land, and Learning we explore the concept of “home place” and the many layers and meanings it has for people living in Saskatchewan and beyond. Within this issue, the articles bring forth many of the topics that critical environmental educators, families, and outdoor recreationists struggle with and find joy in as we try to communicate and learn about this land and the place that we call home.

Aldo Leopold remarked, “our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than toward, an intense consciousness of land” (Leopold 1949/1968, p.223). This statement reminds me of a story about two young children from a city in Saskatchewan that went out to an acreage for a sleepover and were frightened by a sound they heard in the background. The sound of crickets.

Stories like this remind me of how fortunate I was as a child to live on an acreage, and for my “normal” to be the sounds of the outdoors. Home for me included 80 acres of space to run around in - space that I knew intimately. Even though I felt as though I knew this place of my acreage very well - where to pick the crab apples, where to collect the rosehips, where to avoid the hornet’s nest, where to find safety if the cows charged, where to toboggan when mom wasn’t looking and so on, I still did not have an intense consciousness of land as a piece of the story was missing. What was missing, were the colonial stories of the land. Not once as a child did I ever learn about which Treaty I lived on, or to whom the land upon which rests my farm belonged. Not until University did I learn about the misappropriation of Indigenous land by settler peoples, nor about the unjust residential schooling practices that occurred near my home place.

This issue of Of Land & Living Skies: A Community Journal on Place, Land, and Learning explores some of the many forms of educational experiences and practices that promote an “intense consciousness of land”: experiences that allow people to learn about the many layered stories of the places that we call home including ecological and cultural stories, stories involving our colonial past and present, and stories of hope and renewal for a healthy planet.

The current issue includes a Spatial Manifesto (page 8) by cultural geographer, Jon Anderson, from the UK, and helps us understand how who we are is dependent on where we are, and the role that geography plays in giving meaning to our lives. Relating to identity, Leah Walberg’s piece (page 30) describes the learning involved in her young daughter’s life and how the language of the prairie landscape has imprinted on her daughter. Unlike her mother, Walberg’s daughter has found comfort in calling the prairies her home.

Kristin Catherwood (page 10) also describes how her farm influences her identity as she discusses how her adoration with the farm land that she grew up on led her to tattooing the land location into her skin. We can’t escape the place of our skin!

With a series of beautiful images, Marc Spooner (page 25) shows us two places, Igloolik and La Ronge, both involving teacher education programs in partnership with the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina. His words speak of colonization and questions how we can move forward together, sharing knowledge and stories. More thoughts about how to move forward for a sustainable present and future come from Jeff Baker (page 22), a Métis scholar, discussing a spirit of reconciliation and healing that comes from learning at the place of Brightwater Science and Environmental Centre.

This inaugural issue, as well as all future issues, will profile an experiential education program that embodies place, land, and learning on a day-to-day basis. Jana Miller and Tyler Rittinger (page 5) share with us how they go about integrating various subject areas to teach for sustainability. Along the lines of place-based educational practices, our feature Research from the Field article (page 12) by Janet Mcvittie describes the assessment techniques used in a grade 8 experiential education program with an outdoor focus. As standardized testing is a hot issue in our home province at the moment, the article communicates to readers how educators can raise academic standards without standardizing. Mcvittie showcases a model of assessment practices through learning of land and home.

Throughout the issue you will find examples of creative ways to communicate home place and different experiences of people sharing interpretations of place, land, and learning.

Issue Editor,
Karen McIver
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LETTERS

I would like to extend my congratulations, regarding this new journal initiative and its inaugural issue, to the Saskatchewan Outdoor & Environmental Education Association and partners, and especially, to the hard work of Karen McIver and Audrey Aamodt for getting it off the ground.

In a wide variety of ways, this issue, Communicating Home Place, contributes opportunities to feel the intensities of living in particular places and times. These intensities according to William James (1909/1996), register as an immediate set of potentials felt by bodies. They are experiences of listening to the planet speak as it produces information (Serres, 2012). Becoming sensitized to the potential emerging from experiences of places we call home, will perhaps garner new modes of attention that compel us to move and act sustainably and generate greater felt choice with which to respond to the question of what do we do with the information that place offers us?

Perhaps this journal edition will further challenge readers to consider how places pick up substance, texture, and hues in their movement through body experience, as a source of instruction for pedagogic and curricular design. Education is not meant to pull us out of the world, but to feel it coming in, as we learn to reposition in response to sharing the earth with its living and nonliving partners. Communicating Home Place is an indication of the importance of our partnership with the information-producing places that matter to us.

—Valerie Triggs

Valerie is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education/Arts Education at the University of Regina. Her areas of research include the interdisciplinary significance of art in extending classically scientific modes of research and pedagogy.

Congratulations to the current Board of SOEEA and for partners SERI and the U of R Faculty of Education for initiating this wonderful journal celebrating environmental education in Saskatchewan. I wish us all the success of communicating, deep thinking, and collegiality in community! A journal can be a beautiful place where we develop cultures of loving and knowing: a place for growth.

Writing today, from my little house near the beach that is backed by Tuart forest and bound by the Indian Ocean, I remember the prairie place I called home with fondness. Prairie living was hard, save for the deeply compassionate people I learned to live with. These people had one powerful thing in common... SOEEA!

It’s curious that my passion brought me to Saskatchewan and gave me a family in which I could belong and still grow. Saskatchewan is a special place and a treasured community.

Reflecting on the grounding I get from place, I think that it is how I move in and over the ground that matters, not choosing any one special place to be mine. The road often walked out the back of the SIAST campus in Regina is not mine. The valley near Fort Qu’Appelle with its long frozen lake is not mine. Just like the creek below my farmhouse near Dininnup where the bridge rots and the ghostly trees squeak, where we raced our ponies for fear of being caught, or the empty back beach of the Maidens with raging wintery waves are not mine. Yet, they are mine, as they come with me everywhere: accumulating like large soft snowfall dampening the sound and affording feelings of closeness.

I have always loved being outside, seeking comfort with all beings: my pony, the trees, the magpies, even the sheep on occasion, and, now, my favourite being and best mate, Savannah. Senses of place I carry within, still, I find them thought appreciating wherever my feet touch the earth. I feel fortunate in this! I hope you share my experience, privilege, privileged/experience.

Respect of place means that I can only be in some places for some time and how I can be there is often limited. Acting like I’m part of the system means that I work to reveal the implications of the choices made; for each carries heft. Moving from place to place bears costs most often met by our environment, and I choose to take this responsibility to heart. So, while I may not be there, you are here.

SOEEA has such strong community. I learned, grew, valued, loved from within this wonderful home of an organisation. Such heart in people often diversely connected. Recreation at the left of centre with sense of place and pride intermingled in desire to use our powers for good. Environment honoured, leaders born, friends supported, and learning... always learning! A lifeline of people, a lifetime member, as old as me, and great in her energy: SOEEA!

Thanks, best wishes, and good luck
—Peta and Savannah White

Peta was SOEEA President from 2006-2009 while she was in Regina completing her PhD in Education. She is currently a Senior Lecturer at the South West campus of Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. Savannah is her Rhodesian Ridgeback.

Keep the conversation going by sending your thoughts, reactions, ideas, or anything else to oflandandlivingskies@gmail.com
JON ANDERSON is a Senior Lecturer in human geography in the School of Planning & geography, Cardiff University, UK. His research focuses on the relations between culture, place, and identity. Jon has published widely in the fields of environmental action, qualitative methodology, and most notably a textbook ‘Understanding Cultural geography: Places and traces’ (2010). Further information on his work can be found at www.spatialmanifesto.com

JEFF BAKER is a Métis educator and scholar from Saskatoon whose work explores the transformative possibilities of Indigenous science education for catalyzing more equitable and sustainable ways of living. Jeff was recently appointed to the position of Chair in Aboriginal education in the College of education at the University of Saskatchewan. He is grateful for opportunities to live, work, and attend ceremony in his home community of Saskatoon, where he can remain close to his daughter and family.

KRISTIN CATHERWOOD is a master’s student in Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland. She has returned home to her farm near Ceylon, Saskatchewan to conduct her thesis research on barns. She is a lifelong lover of Saskatchewan’s landscape, people, and culture.

JANET MCVITTIE is a faculty member in Educational Foundations and an associate member of the Sustainability Education Research Institute at the University of Saskatchewan. Outdoor, experiential learning in and for social and ecological justice have become the focus of her teaching and researching, because of the power they have to inspire learner engagement, as well as the power to make the planet a healthier happier place.

JANA MILLER grew up on a farm South of Prince Albert where she took pride in maintaining foot trails, building fortes and helping grow food on her parents’ farm. As a teacher with Saskatoon Public School Division she believes in the importance of nature immersion, and appreciates the space the Ecoquest program carves out in students’ day-to-day lives to discover the connections they have to the places they live and the processes they are a part of.

TYLER RITTINGER spent his youth exploring the southwest corner of the province from places including Cypress Hills and the Great Sandhills to his grandparents’ farm near Shaunavon and the Swift Current Creek. He teaches Ecoquest in the Saskatoon Public School board in a way that integrates the curriculum and the outdoors. He shares his passions for cycling, canoeing, camping, and cross-country skiing with his students as well as with his wife and two young daughters.

MARC SPOONER is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina. He specializes in qualitative and participatory action research translating theory into action-on-the-ground. His interests include: creativity/deviance, homelessness & poverty, “at risk” or “at-promise” youth, social justice, activism, & participatory democracy. He co-chairs a popular discussion series, Talkin’ about School & Society which takes place not at the University, but rather at a local resto/bar.

LEAH WALBURG grew up with the freedom to explore the natural world, and finds great joy in sharing that freedom with her two small children. While her background is in conservation, she has crossed into the field of education as Director of Prairie Sky School, an arts- and nature-based independent school in Regina. Since moving from the west coast, Leah has embraced trading in her surfboard for cross-country skis, though still feels comforted by drops of rain on a cloudy day.
ECOQUEST: Creating a Learning Ecosystem

BY TYLER RITTINGER AND JANA MILLER

What kind of educational experiences excited us or left us looking longingly out the window when we were in grade 8? What does offering students increased independence and opportunities to navigate their own learning look like when stepping out of a climate controlled classroom? How do we put place-based education into practice while following the Saskatchewan curriculum? Questions like these were part of the conversations that helped form the Ecoquest program, and regularly resurface as the program moves forward.

Responses to these questions can be found in the Ecoquest students’ day-to-day experiences and assignments, such as when they study the properties of snow or research the barriers that Saskatoon’s homeless population face in meeting their basic needs. The program and each of its themes are designed to use place, including urban, rural, and wilderness, as a medium to delve into each of the places’ social and environmental histories. Although the practical applications of Ecoquest continue to evolve as the teachers, students, and current issues change, our reliance on pillars such as experiential learning, project-based learning, subject integration, and place-based education continue.

The Ecoquest program creates space for grade 8 students to increase their sense of identity and belonging. Every fall 28
successful applicants show courage in leaving their home school to transition into a new social environment—the Ecoquest class. Students come to understand that part of the program’s success is due to co-constructing a community that values inclusion and collaboration. In Ecoquest, elevating the importance of social-emotional, physical, and spiritual development does not sacrifice students’ academic accomplishments, but rather serves to strengthen all areas of learning. We continue to work within this holistic framework established by Ecoquest founders Scott Thompson and Shelly Loeffler.

As part of the holistic model, we assess learning in the program differently than many grade 8s are used to. Thompson and Loeffler’s prior experiences teaching middle years students led them to recognize that numerical marks could act as a de-motivator for students individually, as well as could create barriers to non-judgmental participation. As a result they requested special permission to design an alternative form of assessment which emphasized student involvement in the evaluation process.

Our school staff often remark on how little we are in the school building. Our decision to kick off our morning routine in locations around the city is not simply in the name of adventure, but rather best place learning. Week one, on a trip to Shekinah Retreat Centre, we introduce to students the idea of Ecoquest functioning as an ecosystem, with each relationship strengthening the whole. As teachers, we work to make the walls of our classroom porous so that a greater network of relationships can happen. For us this often means physically leaving the building. By accessing places with increased biodiversity and realistic social demographics, opportunity for students to connect is increased and authentic learning is unavoidable.

No two months in our students’ planners look alike. We plan and sequence experiences based on seasons, student ability, and the focus of study. This may look like an unnecessary disruption to the sense of routine many teachers work hard to establish. Working in this kind of program, we have to let go of “being the teacher”. The places we visit become the teacher, and the experiences and personal relationships form the content. Sure, we invest a substantial amount of energy into establishing parameters and practicing appropriate ways of participating in experiences, but a big part of our job is facilitating and then getting out of the way of our students’ learning.

As place-based educators we realize there is no one singular best practice, but rather we try to practice ‘belonging’ or taking cues from and fitting in with the places we visit with our students. This is a process. We aim to familiarize students with a variety of Saskatchewan locales through multi-day trips. A critical part of these nature-immersion experiences occurs through a sequence of ‘solos’. Ecoquest solo experiences are progressively longer periods of time alone in which reflection of nature and self are encouraged. At the beginning of the year an unexpected spider crawling or a rustling in the bush can elicit a fear response from students. We’ve noticed our students quickly move past this initial discomfort and discover a sense of normalcy to learning in different environments.

When we begin to explain the program to those who haven’t heard about Ecoquest, they often think it must be in the first or second year of existence. In fact it has become well-established within the Saskatoon Public School Division and is now in its eleventh year of operation. Furthermore, there are currently four experiential and integrated programs in grade 8 alone. Although each program is unique and integrates along different themes, we share the common goal of engaging students through authentic learning.

See the next page for an assignment that Ecoquest uses to put the curriculum into practice.
NATURE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

PROJECT OVERVIEW:
During our lives our relationship with the natural world grows, shifts and evolves. Whether you consider yourself a nature steward, nature observer, wilderness explorer, or environmentalist, everyone's relationship with the natural world is highly personalized and meaningful to them for different reasons.

One way of increasing your awareness of how you relate to and understand the natural environment is to write an autobiography of your relationship with the earth. An autobiography is the story of one's life as told by you; however a nature autobiography is much more focused and does not try to tell a whole life story. Telling the story of your own personal connection with nature will require taking time to remember, reflect on and interpret the meaningful nature experiences of your childhood.

WRITING:
• Reflect on your relationship with nature up until now and think about how it has shaped you as a person (e.g. your interests, personality, what you are comfortable with, etc.).

• You do not need to write about every single special nature experience, but rather focus on and select those experiences which represent or have played a part in shaping how you relate to nature and explain why they are significant.

• As a way of focusing your writing we ask that you select experiences which address three of the four following types of themes:
  - Special place
  - Time with an important nature mentor
  - Special family time in nature
  - Favourite pastime in nature

• Your nature autobiography will be written in paragraph form from the first person point of view.

• As a minimum your autobiography layout will include the following:
  - Title
  - Three body paragraphs: theme one
  - Three body paragraphs: theme two
  - Three body paragraphs: theme three

• For each experience you write about you must:
  - Describe the setting and tell the story of the experience in descriptive sensory detail (two paragraphs)
  - Explain why this particular experience was meaningful to you. You will need to interpret how this experience has changed or shaped you as a person (one paragraph)

• When generating ideas for writing you may consider the following:
  - Close your eyes and remember the sights, smells, and feelings of being in a place where you felt intimate with nature, and then write up notes that explain why that place on that day allowed you to relate to the earth in a special way.
  - What is it about those places, and the experiences you have had in them, that make them so important?
  - What places would you want someone to know about if they were to truly understand who you are?
  - How does this specific experience help describe

• We encourage you to use descriptive writing which strives to creatively express or capture these meaningful experiences.
• We also expect you to demonstrate your skill and capability at spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and correct grammar.
• We will have a workshop on writing introductions and conclusions in class
• Please make sure you allow yourself time to proofread, revise, and proofread again!
• Rough draft (not including intro and concl.) due: Tues., Sept. 24th
• Final draft due: Wed., Oct. 9th

This assignment requires a different process than completing research for an essay, but you must still allow yourself plenty of time so that you are able to remember and meaningfully describe and explain the different parts of your Nature Autobiography. Lastly, Ecoquest's philosophy for writing encourages you to, “Make time for your work, so you can take pride in your work.”
This website grew out of my interest in people and places. I believe there are important connections between the places around us, and who we are both as individuals and as groups. This website is therefore my manifesto for space.

It is a cliche to suggest that humans are social beings. It is less well acknowledged that humans are also spatial beings. But from the moment we are born, the spaces we inhabit play a crucial role in who we are, how we behave, where we can go, and how we may feel. The world around us is therefore both social and spatial; geography plays a key role in making us who we are.

This website seeks to outline some of the ways in which all geographical contexts play a crucial significance in our lives. To emphasise the influence of space on our identity is important – many political and economic decisions ignore the role that geography plays. But as Edward Said notes, “none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography” (1993:7). This website offers a manifesto for geography, highlighting the ways in which space and place influence our lives and identities.

Approaching the world ‘as if place mattered’ too.

Many scholars have made a manifesto for space (most notably Massey, 2005; Soja, 1996, 2010). But what is the case for suggesting that geography plays a key role in making us who we are?

If you viewed the world from a scientific perspective you could be forgiven for thinking that place and space were largely irrelevant to human behaviour. As Madanipour et al (2001:7) identify, in many areas of decision-making the tradition has been to “treat space and place as unproblematic, as part of an obvious reality, often [simply] as a surface on which things happen”. From this perspective, humans are outside and beyond geography, detached from the spatial context as if it exerts no effect on their actions.

Nicholas Entinkin puts it this way: “for most of the past century, geographers have approached their subject in a manner that could be characterised in terms similar to those used by Italo Calvino (1972:77) to describe the fictional citizens of Baucis, who, as residents of a city built on stilts, lived in the sky and gazed at the earth through telescopes, never tiring ‘of examining it, leaf by leaf, stone by stone, ant by ant, contemplating with fascination their own absence’” (2001:694).

However, it is really possible to stand outside the world, when our feet, and our lives, are firmly planted within it? Indeed, isn’t it this connection between ourselves and the places we live in, that furnishes us with insight about the world? As Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘how could we know the world if we were not of it?’ (cited in Davidson, 2003).

The scientific view of space is challenged by geographers who regard space and place as a medium for action rather than a container of it. From this perspective, geographies have an influence on the social actions occurring within them, in Tilley’s words, place is “something that is involved in the action and cannot be divorced from it” (1994:10). This is not to say that geographies somehow determine social behavior. Indeed as much as places may constrain social life, they also enable it, places are taken and made by different social groups, with some (perhaps all) places becoming politicized and cultured by human beings. Places then, are not only a medium but also an outcome of action, producing and being produced through human practice.

Places then not only simply locate an activity, but also provide the medium for it. Places themselves are both social and spatial, they comprise the built and social context of community relations, and the particular worldview or way of life associated with an area. Through these, places generate connections with people who live in or know the area. Geographies then are not simply points on a compass or co-ordinates on a map, but are also social and cultural. They are, in the words of Preston, ‘deeply woven into the fabric of who we are’ (2003: XVI). The role that geography plays in making our lives meaningful and giving us a sense of identity should not be overlooked. Rather than being ‘highly abstract and remote from experience’ (Tuan, 1975: 151) the places around us are ‘thoroughly meshed’ (Casey, 2001: 684) into the human condition.
Last August, not long before I left for St. John’s, Newfoundland to begin graduate school, I allowed a stranger to take to my skin with needle and ink. The result: a small tattoo, my first and only. It is of the land location of my farm, the place I grew up, the patch of land which my family has claimed as our own for the past 108 years.

It is just letters and numbers in a certain sequence. To almost everyone not from rural Saskatchewan, it reads as gibberish. It’s one of those tattoos that must be explained every time it is glimpsed. And even once its code is deciphered, it still really only means something on an ordnance map, the ones which neatly carve up Saskatchewan’s landscape into well-ordered blocks which are further divided up into sections and quarter-sections, a system which is infinitely logical, but which has very little to do with the land itself. Nonetheless, the Saskatchewan we know now is ordered along these lines. Our roads, railways and towns are set up in accordance with them. From the air, one can see that Saskatchewan’s southern agricultural landscape, sometimes flat, sometimes undulating, occasionally rather rugged, is sliced with perfectly straight (the odd curve here and there “correct” the earth’s natural curvature) lines, meeting at right angles.

The numbers and letters embedded in my skin, which stand for the particular block of land my ancestors homesteaded, can in no way describe the intense beauty of the place I am blessed to call home. They cannot capture the endless, flat horizon to the east, nor the thick tangle of trees planted by my great-grandfather to shelter us from the worst of the bitter winds from the north and west. Most certainly they are unable to emulate my favourite view, that to the south, where the rolling hills of the Missouri Coteau rise gently from the flat terrain, making our farm feel snugly tucked into the landscape.

The characters of my tattoo cannot summon the riotous palette required to colour those hills, from the brilliant white of deep winter, the stark brown when they begin to shrug the snow from their shoulders in early spring, the brilliant green of first crop sprouting and pasture maturing, nor especially the perfectly mis-matched array of browns, goldens, yellows, blues, and greens of the crops as they rapidly move through their brief but glorious growing season.

The tattoo cannot imitate the way the wind stirs the leaves of the trees into summer symphonies of rustling and rasping, nor the first hesitant frog croak nor the overpowering racket of ribbiting when they sing together in every slough and puddle, so loud you can feel it in your eardrums. It could never summon forth the cacophony of the great travelling flocks, or the sweet trill of the meadowlark, nor the plaintive howl of a lone coyote in the depths of the night.

Getting “inked” hurt quite a lot, but that ink cannot conjure the bitter knife slicing cold of January, nor the furnace
winds of July, the coating of dust in the throat during harvest which hangs in the air and turns the moon orange. It could not demonstrate that in the middle of winter when the moon is full and the snow lies thick, the two cooperate so that one could read a book outside at midnight in the light they create, borrowed from the sun as it is.

I do not have the courage or the pain threshold or the trust in the skill of any tattoo artist alive to capture even just one of those things. Even a full-back mural of one of my favourite vistas would not come close to capturing the sense of wholeness and rightness I feel when I am home. The sting of the needle cannot compete with the raw pain I feel when I must leave, which eventually dulls to a distant ache but never completely disappears with the passage of time spent away.

When I tell people what the tattoo means, they joke, “now ‘they’ll’ know where to send the body.” But I know that it is just a tiny attempt to carry all that I love about that place with me. The tattoo is on my right foot, the foot I lead with, the one that will always bring me back to this place, the only place my spirit feels free, the one place I will always return to. Home.
ASSESSING FOR OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING: RAISING STANDARDS WITHOUT STANDARDIZING

BY JANET MCVITTIE

INTRODUCTION: A GRADE 8 OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

Several years ago, I had the privilege of living alongside two teachers and 28 grade 8 students who were involved in a special program focusing on outdoor environmental education. I visited with them a few days a month, and traveled with them on numerous camping and/or hiking trips. I was interested in learning what the students were learning, and how the teachers’ novel assessment practices affected student attitudes towards assessment and evaluation, and learning. The teachers had done away with numeric grades, replacing them with four levels – Experiencing Difficulty (ED, which basically meant the student had failed), Not Yet Proficient (NYP, which meant the student was to take the feedback given, and improve the assignment), Proficient (P, which meant the student had achieved the grade level outcomes), and E (which meant either exceptional or exceeding expectations, depending on which teacher I talked to). Although Proficient meant students were achieving curricular outcomes, what this means varies around the province, and from teacher to teacher within school divisions. The students in this program learned that Proficient meant a much higher quality than they had encountered before. In this paper, I focus on the role of assessment in why and how academic standards increased for these students.

During my times with the class, I made field notes, either at the moment, or as soon as possible afterwards. I formally interviewed the students and their teachers about what the students were learning and what they believed about the non-traditional assessment approach in the program. Twenty-eight students signed off on the interviews; ten of them had already graduated, and were completing their grade 9 year, and so were able to comment on effectiveness of the program for preparation for high school. The interviews were transcribed, and the two teachers, the principal, and I, went through them for themes. After sorting the themes, I checked to see if one student was under or over-represented, and re-examined the transcripts, ensuring that I had accurately represented all the students. In the transcripts, students were named as to whether they were male or female (M or F), and whether they were current students (CS) or had graduated from the program (G) at the time of the study. Hence, a student could be Male Current Student1, MCS1, or Female Graduate3, FG3. I added information from field notes where appropriate in this paper.

An intriguing outcome of the research was that the majority of students said they applied for the program because they wanted more physical activity and because they thought it would be fun; yet they then went on to describe how “hard” the program was, and they noted the considerable academic challenge1. A few students said they had thought the program would be easy (for example, MCS1 said “Well, I thought personally that it would be a lot easier than my old school. But when you get into it, it is a lot

1 Less than half picked the program because they were environmentally oriented.
They all talked about the amount of academic work they had to do (FCS8 stated “Like a lot of this stuff that we’ve learned is completely higher than what I would have expected to learn in grade eight.”) The students talked about the different kinds of challenges: they were challenged emotionally, physically, and academically (MG1 stated “Well, getting used to the independence, getting used to people. ... At the start of the year, I was finding myself with a lot of homework. Then, after a while, you just really get used to it. Getting it finished at school, not goofing around. So, the task commitment improves a lot.”) Many of them said they had “coasted” before in school; they knew what numeric grade they wanted and did the minimum amount of work to get that grade (FCS9 said, “Like I’m challenged more than I was last year. Like last year I just felt I was, I could do it really quickly and I’d still get good marks, but this I put a lot of effort in.”) When I presented this as a dichotomy – fun versus challenge – they said the challenge made the program fun. In this outdoor environmental education program, grade 8 students rose to the academic challenges the teachers set for them.

**RESULTS**

**THEMES: ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING.**

As noted above, the themes were derived from transcripts and field notes. Program teachers, the principal, and myself, worked to develop the themes. During these conversations, information about the program emerged, adding to my understanding of the program. Field notes from times with the class and from conversations with the teachers were also drawn on to support the themes. Numerous themes emerged, but in this paper, I focus on the assessment approach as it relates to the new Saskatchewan curricula. In the current educational climate in Saskatchewan, examining how teachers facilitate students improving in learning (raising standards) is important. The Minister of Education recently outlined a program of standardized testing, to take place in Saskatchewan for the first time ever. He claimed standardized tests will raise standards, especially for Aboriginal students. Thus, examining how teachers raise standards (versus standardizing the students) is especially pertinent.

In this paper, the term “assessment for learning” means any practice a teacher adopts to collect data (including observation data) on student learning with the purpose of using that data to improve student learning immediately. Assessment for learning in this paper is not to be conflated with the province of Saskatchewan’s “Assessment for Learning” exams, which were oriented towards school division learning, not towards individual student learning.

**NO NUMBER GRADES.**

The teachers had decided that the program would have no number grades. They did not want students competing, nor did they believe a student could be reduced to a number. The four levels they implemented in lieu of numbers are described above. Although most of the students (all except two of those interviewed) said they preferred the levels to number grades, they still, almost all, talked about how well they did in the program, that they had high marks, etc. They would use the term “high marks” immediately after noting that they preferred not having number grades. Having four levels instead of number grades for one year of their school lives did not change their attitudes towards their final evaluation. However, the assessment for learning practices the teachers implemented affected their learning, and the students noticed this. Numerous educational researchers have noted that tests and number grades are inconsistent with current theories of learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Carr, 2001; Delandshere, 2002). Current theories of learning address the complexity of basic facts, algorithms, problem solving, values, interests, social systems, etc. (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Carr, 2001; Delandshere, 2002; Jonassen, 2011). To assess learning, very different methods must be used than were used when learning was posited as behaviourist (Watson and then Skinner were the primary proponents) or cognitivist (Piaget was the primary proponent). Since numbers cannot be very accurate (some estimates place the accuracy at + or – 3%), and since motivation research demonstrates marks are demotivating (Deci, Vallerand, et al., 1991; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Sanson & Harackeivicz, 2000), getting rid of number grades is appropriate. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education does not require number grades until grade 10, so school divisions can do away with number grades until then.

**CREATING THE CONTEXT FOR QUALITY WORK.**

The first assignment that students were assigned was done in pairs. Each pair had to research an outdoor product (boots, socks, rain gear, etc.) that their peers or the program would likely have to purchase. The students were given the purpose of the assignment (in the context of their course, they

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2 The Minister responsible for the initial policy resigned; the new Minister says the standardized tests will be implemented, but the roll out plan will be delayed, and the intensity of testing will be reduced.
would be using outdoor products, and their peers would rely on these assessments; as well as in the context of learning how to learn). The students were given, on the same sheet as the assignment description, a set of criteria for the final product. FCS9 said: "they explain it really well, [the teachers] are really good at explaining it and they also give us handouts to help us understand, and to look back on it."

The students were supported in research. The teachers took students to locations to do the research—various outdoor product stores and the internet—and also helped them to find people who used these products. They taught the students how to find sources of information, how to conduct interviews, how to use the interviews as information to add to their presentations. The students had time in class to work together, but then had to prepare a presentation for their peers.

This first assignment was a revelation for many of the students. They had been used to being able to relax during the school day, and put off assignments until the evening before due. If necessary, they could “pull an all-nighter” to get a larger assignment done. With working with a partner, and with drawing on information sources, the “all-nighter” was difficult. On the day of the presentations, many of the students learned that their work was not done to the expected quality; they needed to have more information to be able to give a worthy presentation, they needed to work more closely with their partners prior to and during preparation of the presentation. The quality of this first assignment affected their classmates, since some of them would be purchasing outdoor products and if one team did not present accurate information, the peer would have to do his or her own research. With the first assignment given as an oral report to their peers, they could see that some of their peers had done a much higher quality of work than they had.

It was in this first assignment that students learned they had to be active learners during class time; they had to be thinking about their academic work; they had to be recording information, and asking the questions they would need answered – which meant anticipating what they would need to know. This was a first step for the teachers in assessment for learning. Students were beginning to learn what “quality” looked like. Many of the pairs earned NYP on this assignment, and had to rework it to get up to a P. They were already working on their second assignment as they completed the first, and they were given a third one right away, so catching up on the first added to their work load.

In the past (I hope the long gone past), beginning teachers were sometimes advised to fail students on their first test. The hypothesis was that students would realize they had to work harder; this hypothesis was found to be false for most students; most students would give up. The difference between that practice – an arbitrary fail, versus specific descriptive feedback, based on assignment criteria, speaking directly to issues the students knew they could overcome – is what is significant. Students should not be given a gift of a pass when they have not earned it. On the other hand, they have to be taught how to earn it. The teaching of how to earn the pass is assessment for learning.

“The teachers took students to locations to do the research... They taught the students how to find sources of information, how to conduct interviews, how to use the interviews as information to add to their presentations.”

A common piece of advice program graduates said they would give to incoming students was to get to work right away and to stay on top of things. Teachers also told students this. Still, most students learned experientially to get to work right away!

This kind of assignment – an inquiry, place based project conducted over a period of time, with the time in appropriate locations – must be carefully chosen for each place and for each grade level and subject area. Since inquiry projects integrate subject areas, elementary grade teachers who teach the students nearly all subjects will likely have an easier
task. However, by secondary school, students should have learned the importance of communication, and so the science teacher (for example) should be able to insist that students write, present, etc. to a high standard. By surveying the links between different subject areas, and communicating with teachers in the other departments, secondary schools could create long term, meaningful, place based assignments that are shared amongst different teachers.

INFORMAL FORMATIVE FEEDBACK.

The teachers give students their assignments on a sheet of paper, which includes a formal description, the purpose, and a list of criteria. As well, the teachers talk the students through the key points on the assignment description and the criteria. FCS9 said that, as well as oral instructions and good explanations on the assignment sheet when the assignment is given, there are class discussions about assignments, to ensure “everyone’s coming along and if anyone is having any problems” and that students are encouraged to ask their teachers for assistance. She added that their teachers: “suggest resources. They’re, really helpful, they have a lot of connections, so if ever you need someone to interview, or talk to about whatever you are studying, they always know at least three or four people that you can talk to.” The teachers ensure, regularly, that students have the tools for productive academic work.

Long term assignments teach students to work systematically. Teachers take students to locations where they can do their research. FCS10 said about the Tree and Shrub study, “And they gave us lots of time, when we went to the National Park to work on it.” MG4 concurred: “In grade seven, I procrastinated a little more. But in [the program], I think we got the time that we would have to do our assignment, so that wasn’t like a big deal or whatever. Like there wasn’t a lot of pressure on assignments, but there was enough that you know, learn.” The teachers followed through on the advice they gave about work habits by offering students opportunities to practice; gradually through the year, they offered less advice.

Some students commented about school work required outside of school hours. In their second assignment, after recording information in their field journals during the school days, students were required to hand in two or three pages on each tree or shrub (16 to 24 pages in all) – not just hand in their field journals. During the evenings, they had to use their notes to create a product for an audience other than themselves.

Despite students saying they had time, one of the teachers said he noticed students becoming distressed in November, as the students were adjusting to having multiple large assignments, and after they had learned the academic expectations they had coasted to in prior years would not suffice. I interviewed the students in the new year; by then, half way through the program, the students had learned how to plan their days, how to put in effort at appropriate times, to ensure the work did not become oppressive.

Interestingly, many students talked about the value of effort, rather than the product. FCS8 was adamant about the value of effort: “the academic limits in [the program] are different. They try to help us focus on, not so much the mark that we get, but how hard you pushed yourself to get to the mark that you receive. Like if someone gets a fifty percent, a fifty-five percent and they worked, they studied for four hours and they worked their butt off. And they worked as hard as they could, and they understood that to their most ability, they got a fifty-five percent3. In my opinion,

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3 This student was talking specifically about math, which the school division had insisted be taught separately from the other subject areas. Math did have tests, did have number grades.
it is better than someone who understands it and could care less ... Because that person gains much more respect for themselves because they were able to do that.” Students recognized the need to work hard; however, as noted above, teachers supported students in developing skills for success. The teachers explained what effort meant. Students who had weaknesses were assisted in finding how best to compensate. This might be a student who has poor writing skills getting his or her work done early enough to have a peer or a teacher read it over with the student. It might be a student who isn’t comfortable doing oral presentations getting props and cue cards ready, and rehearsing a number of times. The teachers helped the students consider what resources were available to support their learning. This ongoing assessment of student abilities, and of what resources students needed to develop their abilities, are examples of informal formative feedback, one aspect of assessment for learning. Teachers monitored student behaviours and provided timely advice. Teachers modeled how students should do this for themselves.

In this program, students were taught how to read assignment criteria, were taught how to find sources of information, how to turn that information into knowledge, and how to present that information. They were reminded of choices they made, but always given space to make choices and do their work. When they made inappropriate choices, they were reminded that this had been a choice they made and they were responsible for the consequences. The consequences usually were poor quality assignments, resulting in NYP as their grade. This added to their workload, as they had to correct one assignment while working on the next one. Students believed the effort they put in was what they should be proud of. Effort was under their control. But the teachers taught them what effort looked like, and how each student could shape his or her effort differently, depending on the resources she or he needed.

FORMAL FORMATIVE FEEDBACK.

The teachers gave the students written descriptions of the assignments with criteria, as well as explaining them orally. The first assignment, Outdoor Product Analysis, had very clear criteria outlined, and these criteria corresponded to Proficient. With this assignment, students learned that the criteria for E (Exceptional or Exceeding Expectations) are not outlined. To earn E, they must do something extra or creative.

“They try to help us focus on, not...the mark that we get, but how hard [we] pushed [ourselves] ...”

Thus, they knew what had to be in the assignment; beyond this, they were rewarded for taking a creative academic risk (if it was an appropriate academic risk). There was far less information in the Ecozones assignment description, given 8 months later, than for the Outdoor Product Analysis assignment, but by then, students knew how to research and they understood the quality of work expected of them. Teachers scaffolded the students more powerfully in the beginning, gradually removing supports during the year.

Another factor contributing to students raising their academic standards was the formal written feedback the teachers gave students on their assignments. MCS6 explained the feedback process:

You can tell that they have gone through your project with really, in a lot of detail, because there is a lot of feedback. And they give us sheets back with, um, sort of points of what you’re supposed to include in that project. And they sort of give you feedback on each point and sort of give you a little jot notes on things you could work on and things they found that were really well done. And they give you, usually give you a sheet for your essay, once you do your essay. And one sheet for your presentation for each project.

This description matches that of Black and Wiliam’s (1998) definition of feedback as information about the student work, as well as advice about closing the gap between the quality and the expected quality of the work.

An important aspect of the formal formative feedback was described by MG3: “It is definitely a self realize, like they do compliment on a lot of your good work, like it’s not like if you do something good, they just completely forget about
AURORA FROM WOOD MOUNTAIN, SK

On June 29th, 2013 was perhaps the most amazing display of aurora I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen some excellent examples in southern Saskatchewan before. This is me in front of the Catholic Church (which closed for forever recently, not many years after the United Church also stopped holding services here). The old Pool-branded grain elevator is visible in the background in front of the northern lights.
Students did approximately one large assignment a month. By the end of the second assignment, students understood more clearly than could be expressed in written words (as would be in an analytic rubric) what the expectations were for a Proficient.

FCS10 told me the feedback on her first assignment comprised general suggestions for improving that particular assignment, but as well, that she had to communicate more often with her partner, get her work done earlier so she could then improve it with details, and so she could edit it. Feedback contributed to improvement in all later assignments.

“And that’s why I think... it is not...about the mark. It is how much you’ve grown...”

There has been much research on formal formative feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Davies & Busick, 2007; Stiggins, 2008). Current approaches are to give learners “specific descriptive feedback” – comments that provoke students to think about what they have done. Specific descriptive feedback should address what is done well, so students know what to keep, and what needs to be improved or what is missing. Specific descriptive feedback is the kind of verbal commentary that improves intrinsic motivation (Sanson & Harackeiwicz, 2000).

SELF ASSESSMENT.

Feedback given on assignments ties in with self-assessment. Assignment feedback sheets were double sided, with the same headings and criteria on each side. The teachers filled in one side, gave back the assignments with the sheets, but the side already commented on was turned down. Students were to self-assess, filling in their side of the feedback sheets, and give themselves a final mark - ED, NYP, P or E. Only then were they to turn over the paper to read their teachers’ specific comments and the level the teacher had assigned.

When I asked MCS5 how he learned what teachers’ expectations were, he admitted he had done poorly on his first assignment. He explained that with a mark of NYP, he and his partner had to redo aspects of their assignment, making it better according to the teachers’ comments on their work. He and his partner talked to the teachers, so they could learn where they had to improve. He said that now he is “doing a lot better and able to get up to their expectations in everything.” By the time of his interview, in June, his choice of level matched the teachers’. Black and Wiliam (1998, ph. 28) reported on four studies which indicated the quality and depth of student self-assessments improved due to comparing their assessments to their teachers’. More important than the match with the teachers’ is the quality of self-assessment. Black and Wiliam cited another study in which students did not necessarily match teacher evaluations, but, nonetheless, students commented on how self and peer assessing provoked them to think and to learn more (pg. 28).

MG3 said about his learning: “But, yeah, a lot of it is oriented on how, like you think about yourself, personal reflection, like just looking at your own skills. Your own feats and whatever, you’ve accomplished.” Concurring with this, FCS8 believed that hard work, regardless of marks, leads to “that person gains much more respect for themselves because they were able to do that.” For her, it was about doing your best and not quitting. That is what success was, and it was in her hands. She added:

And that’s why I think maybe, because it is not always necessarily about the mark. It is how much you’ve grown, not only as a person, but how much more you could learn because of that. I think that, they don’t give us marks, I don’t think we’ve ever had like a mark where you get seventy-five percent, besides Math. They give us E’s, like our letter marks, which I think is a lot better. Because you are not going to get a specific mark.

This student had internalized self-assessment. She focused on her growth, not on her mark.

In summary, students were introduced to self-assessment through the criteria sheets. However, students learned how to self-assess for such things as effort and attitude as well. Some of them internalized the self-assessment process so it was ongoing, not just when getting teacher formal formative feedback on assignments.

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Supporting students using assessment for learning (as opposed to assigning grades or giving vague comments) leads students to go beyond performance goals (doing only what is necessary to earn a grade) to learning goals; assessment for learning has potential to change a student’s mindset (Dweck, 2006). Assessment for learning has shown more educational promise than any other educational change yet (Paris, Lawton, Turner & Roth, 1991; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Carr,
2001; Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Black & Wiliam, 2005; Stiggins, 2005; James, Black, McCormick, Pedder & Wiliam, 2006; Davies & Busick, 2007; Black & Wiliam, 2009; Willis, 2011), showing that students can move up to three grade levels in one year, and that struggling students gain the most (Stiggins, 2005). The teachers in this program used informal formative feedback moment by moment, throughout the term, teaching the students the skills required to learn. The students developed academic competency, knew they had the skills to carry out the challenging assignments, and if they were unsure of the skills, knew their teachers would support them in developing the skills.

These teachers used assessment for learning to support students in developing the competencies to succeed at the place based, inquiry tasks that met curricular outcomes and cross curricular competencies and broad areas of learning.

DISCUSSION

These students learned factual, applied, and critical knowledge, they developed more robust understandings of themselves and what they valued, they came to understand their emotional and physical strengths, and they learned how to learn. The students were willing to work so hard because of many factors, but some of them were inquiry place-based projects (providing students with choices and relevancy), working with their teachers and peers (providing students with a sense of belonging), and worthiness of the work (providing them with a sense of their own agency), assessment for learning strategies (providing students with the competencies necessary to do well), and doing away with number grades (increasing student belonging and willingness to work together). The focus in this paper is on the assessment for learning approaches the teachers used. Using assessment for learning meant the students were constantly given feedback to assist them in developing competencies.

These teachers had a different view of learning than the century old and narrow behaviourist / cognitivist view that undergirds standardized tests. Delandshere (2002) argued that calls “for more accountability and increased measurement of learning outcomes as a way to evaluate the efficiency of the educational system” (pg. 1462) are for political aims, and these compromise the ability to actually assess learning according to what we now know learning to be. Delandshere noted that measurement and assessment textbooks do not address learning theory, but that the tests are designed as if learning is meant “to accumulate knowledge, and [that] learning results from teaching that is organized to impart that knowledge in an atomized, sequential, and hierarchical manner (Skinner, 1954)” (pg. 1463). Indeed, Brookhart, Walsh et al. (2006) found that students who were taught and assessed through performance tasks were more “mastery” oriented – they were more likely to engage in the assessment task for the purpose of learning, rather than for performance goals (showing off, or avoiding failure). Measurement researchers have not asked themselves the question of what it means to learn (Delandshere, 2002), and thus have not addressed the fullness of learning (including facts, algorithms, procedural knowledge, learning how to learn, values and emotions, and transforming one’s ideas of how the world works (Freire, 1970; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Carr, 2001; Jonassen, 2011)). Since the teachers in this program are working within a paradigm that posits learning as more complex than the paradigm of measurement researchers, they have adapted their assessments to suit. Selected response tests are not included in their assessment program, nor would they be helpful.

“...with the new curricula, teachers are supported in getting their students into best places for learning...”

The Ministry of Education has spent the last ten years, with their highly qualified employees, drawing on educational research, post-secondary consultants, and in discussion with classroom teachers, developing a set of curricula that are integrated vertically (in one subject area from lower to higher grades) and horizontally (between subject areas in the same grade), to create curricula that are meaningful and, if implemented appropriately, will result in children learning more than they have been. These curricula draw on current theories of learning, as well as promote inquiry approaches and place based projects. The new curricula tie together many of the factors that Black and Wiliam (1998, pg. 16-17) identified as necessary for the gains for assessment for learning to be realized. Saskatchewan teachers implemented inquiry and assessment for learning approaches prior to the new curricula, but many teachers were frustrated by outdated theories of learning, having to adhere to separating subject areas, and teaching decontextualized learning objectives in classrooms – which the old curriculum guides were oriented towards. There were ways for teachers to get around this (as
evidenced by the program described in this paper), but now, with the new curricula, teachers are supported in getting their students into best places for learning, to have them carry out inquiries, to make choices that support them as life long learners. Associated with the new curriculum guides, many school divisions have been providing teacher support in assessment for learning practices, which supports students in developing the competencies required to inquire and to learn.

"Place based learning increases relevance and increases engagement."

Inquiry projects, based in best places, drawing on local expertise and diverse sources, result in different students within one classroom taking on different projects; when considered provincially, a grade 8 student in Regina can be expected to do something very different than a grade 8 student in Stony Rapids. Although carrying out different projects, these students should all be working to the same high standards, and all meeting curricular outcomes*. Supporting teachers in learning more about assessment for learning can lead to teachers using more of these practices, and will raise the standards of learning.

Despite the Ministry of Education’s new curricula, the Minister(s) of Education have decided to invest substantial sums of money to implement provincial “made in Saskatchewan” standardized tests. This is in spite of research evidence indicating that in those locales with more standardized testing, overall test scores drop (Sahlberg, 2011, pg. 65). Saskatchewan’s suggested standardized tests, to be carried out on the scale suggested, within the budget suggested, must be selected response, which are associated with outdated theories of learning. This will undermine the Ministry’s new inquiry, place based curricula. Further the more high stakes a test is, the more the test will change students to have a “performance orientation” as opposed to a learning orientation (Dweck, 2006; Brookhart, Walsh et al., 2006). Students will lose their intrinsic motivation to learn, because they will be learning for the “mark candy”, rather than for the joy of learning.

And yet, the poisoned rhetoric is that, apparently, teachers (“whiney union type teachers”) are afraid of standardized tests because the tests will mean teachers are held accountable. Rather, teachers are against standardized tests because they know the deleterious effects on student learning. In this program, students were expected to be responsible, as opposed to accountable. Students understood what they were to do and were supported in doing it. The students, by half way into the year, had developed their own ideas of their self-efficacy; they knew they could succeed because their teachers had estimated the amount of time they would need, had given them helpful feedback on prior assignments, and would point them in the right direction if necessary. The students had experienced success and believed they could surmount the challenges put in front of them. This is consistent with Brookhart, Walsh et al. (2006) who found that perceptions of self-efficacy, regardless of prior performance, were the best predictors of student achievement. These teachers were responsible, as is the case for by far the majority of teachers in the province. I cannot imagine a teacher who does not want students to succeed.

There are claims that standardized evaluation can be used to complement classroom based assessment. Until, however, the purpose for the province’s standardized tests is made clear, and unless the tests are designed to account for the fullness of learning, the effect they will have on learning are likely to be deleterious to learning. Delandshere (2002) asked (from the American experience): “Can assessment whose function is to support learning coexist with assessment whose function is to reward or penalize learners, teachers, or schools?” (pg. 1466). She argued: “If what we know or understand is inseparable from how we know and understand, how can we justify current assessment practices?” (pg. 1478). Provincial standardized tests will separate the knowledge being assessed from the context students learn it in. This will be more so for students from marginalized groups, such as Aboriginal students. There is a significant body of research indicating the Aboriginal students are more likely to engage in work that is culturally relevant and ecologically worthy (Kirkness & Barnhart, 1991; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Malatest & Associates, 2002). The Minister’s claim that standardized tests, which can not address local and cultural issues, will help for teaching Aboriginal students just does not make sense when considered in light of research.

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* As an example, consider the science unit on ecosystems. The concepts in ecosystems are the same, regardless of place, but the specific ecosystems studied will be different; the disruptions to the ecosystems will be different. As well, teachers should incorporate novel studies and choice of novel could be different; teachers, when addressing governance about ecosystems, will address local governance, as well as provincial and federal.
Situating learning in best place, and in local contexts, makes learning relevant. Place based learning increases relevance and increases engagement. Inquiry learning offers choices to students, within the limits of the curriculum guides and what teachers are comfortable with. With inquiry learning, students have more choices, which results in greater relevancy, and greater engagement. In inquiry learning, with assessment for learning, students learn how to learn; they become competent researchers – collecting information, turning that into knowledge, and presenting that information to others. Greater competency results in greater engagement. Through carrying out inquiry community based projects, students can develop action plans, resulting in their sense of selves as active citizens. They will recognize their own power, their own potency. This sense of self as agent will lead to greater engagement and greater learning. These programs, of which assessment for learning is a significant aspect, will facilitate children becoming life long learners.

REFERENCES


DESTINY

Destiny brought in her collection of stones for show & tell.

I love them all so much.

Teacher did not have to ask many questions every stone a story.

Years later, she found the stones in a little jar cloistered in her childhood dresser with fragments of sea shells & weathered glass.

Before she threw them all away, she hesitated for a moment she held the jar up to her ear & listened.

Nothing.

They were just dumb rocks.

– xavier o. datura


INDIGENEITY AND THE SPIRIT OF RECONCILIATION AT BRIGHTWATER

SETTING UP A TIPI WITH KNOWLEDGE KEEPER SANFORD STRONGARM

BY JEFF BAKER

The Brightwater Science and Environmental Centre is operated by Saskatoon Public Schools (SPS) and located south of Saskatoon on a varied quarter section that encompasses forested riparian habitats, native grasslands, and sand dunes. The site is also home to a recently constructed Eco-Science and Indigenous Learning Centre and an Indigenous ceremonial site, where students and staff are provided opportunities to foster connections to the land and to gain experience with Indigenous teachings, protocols, and practices.

I first visited Brightwater in 2009 to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony with Don Spiedel, a Lakota waokiye (traditional helper) and Cultural Resource Liaison with SPS. Sitting on the earth, surrounded by the elements and listening to songs and prayer in the moist heat of the lodge, I experienced an overwhelming feeling of being at home. For me, the ceremony exemplified and embodied the enhanced sense of relationality that I had been theorizing but had only fleetingly experienced. Hearing the personal thoughts and prayers of my friends, colleagues, and strangers created new connections among us and helped me to better understand their stories, as well as my own. Since that first encounter Brightwater has become my spiritual home, and I have been privileged to participate in and assist Don with numerous lodges and other ceremonies. My relationship to Brightwater was further strengthened recently, when my four-year-old daughter joined me there for her first sweat.

In addition to being a significant place of learning and transformation, Brightwater also exemplifies a growing spirit of healing and reconciliation. The Whitecap Dakota and Métis from the nearby settlement of Round Prairie once peacefully co-existed and utilized the land on which Brightwater sits. The Whitecap Dakota First Nation is now an active partner with SPS, and the relationships between Brightwater, the Whitecap Dakota, and Round Prairie Métis are acknowledged and commemorated in the Learning Centre. Even the existence of the Learning Centre and ceremonial site can be attributed to collaboration—namely to a division-wide commitment to cultural responsiveness that has been supported by Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, staff, teachers, community members, and administrators. In my own experience, Brightwater has provided a safe place for me to explore, express, and practice my own beliefs and convictions, helping to reconcile my values with the realities of the society in which I live.

The presence of this spirit of reconciliation, while encouraging, must continue to expand as a youthful and rapidly growing Indigenous population encounters Saskatchewan’s schools. This process of reconciliation is not without its challenges, several of which I have encountered in my own work (bridging aspects of Indigenous and Western scientific knowledge systems). An initial hurdle is the general lack of understanding and awareness regarding Indigenous peoples’ cultures and histories, which is all too often exacerbated by racism. This lack of awareness must be expected, however, when until recently Indigenous content was absent from much of the K-12 curricula. While new inclusive curricula are being developed, those who are expected to teach it have been expressing well-founded concerns regarding unintentional cultural misrepresentation and/or appropriation. How can one teach what one doesn’t know or understand? This is worthy of more attention than can be provided here, but in brief I feel the best approach is to simply acknowledge that we are all learning this together, articulating why it is important from a place of humility with a good heart and an open mind.

A further hurdle in this process of reconciliation is the perception that the “cultural gap” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is insurmountable. For example, Stan
Rowe, an advocate of eco-centrism and professor of plant ecology at the University of Saskatchewan in the 1970s and 80s, has written that:

_The worldview to which we have been born and raised... cannot simply be exchanged for any one of the many others developed by foraging, Nature-revering societies. We must find our own way with a new faith allied to, or at least not contradicted by, the best salvageable parts of the modern and post-modern culture that is the Western inheritance._ (2006, p. 64)

While Rowe correctly notes the impossibility of a “worldview exchange,” this does not impede the possibility of co-learning and piecemeal adaptation, which are integral to processes of cultural change. Further, Rowe’s belief that an eco-centric worldview must draw solely on Western foundations profoundly limits the possibilities for its emergence. While cultural diversity can be a source of difference and conflict, it is also a rich source of creativity. Indeed, the insights of many cultural groups, Indigenous or otherwise, have valuable contributions to make, and the interests of equity suggest that all be heard.

_“Without question, Indigenous peoples have something to share about equity and sustainability.”_

This brings us to a final hurdle, which involves recognizing that Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems have already given much to contemporary societies, and have even more to offer with respect to the co-creation of more equitable and sustainable ways of living. It wasn’t until graduate school that this idea became apparent to me—my previous educational experiences had never adequately addressed it. Recognizing the past and present contributions of Indigenous peoples in turn requires the understanding that Indigenous cultures are not static artifacts from a previous time, but rather vital, dynamic ways of being that have survived attempted genocide and are again beginning to thrive. Without question, Indigenous peoples have something to share about equity and sustainability. It is also worth noting that one need not adopt romanticized notions of “noble savages” to understand how Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems can contribute to the health of today’s societies. In no way does living through relational and reverential worldviews lead to utopia—Indigenous peoples are human, as beautifully gifted and flawed as everyone else.

One key contribution Indigenous peoples can and have made is in facilitating the development of more eco-centric and bio-centric worldviews. This is a fundamental aspect of the socio-cultural change at hand, and calls for it have become standard in the environmental education literature. Rowe (1990), for his part, has expressed this as follows:

_We have not yet learned to visualize the earth spaces in which we live as Living Spaces, as vital surrounding systems that sustain us. Yet when these Living Spaces are endangered, so are we._ (p. 45)

Perhaps Indigenous peoples, who have survived for millennia with an understanding that all things are related, and that all of Creation is indeed alive, animate, and spiritual, may have something to offer in this regard. This is not to suggest that Indigenous peoples have all the answers, or that reconciliation in the context of injustice and inequity in which Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations are situated is a simple or straightforward process. Reconciliation requires that respectful, mutually beneficial relationships be established, which can take significant time and effort. I am simply trying to show that reconciliation is possible, and indeed is happening—my own story and the story of Brightwater provide but two examples. The vitality of this spirit of reconciliation is not limited to Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations, however, the escalating social and ecological challenges arising through our alienation from one another, other species, and the land, demand it.

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1 For more information on Brightwater visit: http://schools.spsd.sk.ca/brightwater/
2 Established with the assistance of a generous donation from PotashCorp
3 This work has been led by the division’s First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Education Unit which has in turn been guided by a Culturally Responsive Schools Advisory Team of Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Educators from across the province. For more info see: http://www.spsd.sk.ca/division/FNIMeducationunit/Documents/FNIMActionplan2013.pdf
4 The Indigenous peoples of Saskatchewan include the Cree (Plains, Woodlands, and Swampy), Saulteaux, Dene, Lakota, Dakota, Nakota, and Métis. The Inuit are also considered one of the Indigenous (Aboriginal) peoples of Canada.
5 The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education has been revising all curricula to include Indigenous content. A number of workshops and programs have been created for teachers and others who did not receive this in their own K-12 experiences. The Indigenous Voices (www.usask.ca/iv) program at the University of Saskatchewan and professional development workshops offered by local school divisions and the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation are a few examples.
The Faculty of Education at the University of Regina has many partnerships with Aboriginal teacher education programs; these programs include, the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP, Regina), the Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP, La Ronge), Indigenous Education (First Nations University of Canada, Regina), the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program (YNTEP, Whitehorse), and the Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP).

One of the exciting privileges for us as faculty members is the chance to actively collaborate with our partner programs. Two of the programs that I have been fortunate enough to work with are NTEP in May of 2008, and NORTEP, in 2013.

The following photos are an attempt to document both my awe at the beauty and complexity of these idiographic places and people and my struggle as I looked for an ethical way forward as a self-identified settler ally. It is my hope that you the reader will share in the beauty and the tensions as you interact with the photos and captions that follow; they are glimpses of an understanding that is incomplete and unresolved, but every time I look at them I see a little bit more.
LEFT TOP– the Flowedge where the ice edge meets the open ocean: “You might want to walk where you see footsteps” —[in a very friendly manner warned our tour guide]. Translation “Silly Southerner pay attention to local knowledge—your life depends on it!”

BOTTOM– Stanley Mission Church is the oldest still standing building in Saskatchewan; it is also an icon of colonization’s long history in the province; either by religion or education—they often work hand in hand.

RIGHT TOP– Innuksuk with Graffiti. I found this photo to represent the tensions of the old and new ways. The Far North is changing rapidly, from climate change and development, to the revitalisation of Inuktitut as the primary language of instruction. The South must pay critical attention otherwise our presence continues the colonial project.

BOTTOM– First Nations Pictographs on the rocks near Stanley Mission, markings of a distant time call still, artist sentinel, cultural guardian.
The above photos (LEFT TOP Igloolik, BOTTOM La Ronge) speak to my uneasiness with being a modern coloniser and cultural voyeur, and my genuine desire to learn, to explore, and to hopefully somehow make a positive contribution. Are we modern technology colonisers? Is it possible to share in a new era of partnership—equals trading knowledge: western to indigenous, indigenous to western, indigenous/western/indigenous/western?

RIGHT TOP - Igloolik, Ocean Bay Village,
BOTTOM- Lac La Ronge Bay with airplanes
It is important to be reminded that Canada is only “new” to Europeans! Humans have been living continuously for over 4000 years in Igloolik (pop. 1500), and for thousands of years in Stanley Mission (pop. 1500) and La Ronge (pop. 2750).

These are but some of my thoughts about my journeys to the Far North and North which found me at various times excited, engaged, isolated and disconnected and always questioning, reflexive, hoping.
Our family moved to Regina from Vancouver Island two years ago. We moved soon after our daughter was born, and our son was two years old. It’s been a big change moving from a coastal town surrounded by forest, to city lights under a wide open prairie sky. When I meet people here in Regina, I talk about ‘back home’ being on the coast. Though when I am with my children, I always refer to the where we live now as home.

The past two summers I have taken the kids back to BC to visit family, friends, forests, mountains, and ocean. It was during this year’s visit that I recognized my daughter has her own sense of what home looks and feels like. This recognition filtered through to me after the surprise wore off that my precious seedling was afraid of the forest. At first I was dismayed that she could be rejecting a landscape I feel is so deeply a part of me. This reality was also quite frustrating as her fear of foliage followed us our entire trip: I could hardly put her down due to the presence of threatening greenery. It was as though she was thinking: “What do they want? Those trees, they’re just standing there, lurking. I don’t trust them mommy.”

Wow, a prairie girl. I have a prairie girl. Somehow I just didn’t see it coming.

I hadn’t planned for how much a place communicates, that a place bears language, and that my baby would silently learn that language as we go walking aimlessly around the
neighbourhood and local parks. I hadn’t planned for her to be so taken aback that the land in a different place may speak in such a different way.

I don’t know why I was so surprised, really, as it is fresh in my mind how young my son was when I realized his connections to the environment around him. In his case, he was less than 18 months old and I noticed how he would touch the same places or objects on a stretch of trail we would walk regularly. These touches appeared like familiar tactile conversations (hello, how are you, doing well, yourself, nice weather we’re having, and so on). These conversations struck me as a connection, and seemed to make this trail my son’s companion.

Perhaps I was surprised this time because I am less connected to the prairie landscape, which likely reduces my ability to observe my daughter’s conversations with the world outside. I believe I have also limited my power to observe though prejudice, in the belief that there is less to get to know because we are in the city. I have always felt it is so important to provide my children with the opportunity to develop their own intimate and meaningful relationships with the natural world, their home. The move to the city has always felt really compromising.

Some of those feelings of compromise are dissolving as I rethink the non-linear paths to fluency in a landscape. Landscape has language, and as language can be learned, so does landscape become an intrinsic part of us, framing our expression and our dreams. The younger it is learned, the least likely we will ever remember learning it. Landscape, like language, becomes an extension of our core sense of identity and belonging. But fluency can also be acquired in new and different languages, in new and different landscapes, at any point in our lives, if we are open to it and seek it out.

My daughter knows this prairie city as home; it is part of her identity being reinforced daily through experience-based communication. Upon reflection, I actually feel a deep sense of relief that she had such a strong reaction to trees, even if it was not the reaction I would have hoped for. Yes, I just feel glad she noticed. That in a world of plugged-in, fast-moving, noisy incessant excesses: she noticed. And I got to notice that she noticed, and I’m grateful for that. I am grateful for that because all she is exposed to is intertwining inextricably within her body, mind, and spirit forming the woman she will be. At two years old, already she speaks a language unfamiliar to me. That language is now part of her voice, a voice that is getting louder. It is up to me to listen more carefully and learn more about a language that I feel is so deeply a part of her.
FIELDS OF GREEN: RESTORING CULTURE, ENVIRONMENT, AND EDUCATION
(McKenzie, Hart, Bai, Jickling), 2009

“This is a delicious volume that joins daydreams and nightmares; composing liberatory education and interrogating environmental crises; where theory and affect snuggle; poetry and critical theory embrace; where flowers grow among trauma.

In this volume the notion of a field grows rich, colorful, and generative; refusing to be disciplined, constrained, and bounded.

What a relief.” —Michelle Fine, The Graduate Center at the City University of New York

“Here is a luminous anthology of insights and dreams from many of the liveliest thinkers in environmental education—a necessary compendium for tools, both poetic and practical, for the transformation of culture.” —David Abram, author of the Spell of the Sensuous

“This is a “must read” book that helps us to find our own story for animating ecological and social justice in and through education.” —Marie Battiste, University of Saskatchewan

“The issues raised by these timely—and urgent—essays speaks to both the historical moment and the future of life on this planet. This is an important book and I highly recommend it.” —Peter McLaren, University of California, Los Angeles

This book is about hopeful daydreams and their implications for action in the interwoven spheres of culture, environment, and education. In spite and because of the recent significant shift in concern for the environment around the globe, the editors believe there remains the urgent task of restorying the ways we live on this earth. Cultural understandings that value the individual over the collective, humans over other species, concept over experience, and progress as globalizing growth and change, are examples of the sorts of imaginaries that can be traced in the ecological and cultural losses we are currently experiencing and participating in around the world.

BIOKITS FROM THE BIOSPHÈRE

Hey families! Here is a tool that you can use to go out into your own neighborhood or local green space to explore your home! The Government of Canada’s Biosphère, based out of Montreal, has created a great resource for families to get out and explore the natural world. The BioKits get you looking at the daily weather, checking off which plants you can find, looking for animal tracks, and they also make you aware of endangered species and new vocabulary. The Biosphère is an environmental museum that encourages individuals to take action and get involved in environmental issues.

Go to: www.ec.gc.ca/biotrousses-biokits/

Click on “Explore the BioKits” on the left hand side

Click the link on the text “BioKits by province”

Choose your province and find links for BioKits for “Urban”, “Nature”, or “Trans Canada Trail”

You can then print the biokit to be used by your family on your next outing! We also recommend saving it to your computer for future use.

HOME

Through visually stunning footage from over fifty countries, all shot from an aerial perspective, Yann Arthus–Bertrand shows us a view most of us have never seen. He shares with us his sense of awe about our planet and his concern for its health. With this film, Arthus–Bertrand hopes to provide a stepping-stone to further the call to action to take care of our HOME. HOME is the first film that has been made using aerial-only footage.

The style of the film makes it quite educational for audiences of all ages. There’s a vast number of local and global issues that must be resolved. This film shows us the interconnected dependency
of these issues. Expect to see this film used in elementary school all the way through universities, neighborhood gatherings, movie theaters, and more. The official website of the film includes a guide for educators with suggestions of lessons and discussion questions and different ways the film can be used as a pedagogical tool.

The entire movie HOME (English with subtitles, 1 hour 33 minutes) by Yann Arthus-Bertrand is available for viewing on YouTube and the English version has been viewed by over 2 million people. There are versions in Spanish, French, German, Arabic, Russian and other languages.

HOME the movie is carbon offset. All of the CO2 emissions engendered by the making of the film are calculated and offset by sums of money that are used to provide clean energy to those who do not have any. For the last ten years, all the work of Yann Arthus-Bertrand has been carbon offset.

HOME official website www.home-2009.com

H2OIL

H2Oil is a documentary about the people that call Fort Chipewyan, a community downstream from the Tarsands, home. H2Oil follows a voyage of discovery, heartbreak and politicization in the stories of those attempting to defend water in Alberta against tar sands expansion.

Moving between a local microcosm and the global oil crisis, H2Oil weaves together a collection of compelling stories of people who are at the front lines of the biggest industrial project in human history: Canada’s tar sands. H2Oil is a feature-length documentary that traces the wavering balance between the urgent need to protect and preserve fresh water resources and the mad clamoring to fill the global demand for oil. It is a film that asks: what is more important, water or oil? Will the quest for profit overshadow efforts to protect public health and the environment in Canada’s richest province?

An educational resource found here (www.hotdocs.ca/resources/documents/educational/HD12_DFS_EDPKG_H2OIL_FA.pdf) has been designed to help teachers and students enrich their experience of documentary film by providing support in the form of questions and activities. There are a range of questions that will help teachers frame discussions with their classes, activities for before, during and after viewing the film, and some web links that provide starting points for further research or discussion.

RECONNECTING CHILDREN THROUGH OUTDOOR EDUCATION

A Research Summary, 2007

Thanks to a one-year Ontario Trillium Grant, COEO is very proud to announce its publication of Reconnecting Children Through Outdoor Education, an 80-page document summarizing a wide array of current and international research into the multiple, powerful and lasting outcomes produced through outdoor and experiential education (OEE). The comprehensive document has 169 end-notes and 101 references. The findings are reported according to COEO’s four stated values, namely, education for curriculum and community, character, wellbeing, and environment.

In addition to a text that details compelling research, different programs and exemplary instances of government initiatives to establish and make effective use of OEE, this document features a number of great colour photos of students powerfully connecting with themselves, others and their natural surroundings through outdoor learning. It also provides a number of evidence-based recommendations to the Ontario government as well as to Canadian postgraduate schools.

COEO hopes that Reconnecting Children will contribute significantly to current discussions about making today’s youth more active and comfortable in the outdoors, more confident about their own abilities and their interactions with others, and more connected through their hands, heart and mind to the natural life support systems of this planet.

Visit www.coeo.org/research-summary.html to download a free copy of the booklet.
INUKSHUK

A timeless guidepost varying in design and shape, the inukshuk has many meanings— from marker of sacred places, to a navigation tool and/or an aid for hunting and fishing.

During a visit to Igloolik to teach a class for the Northern Teacher Education Program, Marc Spooner spent 3 weeks trying to take this photo with the sun setting perfectly in the background. Spooner shares several rich images of Igloolik and La Ronge inside on pages 25–29. The inukshuk, and his other photos are a reminder to us of where we have been and where we going as an Indigenous/Western society.