

## Essential Activities - Self-Reflection, Introspection Reading Time: 12-15 min.

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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.

### **Self Reflection, Introspection, Inquiry (As a Practice)**

As an underlying core value, deepening our self-awareness permeates everything we do as we develop ecosocial literacy. As an activity, we use *self-reflection, introspection, inquiry* as a metaphor that implies the variety of activities in which we can engage in order to build that self-awareness. It reminds us once again of our inherent human ability of self-awareness and, critically, the potential for deepening our self-awareness. We can look inward and consider

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what we notice; we can become aware that we're aware; we can "inquire within", wonder about our experience and seek answers. While we may not know for certain what other species may also have this ability, the process of self-reflection is an ancient and essential part of our human repertoire.

*"Other creatures may love and laugh, talk and think, but it seems to be the special peculiarity of human beings that they reflect: they think about thinking and know that they know. This, like other feedback systems, may lead to vicious circles and confusions if improperly managed, but self-awareness makes human experience resonant. It imparts that simultaneous "echo" to all that we think and feel as the box of a violin reverberates with the sound of the strings. It gives depth and volume to what would otherwise be shallow and flat."* - Alan Watts

Our ancient ancestors, by definition, developed remarkable ecosocial literacy, evidenced by the fact that we're here today. No other species in the hominin lineage has survived. Despite the similar genetics, only *Homo sapiens* has so far avoided extinction. As it begins to dawn into modern human awareness that, 1) we are a global species, united from a single genetic heritage and, 2) our current worldview and our global systems of self-organization are destroying our means of survival, we begin to recognize that, as a species, our current level of ecosocial literacy is insufficient for guaranteeing our long term survival.

Luckily, as part of our genetic inheritance, we've been gifted the profound gift of self-reflection, introspection and inquiry. It is this human trait that will allow us to remember, rediscover and re-invent an ecosocial literacy that will make our continued survival and flourishing inevitable.

There are three important ways in which we wish invoke and develop our self-reflective abilities.

### **Discovery**

We work to uncover the hidden filters, biases and lenses through which we view the world, including the stories that shape our personal identity.

### **Examination & Inquiry**

We critically examine the origin and validity of the beliefs that make up our world view, especially those have been taken for granted. We also reflect upon the actions, behaviors and attitudes that result from those beliefs. This includes the stories that help situate us in the world and tell us who we are as individuals and in our groups.

### **Non-Cognitive Knowing**

Listening and sensing inward reveals the sources of our non-cognitive ways of knowing and helps us understand and validate those experiences. We develop sensitivity to the somatic nature of our human experience and, over time, develop trust in our "felt" senses and wisdom.

Self-reflection is our primary means for uncovering the biases, filters and lenses through which we view the world. Without self-reflection, we're much more inclined to continue

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following whatever biases or filters we've learned through our enculturation. Self-reflection is the gateway to deepening and expanding our self-awareness. We can reflect on our actions and thoughts. We can examine our beliefs, turn them over, hold them up to the light and consider them. We can explore the origins of our beliefs and consider the influence and authority of those origins. We can consider alternative stories and compare and contrast them, using the power of our words, language, symbols and dialogues.

Deepening our self-awareness is the first step in transformation as we discover that we're not limited to our habitual, taken for granted stories and beliefs. We realize we can take steps to make changes. For example, we might consider our society's current story that holds human beings as separate from nature and the cosmos and compare it to an ancient story that holds human beings as an integral part of all that is. We might consider a story that holds human beings as superior and dominant and meant to subdue and control all of nature for our own personal pleasure, and compare it to a story that sees human beings as fundamentally equal and completely embedded within Earth's communities. Through self-reflection and then through reverent dialogue with others, we gradually loosen the grip these stories have over our decisions and our lives. This brings flexibility into our thinking and also makes it easier for us to listen to the stories and experiences of others with openness and non-judgment.

The idea of non-cognitive knowing covers a broad range of awarenesses and skills from having a sense of place to having a sense of danger and from curiosity to compassion. It includes a sensitivity and awareness of our shifting emotional states and how our emotions influence our attention, memory and learning, our decision making and judgement, the quality of our relationships and prosocial behavior, our physical and mental health and our creativity and thinking.

*“A commitment to developing character, social and emotional skills, and 21st century competencies can be found in the mission statements of many schools across the globe (Stemler & Bebell, 2012), and in national policy statements worldwide (Torrente, Alimchandani, & Aber, 2015).*

*In addition to delivering academic learning, schools proclaim their commitment to developing students to become life-long learners, skillful collaborators, moral individuals, confident and persistent problem-solvers, organized and conscientious leaders, innovative thinkers, and much more. These types of outcomes, however, are rarely intentionally inculcated through primary and secondary education teaching and learning...In fact, they are as important predictors of success in school and careers as academic abilities, and thus essential for all students.”*

*“The value of noncognitive skills could not be clearer, whether by the research evidence of hundreds of studies or by the common sense and intuition of nearly every classroom teacher.” A Rosetta Stone for Noncognitive Skills<sup>[1]</sup>*

Non-cognitive skills and awarenesses represent a vast and important array of human experience. [see [The Whole Child](#)] It could be argued that the majority of our human experience

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is non-cognitive in nature. Yet, our current mainstream education systems continue to privilege cognitive, thinking-oriented learning, especially oriented towards subjects, pedagogy and perspectives that can be easily quantified, assessed and ranked, allowing students to move through the system in a linear, age-based manner. When students struggle in this system, rather than questioning the system, we try to find “accommodations” to help these students stay on their predefined track in the system.

Contributing to our almost singular emphasis on cognitive learning are the privileged positions that science, the mechanistic view of the universe and validation by measurement have in mainstream educational thinking. They each contribute to the views that non-cognitive skills aren't important, that they're based in superstition, they're backwards, un-scientific and other discrediting terms. Put together, this state of affairs conditions us to ignore different holistic views because they don't easily fall into the domains of measurable, evidence-based, research driven and so forth.

Differentiating pitch in music allows us to appreciate melody and harmony and sing with others; differentiating one bird song from another allows us to develop an understanding of bird language; reading ocean currents and feeling the changes in wind and weather allows Polynesian voyagers to sail the vast Pacific without modern instruments. All of these are examples of non-cognitive knowing and understanding. We wouldn't dream of excluding them from our experience just because they're not easily measurable or scientific. Some of these experiences we can more easily put into words while others are more difficult, yet they can each be learned, deepened and passed down from one generation to the next just like math or the facts of social studies and mechanical engineering. Like gratitude, love, generosity or kindness, they are real and palpable despite an absence of scientific “evidence” to prove them so.

Leaving these skills and awarenesses out of our mainstream education systems has, over generations, allowed those abilities to stagnate and atrophy, to the point of disbelief that they're real or worth consideration. We even doubt our own experience when confronted with non-cognitive knowing that doesn't fit into our patterns of thinking and belief. Yet, anyone who has understood the needs of their pet has drawn upon non-cognitive skills that haven't been “proven” by science. Nearly everyone has either personally experienced, knows someone who has experienced, or has heard stories from their credible family or friends of someone who has experienced healing from non-allopathic mainstream methods, whether it's something as simple as herbal remedies for colds to complete healing of cancers and other life-threatening illness. Yet, rather than question our taken for granted beliefs and filters, we continue to make excuses for these “anomalies”: coincidence, placebo-effect, original misdiagnosis, anecdotal and so forth. Rather than advocate for the investigation, development and adoption of these skills, we disparage them.

At any point in time, at any moment, we can pause and notice our internal landscape. As we develop this ability, we discover a rich tapestry of somatic experience constantly there; it was always there, but we never took the time to notice it. The astounding miracle of trillions of cells working together to create our human experience. Through our sense of internal

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touch (interoception) we can rebuild our embodied human experience. Expanding our somatic awareness, we begin to develop and trust our non-cognitive ways of knowing and understanding the world. We deepen our awareness and understanding of the importance of our human emotions and how we might work skillfully with them. As we become more attuned to our somatic experience, we begin to source understanding, knowing and wisdom from places beyond our cognition. Included in that awareness is our deep interconnection with all things, which is also a non-cognitive, felt experience. As we consistently tune into our genuine, felt sense of gratitude for the gift of life, our awareness and sense of our human context transforms.

Probably no one would argue that gratitude and other heart qualities such as empathy, compassion, kindness and love aren't important in our lives. Yet in our current education systems, which play a large role in the enculturation of young people, where do student learners get an opportunity to develop these universal human traits — or anything else that is non-cognitive or non-conceptual? Critically, these are all important elements of deep and abiding ecosocial literacy.

The metaphors “felt sense”, intuition, insight or “sense of connection” point to an inner human experience. While we can certainly speak and think about our “sense of purpose”, just speaking or thinking about it isn't the same as feeling it — the sense of knowing that we're on the right track and following a path that is important. Likewise, speaking and thinking about gratitude isn't the same as feeling a profound sense of it. Speaking or thinking about belonging isn't the same as feeling like you belong. Similarly, the realm of social and emotional learning (SEL) lies primarily with non-cognitive, inner aspects of our human experience. Talking about emotion regulation or cognitively understanding the nature of our emotions or developing a presentation about our emotions can be helpful as a kind of “map”, but “the map is not the territory”. When someone is emotionally triggered, the map is the first thing that goes out the window. We need experiential understanding.

The entire non-cognitive realm (our inner experience) is somewhat like an iceberg. As humans we're mostly below the surface. In contemplative education, we're not ignoring the upper, cognitive realm; rather, we're also including the lower, because we know human beings are more than just their thinking minds. We have an enriched view of the human and wish to address the whole being. Acknowledging that, we work to include the non-cognitive in our facilitation, mentoring and teaching. Addressing all aspects of the student learner both deepens their education experience and it begins to normalize and strengthen their non-cognitive capabilities.

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[1] Roberts, R. D., Martin, J. E., & Oлару, G. (2015). *A Rosetta Stone for noncognitive skills: Understanding, assessing, and enhancing noncognitive skills in primary and secondary education*. New York, NY: Asia Society and ProExam.