

Essential Activities - Creativity

Reading Time: 10-12 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

9. The Importance of Language & Human Stories
10. Reverence (Pointing to a Universal Set of Values)
11. Self-Reflection, Introspection, Inquiry (Contemplative Education)
12. Disorienting Dilemmas (Exposure to Different Worldviews)
13. Practice Mentality (Small Consistent Steps with Intention)
14. Appreciative Inquiry as a Method of Non-force Based Change
15. Creativity and Creative Recovery Practices
16. 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.

Creativity and Creative Recovery

“In other words, creativity — the generation of new forms — is a key property of all living systems, and more specifically of their metabolism, the basic process of life.”^[1] — Fritjof Capra

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Creativity is yet another one of the astonishing inheritances we've received from the cosmos and from life itself, evidenced by cosmic evolution all the way to the evolution of the living systems of our Earth. It's not hard to see evidence of creativity throughout the long history of humans either. From the astounding creativity of our cultural diversity and languages to our creative use of thousands of plant species, to our understanding of the interconnection of all things, to our music and dance, we're nothing if not creative beings.

That's fortunate because our task in the 21st century is to imagine and create a completely new human culture that is global in scope, equally includes all the diverse cultures on the planet in unified voice and carries forward an ecosocial literacy that will make our survival in perpetuity inevitable. This is no small task — there's an enormous need for creativity here.

We have every reason to hope for success. The universe has consistently manifested breathtaking creativity in its slow transformation from the helium and hydrogen of the early universe all the way through the formation of stars, galaxies, planets and life itself. We only need look at the images from the [James Webb Space Telescope](#) to remind us of our creative lineage. This includes Earth in its own transformation from an early rocky planet to single celled life forms all the way to hummingbirds, honey bees and humans. As Brian Swimme has said, "the Earth was once molten lava and now sings opera."

One of the heartbreaking things I've observed in teaching older students (secondary, university and adults) is that they've often lost the innate confidence in their own creativity. What often starts as a fearlessness in early grades gradually loses steam through the later elementary and middle school years and may even go dormant altogether. When faced with even a fun, lighthearted creative challenge, many freeze.

One aspect of creative recovery is investigating the stories, prejudices and filters we hold around our own creative agency. We need to recover the mindset that understands and believes that we have the same creative potential as all other human beings and we can learn to manifest that creativity in myriad ways, including how we dialogue, listen deeply and co-create with supportive peers. It also includes our ability to imagine the future and take active, creative steps towards that dream. Imagination and visualization practices contribute to creative recovery.

It takes an emotionally safe space to access the most creative aspects of ourselves. [The Polyvagal Theory](#) along with other recent discoveries related to the effects of trauma, explain that humans need to be relaxed, safe and socially engaged before our powers of creativity and visioning can really come alive and reach their potential. Our human nervous systems are wired and prepared for this safe connection and the curiosity and creativity that results.

In survey after survey of student learners over the years, they consistently point to the same thing as a reason why they don't manifest their "best selves" both in school and out of school: fear of being judged. This underscores the importance of creating "judgment-free"

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learning environments. This can be difficult, since students (and teachers) have become habituated to constant judgment in the form of assessments. Students (especially older) are under constant stress from the perceived need to “succeed” in passing evaluations. Stephen Porges, the creator of the Polyvagal Theory, a theory to help inform trauma therapy has said,

“If the body feels safe, we all have very interesting potentials that have not been literally mapped out because most people don’t feel safe and there’s a good reason why. The educational system is certainly not a safe environment. Universities and university professors are not really safe because evaluation is 24/7. You’re always being evaluated..what is evaluation doing to our nervous system? It tricks it into being in a chronic state of defense, and what does that mean? It means that we suffer from toxic stress or stress-related disorders.

“..the secret is if we feel safe, what’s the world going to be like? In education, if children in classrooms can feel safe and regulate their physiology, what’s their potential in terms of relationship building and learning? If their bodies are defensive, how can they learn and how can they create [healthy] social relationships?”

— Stephen Porges, from interview, March, 2020.

Developing a sense of emotional safety is a critical part of bringing forth the very best we have to offer. Of course, this ties in with our core values of reverence, trust, and deep listening, each of which supports a sense of emotional and creative safety. Even in an emotionally safe space, it isn’t always easy though. Many students, by the time they enter high school, have become convinced they’re not creative, can’t draw, don’t have an active imagination and can’t imagine their preferred future or anything else related to “being creative”. A large part of our work might be oriented to helping these students recover their creative safety and agency. For some, this takes time and needs to be nurtured patiently and slowly. It may very well end up being the most important part of their transformative journey. Even if it’s the only thing students receive, that transformation alone will be time well spent

As a long time teacher of visual and performing arts, I’ve discovered that confidence in one’s own creative potential is a delicate thing and often requires special attention. For a moment, reflect on your own relationship to singing. Singing is a universal human trait — all cultures have recognized singing as an expressive and even sacred form and within intact, traditional cultures everyone sings. Unfortunately, in today’s modern society, so many people aren’t comfortable singing in front of others. When our expression (through singing or other forms of creativity) is connected to our hearts and our deepest places as human beings, we need socially safe places to bring them out. We need to hold this awareness for each other gently and kindly, allowing each person to make their way in their own time. Judgment, force or comparison rarely helps anyone trying to recover their inherent creative potential (or their singing). We might imagine we’re sitting in a beautiful, flower-filled meadow when an animal, a deer perhaps, appears in the shadows at the edge of the trees. We’d like to entice it to come closer. Patience, and quiet acceptance will likely do much more than pleading

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or demanding. We allow the deer its own journey towards feeling safe enough to approach. Our role is to manifest a safe enough environment.

This is also related to discovering our own strengths and gifts. By the time they reach high school, student learners have often been talked out of their deepest, most profound gifts in order to serve a social mindset and an economy that requires they earn a lot of money. The journey back to their inherent gifts and passions (especially in creative fields) can be rocky and “filled with fallen branches and stones.”^[2]

This is also related to our value of trust. We trust that everyone is inherently creative and capable of contributing their unique creative energy. It will look different for each person, but it’s important that we honor that difference and not hold students to particular “art” standards or visioning standards. Most student learners who struggle with the creative aspects of ecosocial literacy are dealing with fear of being judged. Even, “I didn’t have time to do the assignment” is often masking the deeper sentiment, “I was afraid it would be terrible”.

The enjoyable news is there are an unlimited number of creative exercises and activities that will help student learners (and adult teachers) remember and gain confidence in their creative agency. Journal writing, especially visioning and other imagination exercises are easy practices to begin and student writing often evolves into more and more detail as they loosen up and practice regularly. Weekly future visioning exercises (especially from Appreciative Inquiry) can help loosen the impacted soil around their deepest hopes and dreams in a quiet, safe way. Many student learners will come to enjoy these visioning exercises as a step towards their authenticity and rediscovering their passion and enthusiasm.

Visually creative note-taking might move quickly into sketchnoting and eventually into scribing.^[3] Contemplative art such as Zentangle or mandala drawing, especially when accompanied by reflections (either written or in dialogue) are also easy to incorporate into a weekly routine. Cooperative games like many icebreaker activities, improvisation exercises or group juggling help bring laughter and ease to the a weekly routine, while simultaneously building trust and connection. Cooperative group music such as circle drumming or simple group singing are other alternatives.

One thing that can help practitioners is knowing that their future visioning exercises will never be read by anyone else. For some, this can give them the freedom to experiment and just make an honest effort. Nearly every student who has done these exercises has recognized that their ability to imagine their preferred future has evolved and become more refined over time. Similarly, as students begin sketchnoting, it’s important to practice a culture of allowance and find the positive in every honest attempt. It’s also a great reminder to recognize our unique and diverse group, since everyone’s sketchnoting style will be unavoidably their own. As student learners build experience trying and freedom from resistance in the form of external judgments, they build confidence, which leads to less fear and more access to their inherent creativity.

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Similarly, as we engage in various dialogue practices, the value of “curiosity, not consensus”, helps remind students that unconditional listening is our first responsibility. This helps set the mood for co-creative brainstorming and creating the space for each person to contribute their creative energy and ideas.

Notes

[1] Fritjof Capra. (Center for Ecoliteracy) *Sustainable Living, Ecological Literacy, and the Breath of Life*. Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, 12, 2007, p. 17.

[2] from the poem, “The Journey”, by Mary Oliver.

[3] “Sketchnoting is a specific method within the category of visual thinking. I define it as the process of creating meaningful sketches while listening, reading or thinking about something of relevance. When sketchnoting, people use a variety of visual techniques (clouds, connectors, text, icons) to visually synthesize and summarise the subject under enquiry.” - Alessio Bresciani. *A Simple Guide To Sketchnoting: How To Use Visual Thinking in Daily Life to Improve Communication & Problem Solving*.

Scribing generally refers to sketchnoting what a person or group is saying in real time for the benefit of others who are also listening at the same time. Scribing is often a part of visual facilitation, where the facilitator(s) of a group meeting or discussion are using a “scribe” to help facilitate everyone’s understanding of the entire group’s process.