

## Foundations of Ecosocial Literacy

Reading Time: 10-12 minutes

*Ecosocial literacy*, in its simplest terms, might be thought of as the awareness, understanding and skills necessary to gracefully live in harmony and balance with one another and our non-human neighbors and kin, in perpetuity. Part of that wisdom includes a dynamic and expanded social awareness. How do we get along well with one another and joyfully enrich each other's lives? Part of that wisdom is a deep, abiding ecological appreciation and mastery. How do we integrate harmoniously into the vast, intricate web of life from which we evolved and contribute to the continued flourishing and beauty of all life? The ecological and the social are inextricably connected. With our global human presence we cannot have one without the other.

Since the 1990s and early 2000s at least, Fritjof Capra, David Orr and many others have written and talked about the importance of educating for ecological literacy<sup>[1]</sup> (eco-literacy). Since those days, not much has changed, except that their reasons for urging eco-literacy in education have gotten worse. We now have even more evidence (both scientific data and direct eyewitness account) of the necessity and gravity of their proposal. After the past twenty to thirty years, nearly every ecosystem on the planet is in worse shape, more and more species have gone extinct and at increasing rates, the oceans continue to acidify and Earth continues to warm. Perhaps more importantly, there are nearly 2 billion more humans, languages (cultures) are going extinct faster than species<sup>[2]</sup> and, in many places around the world, certainly in America at least, we're locked in polarized, often aggressive debate over pretty much everything, armed conflict continues and inequalities widen. All the while, we continue our consumerist crusade for "economic growth". Though we live in an age of unparalleled material wealth, that wealth is inequitably distributed and both the upstream and downstream negative consequences of its creation are borne by those who rarely receive the benefits. Even among the wealthy, rates of suicide, loneliness and chronic illness continue to rise. How do we explain these incongruities and how might we respond?

Moving into the second quarter of the 21st century, ecological literacy alone is insufficient to help us unravel the dense web of unsustainability in which we've encased ourselves. Our inability to get along well with one another and find coherence and common purpose hinders our ability to become more ecologically literate. As climate disruptions worsen, our lack of ecological literacy will continue to put further pressure on our abilities to get along well and work together in coherence. No matter where we look, we see that the two, like everything else on Earth, are inextricably connected.

We continue to draw from the insights of eco-literacy, such as systems thinking, networks, interdependence, diversity and contextualization. We continue to think of moving from parts to the whole and from objects to relationships. To those, we add personal inner movements from fragmentation to integration, from bias and prejudice to equality, from aggression to kindness, from absence to presence, from tension to relaxation, from doubt to clarity and from hesitation to commitment.

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By enfolding social literacy into ecological literacy, we recognize their interconnection and are able to address important threads in the fabric of our modern global society that would otherwise continue to go unnoticed in education. Developing ecosocial literacy begins with four foundational pillars.

1. The adoption of an *enriched view* of human beings, resulting in an expanded view of the whole child.
2. Transformation of the outer world begins with our *inner transformation* (we must become the change we wish to see)
3. *Non-cognitive ways of knowing* are critical, so we work to normalize and draw upon the many non-cognitive ways of knowing typically omitted from most education environments
4. The practices and mindsets of contemplative education and the *contemplative lineages* are unsurpassed for cultivating the inner qualities and non-cognitive ways of knowing required for our transformation to ecosocial literacy.

Acting from this fundamental framework, we draw upon eight interconnected activities or understandings that we aspire to include in our everyday language, lessons, curricula and conversations.

- ▶ The Importance of Language & Human Stories
- ▶ Reverence and a Set of Universal Values
- ▶ Self-Reflection, Introspection, Inquiry
- ▶ Disorienting Dilemmas (Exposure to Different Worldviews)
- ▶ Contemplative & Reflective Practices (Practice Mentality)
- ▶ Appreciative Inquiry as a Method of Non-force Based Change
- ▶ Creativity and Creative Recovery Practices
- ▶ Cultivating the Eight Intrinsic Attributes of Ecosocial Leadership

### *Enriched View*

Ecosocial literacy highlights and brings attention to an enriched view of human beings and, therefore, what we mean by the term “**whole child**”. Most formal education almost exclusively emphasizes our cognitive ways of knowing. Some percentage of those students may also be exposed to the subjects and mindsets of what are often termed “the arts”. Yet, even an ecologically oriented science curriculum might fail to draw upon the much larger (and much older) realm of human capabilities that lie within each of us. When we examine just a few of the inner qualities and capacities of humans — self-reflection, self-awareness, altruism, curiosity, wonder, awe, insight, reverence, sense of belonging, empathy, compassion, awareness of place, contextualizing, sense of purpose, among many others — we can start to get a sense of the ways in which our education systems are only addressing a very small part of our human capabilities. These qualities and those like them are critical to cultivating our ecological literacy as well as our relational or social literacy.

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### ***Inner Transformation***

*“We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.” – Mahatma Gandhi*

These words of Gandhi are most often summarized as “*become the change you wish to see in the world*”. Ecosocial literacy is grounded in the principle that the changes and conditions for change we wish to create in the world will be reflective of the changes and conditions we cultivate in ourselves. While our initial motivation may be the external conditions we notice in the world around us, we recognize that our inner transformation must lead the way. This is especially true with regard to the ecological and social justice issues we face today. We must begin within ourselves.

We further recognize that an inner transformation of this nature reaches beyond a simple cognitive understanding. We may be able to articulate the changes in the outer world that we would like to see and we may even be able to articulate what that would mean for us as individuals, but those words are merely maps. They may point us in a direction, but they are not the territory of the journey of transformation. Our personal transformation involves a shift in awareness and world view and includes qualities and wisdoms that aren't easily translated to language or quantified, measured and precisely replicated for the next person to follow. The journey will be different for each person and involves the complex web of relationships in which we're enfolded and the ancient qualities of the human heart, such as empathy, kindness, nobility, dignity, love, compassion, openness, generosity, acceptance, forgiveness and so forth. Ultimately, it involves a transformation of the deepest stories that provide a sense of who we are as humans and how we relate to one another and Earth herself.

### ***Non-Cognitive Knowing***

The *inner* qualities, capacities and capabilities of human beings as acknowledged in our enriched view are primarily non-cognitive in nature. By non-cognitive, we mean that thinking and language aren't required in order to experience them. Thinking about gratitude or compassion is not the same thing as experiencing them, either as something offered or as something received. Fully embodying a reverent attitude isn't the same as talking about having reverence. Understanding how our pet is feeling or the meaning of a baby's cry or smile doesn't involve language. A felt sense is required. A different kind of knowing is involved.

Most education systems omit nearly the entire inner life of students (or worse, discount or belittle it). As a result, learners are left to their own devices when trying to deepen their understanding of their inner selves, their relationships and the world around them. Even the few schools that have successfully implemented Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

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curricula, often only touch a small portion of the inner lives of their students and most importantly, don't normalize or develop many of the qualities that are required for developing ecosocial literacy. While most students admit to having "gut feelings" or "intuitions" at one time or another, most don't have anyone to talk to about these experiences to have them validated, contextualized or to gain insight from them. Even if students are able to discuss, for example, their sense of place or belonging, it's much less likely they'll be given the opportunity to contemplate the effect on their world view or underlying stories or the felt senses they may experience. As human beings, if we are to develop our empathy, self-awareness, curiosity, connection to nature and each other, effortless attention, and all the other qualities of our inner world, they must become a normal, everyday part of our education. We must receive opportunities to have regular, on-going experiences and conversations with peers and mentors that allow us to expand or deepen those non-cognitive experiences and translate them into our everyday actions and cognitive understandings.

### *Contemplative Lineages*

All across the planet, human cultures have produced a wide variety of lineages and traditions that draw upon contemplative and reflective practices in order to develop insight, awareness and wisdom, promote healing and wellness, deepen relationships and specifically develop our inner qualities. Some are devoted to developing spiritual insight, while others are aimed at developing and deepening our interspecies relationships, while still others develop an understanding of human healing and wellness. These traditions capitalize upon the human capacity for non-cognitive knowing. Their wisdom and practices have been passed down in unbroken lineages through the centuries, in many cases orally, from one generation to the next. The insights and wisdom developed in these traditions include everything from the heart qualities of kindness, compassion and reverence to the intuitive, felt senses of insight, belonging, and purpose.

*"In a world beset by conflict, to cultivate only critical thinking and analysis leads to partial knowing. Contemplation is a common human activity that, when brought into academic contexts, offers students a new relationship with themselves, others, and the world. It offers an epistemology based not on data, information, and the separation of subject and object, but on knowledge, wisdom, and insight about the interconnectedness of all things. Such contemplative inquiry can lead to an education that transforms the student." - Deborah Haynes, from *Contemplative Practice and the Education of the Whole Person**

Contemplative and reflective practice encompasses a wide variety of activities and can include nearly every context imaginable. They can be done while sitting, standing, walking, lying down and even running. They can incorporate attitudes of not doing, deep listening, pondering, radical questioning and beholding. They might use guided imagery and active imagination, physical exercises, focusing techniques, free writing, journaling and use visual imagery, symbols or art to represent the experience.<sup>[3]</sup> The word mindfulness is often associated with contemplative practice partially because it is this steady, non-judgmental awareness of the continually unfolding present moment that is a part of what is cultivated

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in contemplative practice. This presence, like all non-cognitive experiences, is available to everyone and can be deepened through the wide variety of contemplative practices.

In fact, it's been said that any activity can be turned into a contemplative experience if it is done with the idea of building and deepening self-awareness. This is an important idea to consider as it puts into different perspective things like the contemplative arts or contemplative science, contemplative math or contemplative social studies.

These four principles create a framework that gives rise to a rich set of pedagogical tools. Embracing ecosocial literacy as an underlying organizing principle in classrooms, schools, homes and institutions expands the scope of eco-literacy. Importantly, it expands the possibilities for educators, parents and institutions to participate in manifesting a more peaceful, harmonious and sustainable human presence on the planet. Recognizing there is an important social aspect to our necessary human transformation opens the doorway for all educators, regardless of academic subject or environment, to mentor an entire generation of ecosocially literate student learners.

### **Notes**

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[1] Ecological literacy, or *eco-literacy*, is a term first used by American educator David W. Orr and physicist Fritjof Capra in the 1990s, in order to include the value and well-being of the Earth and its ecosystems in educational practice.

[2] Since 1950, the number of unique languages spoken throughout our world has steadily declined. Today, the voices of more than 7,000 languages resound across our planet every moment, but about 2,900 or 41% are endangered. At current rates, about 90% of all languages will become extinct in the next 100 years. - [The Language Conservancy](#)

[3] [The Tree of Contemplative Practices](#) [Illustration]

### **References**

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