Essential Activities - Language and Human Stories   Reading Time: 10-12 min.

In advocating for ecosocial literacy as a foundational organizing principle in classrooms, schools, homes and institutions, we aim to broaden and deepen the principles, practices and mindsets, and importantly, the possibilities, that educators and facilitators can draw upon to become active participants in manifesting a more peaceful, harmonious, just and sustainable world and mentoring an entire generation of ecosocially literate humans. Every educator, parent and mentor has their own unique situation, yet within those situations, each of us can find small steps we can take in alignment with our vision of a more eco-socially just and harmonious world.

In "Foundations of Ecosocial Literacy" we briefly discussed the four foundational ideas or thoughts summarized as follows:

- ▶ Adopt an **enriched view of human beings**
- ▶ Recognize that outer change begins with **inner transformation**
- ▶ Develop our **non-cognitive ways of knowing**
- ▶ Incorporate and honor our **contemplative and reflective lineages**

Keeping in mind these four foundational thoughts, we draw upon eight essential activities or mindsets that we aspire to include in our everyday language, lessons, curricula and conversations. At all times, we're looking for ways to engage activities that will illuminate and explore these following eight ideas.

Eight Essential Activities

1. The Importance of Language & Human Stories
2. Reverence (Pointing to a Universal Set of Values)
3. Self-Reflection, Introspection, Inquiry (Contemplative Education)
4. Disorienting Dilemmas (Exposure to Different Worldviews)
5. Practice Mentality (Small Consistent Steps with Intention)
6. Appreciative Inquiry as a Method of Non-force Based Change
7. Creativity and Creative Recovery Practices
8. Cultivating the Eight Intrinsic Attributes of Ecosocial Leadership

These eight activities or mindsets are not separate; rather, they are interconnected at many different levels. Often, to engage one means to engage others. But each one points to a particular facet of our orientation and world view that we manifest in different ways and in different circumstances.

The Importance of Language & Human Stories
It is critical that we begin to understand the power of our words and the metaphorical nature of our languages.[1] As Wade Davis has said, "Language isn't just a body of vocabulary or set of grammatical structures. Language is a flash of the human spirit. It's a vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture reaches into the material world. Every language is an old growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of social

Essential Activities - Language and Human Stories

and spiritual possibilities." Language in the form of stories, symbols and art is the vehicle by which cultures transmit their version of ecosocial literacy from one generation to the next. Language encodes culture and, due to its metaphorical nature, it transmits the (often) unexamined beliefs, filters, biases and lenses through which the culture views and experiences the world. The historical roots and meanings of the metaphors are largely unexamined and become taken for granted assumptions about the world. They are are built into our languages and are handed down to us as we learn and use the language and participate in the culture (i.e., as we are enculturated). Reflect for a moment on each of the following metaphors and what they mean in our mainstream, post modern global society: power, influence, success, materialism, consumerism, progress, intelligence, creating change, cultural progression, technology, education, ownership, intellectual property. Many of the meanings we associate with these words or phrases are taken for granted — in other words, we just assume the world is that way and, perhaps, has always been that way. Each metaphor carries a rich set of intersecting beliefs and filters along with its own origin and history. As we may be able to imagine, our view of "progress" has changed over time and, importantly, is not shared by all cultures. It just happens to be one set of agreements certain groups of humans have adopted in our time. In other words, progress, however we may currently define it, isn't some absolute law of nature or even of human nature. It's a set of social agreements, held in place by our stories and participation.

> *"Knowledge and intellectual understanding are crucial, but they are never enough. Students also need to be able to adapt their knowledge to new circumstances and to use it to solve problems. To do so requires critical and creative thinking, as well as **the ability to recognize the unquestioned assumptions and habits of thinking that can lead well-intentioned people to make ecologically catastrophic decisions.**"* —*Michael K. Stone and Zenobia Barlow [Emphasis added]* [2]

The taken for granted assumptions embedded in our stories about the world act as filters, or lenses, through which we see everything. It's like looking through rose-colored glasses — everything has a rose tint to it. Seeing the world through these filters creates particular biases, orientations or prejudices in our thinking and behavior. Many of these filters are derived from our societal and familial stories. The sum total of our filters and lenses creates the worldview with which we navigate our lives. Over time, these ideas become so pervasive and so deeply rooted that they are difficult to see or even notice. As a result, many of the filters and biases that comprise our worldview remain unconscious and hidden and, therefore, unexamined. Because they seem so perfectly natural to us, we find ourselves describing people with worldviews different from ours as somehow "wrong", "ignorant", "inferior", "backwards", or other critical, classifying, ranking or dehumanizing words.

Even though the lenses through which we view the world are largely hidden and unexamined, they still influence and guide our patterns of thinking and our behaviors. In modern society, we don't think of them as a mythopoetic narrative, partly because we associate "myth" and "mythopoetic narrative" as superstitious or something from indigenous or

Essential Activities - Language and Human Stories

illiterate or so-called "primitive" cultures. Yet those hidden stories continue to influence our answers to the questions cultures have always asked including defining the nature of our relationships with other humans and the non-human world.

Therefore, it's critical that we learn to uncover the roots of our world views, biases and habits of thinking. We must practice bringing our unexamined assumptions into awareness and examining them more closely. The story of our mainstream industrial society, which has rapidly spread and taken over the planet in the past 300-400 years (most especially in the last 50-70 years), has placed humans as the dominant, chosen species and specific humans as the dominant, chosen individuals. Yet, this story has only existed as the globally dominant story for a tiny fraction of Earth's history and a tiny fraction of the history of our species. In other words, it's only quite recently that we've begun to think and act this way and, even now, there are cultures and groups around the world who haven't adopted this point of view. But as ecosystems decline and collapse and our Earth warms, we're seeing that the stories and world views that support and reinforce this approach are no longer serving the majority of humans or the planet herself.

Humans have been telling each other stories for tens of thousands of years, long before the majority of us settled into agriculturalists. Even today, we can feel the primal connectedness that comes from sitting around the fire with others and telling stories.

> *"The exchange of ideas that has occurred around the hearth for millennia is more than simple communication. It is the convergence point of individuals with different experience, talent, and insight. The linking of minds is at the root of humanity's success. It doesn't matter how smart an individual is, and it doesn't matter how much they know. In nearly every case, when minds come together, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For the problems humanity faces…we need multitudes of people plugging in and parallel processing.*
>
> *The Age of Information brings the promise of a collective campfire, a decentralized thing where people who have never met in real life can be warmed by the presence of other minds, sharing ideas and reflections.*
>
> *But the online world, though it holds promise, does not have the structures that made discussions around the hearth so valuable. The virtual campfire is…a free for all. We don't really know one another, our visible history is often misleading, many users are anonymous, and some participants have a dog in the fight.*
>
> *Traditional campfires are waning in frequency and virtual campfires often bring new problems; are there other ways to bring about a campfire renaissance?"[3]*
>
> — Heather Heying and Bret Weinstein in *A Hunter Gatherer's Guide to the 21st Century.*

Extending this idea of the power of our words naturally leads to the importance of dialogues and how we tell our stories to one another. Through our dialogues and participation in society, we (implicitly and/or explicitly) share and perpetuate the individual and collective

Essential Activities - Language and Human Stories

stories that communicate the extent of our ecosocial literacy. This includes the nature of how we dialogue and participate. Our dialogues and stories have always been used to create connection and relationship, yet they can just as easily amplify separation and difference, especially when separation and difference are part of the hidden, unexamined assumptions of our world view.

In our society today, we might more accurately redefine the nature of many of our so-called dialogues as intersecting monologues, since each party is often just waiting for an opportunity to insert their own point of view, rather than genuinely listening to the other and trying to learn and understand them. Media, especially social media, often manifests this monologic format while impersonating genuine dialogue. It also has the effect of amplifying confirmation bias, which refers to the human tendency to search only for evidence that confirms our preferred beliefs. These formats are antithetical to genuine dialogue and communication — the kind we might have had around a fire thousands of years ago. The critical factor of course is deep, non-judgmental listening. Building our capacity to listen deeply is an important part of language and human stories. As we learn to listen, we develop the capacity to engage in genuine dialogue.

As an essential activity for developing ecosocial literacy, the idea of "Language and Human Stories" includes the following points:

- ▶ language is metaphorical and encodes culture
- ▶ many of the ecosocially critical stories and beliefs in our society are unexamined and taken for granted
- ▶ we propagate our unexamined beliefs through language (stories and dialogue) and participation in society
- ▶ we must learn to examine our taken for granted assumptions and beliefs about the world
- ▶ we must remember or relearn how to use dialogue as a means for connection, rather than separation, creating coherence instead of disharmony
- ▶ we must remember or relearn how to listen deeply to one another without judgment and with openness and curiosity.

Notes

[1] In Appreciative Inquiry, we use the simple phrase "words create worlds" to help us remember and describe the power of our words, language and questions.

[2] Michael K. Stone and Zenobia Barlow. *Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability.* Adapted from Michael K. Stone and Center for Ecoliteracy, Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability (Healdsburg, CA: Watershed Media, 2009), pp. 3–15, 122–127. Copyright © 2009 Center for Ecoliteracy.

[3] Heather Heying and Bret Weinstein. *A Hunter Gatherer's Guide to the 21st Century: Evolution and the Challenges of Modern Life.* New York: Portfolio (Penguin Random House), 2021.