

Essential Activities - Disorienting Dilemmas

Reading Time: 5-7 minutes

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.

Disorienting Dilemmas (Exposure to Different Worldviews)

“Disorienting Dilemmas”^[1] is a metaphor that points to the importance of periodically encountering world views, ideas and experiences that are different from our own or outside our normal scope of experience. It also refers to the reverse idea, which is to deeply examine one’s own world view, ideas and biases in order to discover their origin and the ways in which those points of reference inform and shape our decisions, choices and behavior.^[2]

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For most people, developing and deepening ecosocial literacy will require transformations in our world view and in the underlying metaphors by which we orient ourselves in the world. Transformative learning theory as well as theories of contemplative education suggest that regularly encountering perspectives outside our own bubbles of experience and reflecting on them can help facilitate transformation as well as deepen learning experiences in any subject area. Fortunately, in today's globally connected world, it's not difficult to encounter views that are different (often radically) from our own. The critical issue becomes how might we engage those views without disregarding or ignoring them and without aggression, polarization, dehumanization, blame, derision and so forth. Consideration of our own underlying points of view and those of others is an important skill to develop and practice in and of itself, but in the 21st century it is critical that we closely examine the various perspectives, biases and filters that directly bear on issues of ecological and social justice.

Some typical perspectives that are important to consider include what science has now discovered about the origin of the cosmos, the origins of Earth and life on Earth and the evolution of species, including human beings. Most of us with access to the internet have seen images from the [James Webb Space Telescope](#) (or its predecessor, the Hubble), yet far fewer have taken the time to reflect on the consequences of those images for our worldview and ways of orienting ourselves in the world. Similarly, in the last 100 years, we've discovered astounding information about the evolution of Earth and life on Earth, yet the consequences of that knowledge in our day-to-day activities remain unexamined. In each of these cases, we haven't adjusted our systems and perspectives to match our current level of understanding. An easy illustration is the notion of "race", which modern genetic scholarship has thoroughly discredited as a falsehood and an outdated human story. Yet as a global species, we're failing to reorient our lives around the simple fact that we're all cut from the same genetic cloth and related to one another. We continue to rank and create hierarchy and prejudice based on incorrect assumptions. There are numerous other examples where we haven't updated our worldviews and systems of self-organization to match with what we now know about the world. Myths of cultural progression, current knowledge of systems theory, interdependency, complexity science and self-organizing dynamics, the cosmic story, are all examples from the realm of science. These are especially important because they directly affect many of the deepest root metaphors of our modern global society. We could also include indigenous wisdom, the sixth major extinction event, climate change, restorative agriculture or non-allopathic healing modalities.

Most of these stories are outside of our mainstream bubbles of awareness and serve as possible sources of disorienting dilemmas for exploration, deep reflection and reverent dialogue. As we explore any of these stories, we inevitably run into another important area for exploring disorienting dilemmas, which are the root metaphors that underlie our global industrial growth society. Important metaphors include progress, success, technology, knowledge, ownership, individualism and how change happens among many others. How we define these terms is almost universally taken for granted and unexamined, yet they inform our actions and patterns of thinking and are particularly important to the development of our level of ecosocial literacy.

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Notes

[1] Disorienting Dilemma: “*Transformative learning is typically initiated by a disorienting dilemma, which Mezirow (1991) described as “an externally imposed epochal dilemma” (p. 168). Some people may experience a disorienting dilemma as a thunderclap, as in the case of a sudden death. Other people come to a slow awakening that may be sparked by a conversation, or a novel idea.*” - From *Considering Transformative Learning for Adolescents Enrolled at Semester Schools* by Lisa Meerts-Brandsma and Jim Sibthorp. *Journal of Transformative Education*, Vol. 19, Issue 1. July 19, 2020.

[2] “In addition, and more predictably, perspective transformation occurs in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma - a divorce, death of a loved one, change in job status, retirement, or other. The disorienting dilemma may be evoked by an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting **or by one’s efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one’s presuppositions. Anomalies and dilemmas of which old ways of knowing cannot make sense become catalysts or ‘trigger events’ that precipitate critical reflection and transformations.**” - *Fostering Critical Reflection In Adulthood; A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* by Jack Mezirow and Associates. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1990. (Emphasis added)