

Exploring connections to nature and sustainability through a process of experiential arts based inquiry.

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Abstract

Human beings are a part of the natural world and a sense of this connection leads to wellbeing and positively influences pro-environmental behaviour. In the quest for environmental and emotional sustainability, cultivating relationships with nature provides a foundation for innovative and meaningful solutions. Experiential processes such as arts based inquiry can be of use for this task; its ability to unite subjective experience and intuition, with objective observation and deduction allows us to build knowledge, understanding and find ways of being that are true to our values. This paper provides an overview of arts based inquiry methodology including an applied example of this process in the context of a workshop exploring environmental sustainability.

Introduction

“...the natural world is alive with stories. Places, plants, animals and people are woven together in a vibrant tapestry of history, legend and beliefs...” (The Nature Conservancy).

Aboriginal people have lived for millions of years sustaining an ecological understanding of themselves and their place amongst the animate and inanimate natural world. What may be a less considered view point is that all human beings are part of nature; one interdependent ecological system – Gaia; one soul - Anima Mundi (Roszak 1995). The weaving of individual experience and culture may stir in any person an inherent sense of connection and ‘knowing’ i.e. a kinship; an understanding of cause and effect, that is essential to wellbeing for all human beings not just those of indigenous heritage (Hillman 1995; Mack 1995). From this perspective there is also a direct relationship between a sense of connection to the natural world and the way people treat it (Kollman & Ageyman 2002). In Western technological and economically focused societies that value objectivity, a phenomenological perspective such as this presents a challenge to mainstream thought. Modern Science has answered many questions about the natural world but has done so in a mechanistic way that lacks heart. Colin Mortlock puts it simply: *“The underlying problem of the man-made world is that it is built on human separateness”*. Long gone is the holistic thinking of early Western scientists and healers whose work was informed by a mix of philosophy, spirituality, intuition, logic often explored through the arts; these approaches are now considered ‘alternative’. These factors together combined with other social factors have resulted in fewer opportunities for people to experience and ‘know’ the natural world and to build meaningful relationship and connections with it. It is now broadly recognised that this disconnect comes at a major cost to sustainability i.e. the health, wellbeing and development of both adults, children, the economy and the environment. (Townsend and Ebdon 2006; Louv 2008; Kollman & Ageyman 2002).

Context

“Real change must start with individuals, then family, then communityWe really need to embrace the concept of the whole world as ‘we’.” (His Holiness the Dalai Lama 2009)

As aware citizens and professionals, we can begin to address sustainability by understanding our own human-nature relationships i.e. the role that the ‘rest of nature’ plays in our own lives and those of the students, colleagues, family members and friends that we may influence. Early science and indigenous cultures have shown us that to do this we must ask curious questions and answer them through equal measures of experience, logic, deduction, intuition and spirituality. Through these mindful actions, care for nature may become a part of our consciousness that is expressed through every day –ordinary actions ; it becomes part of our culture. This culture creates a foundation for further holistic and innovative solutions that hold great meaning and potential because they are grounded in a sense of ecological citizenship¹. There are multiple ways of generating knowledge, creative arts-based forms of inquiry are useful companions alongside scientific and other forms of inquiry for this task. Heron and Reason thoughtfully describe this function: *“...our knowing is grounded in our experience, expressed through our stories and images, understood through theories which make sense to us and expressed in worthwhile action in our lives”* (Heron and Reason 2006).

Experiential - Arts Based Inquiry

“There is a language older by far and deeper than words. It is the language of bodies, of body on body, wind and snow, rain on trees, wave on stone. It is the language of dream, gesture, symbol, memory” (Jensen, 2000).

To inquire means to seek information through asking and researching (Collins English Dictionary 2013); an arts-based form of inquiry situates the artist as a researcher or vice versa and focusses this research on lived experience. This methodology encourages us to explore, deconstruct and make sense of our own experiences and values in order to arrive at awareness and meaning. The power of this approach is in its ability to transcend words and *“engage the whole body including the intellect and aesthetic and thus give us access to a depth of understanding that is not readily or fully accessed through more traditional fieldwork approaches”*. (Janinka 2012).

This form of inquiry has been strongly influenced by experiential learning theory and phenomenology. Briefly, experiential learning describes a process by which individuals create meaning through cycles of concrete experience, reflection, testing and application. Phenomenology is concerned with the *“study of structures of experience, or consciousness”* and address *“the meaning things have in our experience, notably, the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others ...”* (Woodroffe 2008)

In arts-based inquiry, *“the multitude of visual images connected to feeling, emotions, and ideas that are held within”* , in response to lived experiences, are accessed and expressed through visual art making and other forms of expression like movement, dance, music making. *“When we reflect on such processes we bring these feeling, emotions and ideas into conscious awareness where we are then able to make meaning of them in the context of the present moment”* (Lett, 2011). The art making and expression itself may then become part of the menagerie of experiences that is examined further through cycles of curious questions, reflection and meaning making. This cyclic process can therefore be a powerful medium for processing lived experience; to uncover what is known, how it is known and what will be done with this new knowing. Figure 1 depicts the broadly accepted activities of experiential arts based inquiry that examines lived experience. Although described and presented cyclically it is not necessarily followed around sequentially but rather may cycle between steps as the inquiry unfolds.

1. Ecological citizenship refers to the rights and responsibilities that are present in human-nature relationships and partly constitute sustainability.



Figure 1. Model of the experiential arts based inquiry process

The stages depicted in Figure 1 can be further described as follows:

- Lived experience in arts based inquiry (as depicted in Figure 1) may refer to somewhere you went or are currently at, something you did or are currently doing, a conversation or reading a book; it may be any action seated in the past or present.
- Reflection involves giving consideration to the experience and expressing this through a form of creative expression.
- Processing involves a series of actions that may include conversation, further art making and/or analysis of patterns and themes in what has been depicted or said.
- Meaning making refers to understanding the significance of an experience, the 'light bulb' moment and its impact and implications for the future. This may be arrived at through conversation or further art making or further cycles of experience and reflection.
- Application refers to the choices that we can make to put into action what we now know. It may involve imaging futures and/or setting goals or resolutions.

Experiential Arts Based Inquiry in Practice

An example of arts based inquiry in practice can be illustrated in the following description of a workshop delivered by the authors at the Australian Association of Environmental Educators (AAEE) Conference, October 2012. This workshop aimed to highlight how experiences in nature influence the way we feel and act towards the environment. Participants created objects that represented their own meaning of sustainability in the present moment based on their experiences in nature. Time constraints did not allow this process to be taken through to the stage of application but participants were prompted to reflect on this beyond the workshop and find personal ways of living out their values on sustainability. The steps involved were as follows:

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| 1. Reflecting on a special place or experience | (Lived experience) |
| 2. Selecting a representative image/object | (Reflection) |
| 3. Selecting a word relating to sustainability or writing own | (Reflection) |
| 4. Selecting a material; physically binding objects and words | (Reflection & Processing) |
| 5. Sharing emerging meaning and insights with a partner | (Processing & Meaning Making) |
| 6. Take home question: "In considering our courageous next steps, what message does this object have for you?" | (Application) |

The final objects and meaning shared within the group reflected the broad experiences, perspectives and values that existed. Experiences described included those with: animals, food production, holidays, gardens, bush, threatened landscapes and the night sky. The resulting values on sustainability were equally diverse: 'life-long learning', 'preservation', 'own back yard' are just a small few. A participant described the experience of the process as one that required you to slow right down; another was challenged by the idea of creative expression but found that with lead and supported facilitation he was able to participate. He valued the opportunity to learn in an alternative way other to sitting and listening. Others described quite deep reflection and meaning making even in the short time that was available.

Summary

The positive health of the entire natural world, including human beings is dependent upon finding solutions that achieve environmental and personal sustainability. In order to be meaningful these solutions must reflect a true empathy for nature that will only develop through direct experience of it and the meaning we make from these experiences. Arts based inquiry provides a method for this meaning making by accessing our feelings, intuition and thoughts associated with our experiences. Out of this process personal values are revealed; we are then provided with the opportunity to choose ways of acting and being that is true to those values.

Our society needs a culture change toward the prioritisation of the health and wellbeing of the environment and the people. Most importantly we need to understand that these are intrinsically linked, this is the starting point for achieving sustainability.

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