



The role of the Arts in Environmental Education

Louise O'Connor



Louise is an outdoor educator, musician and yoga teacher.

Louise graduated from University College Cork with a B.A. in Applied Psychology. After working in mental health and intellectual disability sectors for a number of years, she began exploring more physical and nature-based pursuits through instructing in yoga and mindfulness practice, sea kayak coaching and rock climbing.

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Across the globe, educators, scientists, musicians and artists have been collaborating in the development of innovative ways to engage young people with the natural world. The use of music, art, creative writing and poetry has been employed to encourage full sensory engagement with environmental education. A fundamental premise of this approach is that greater sensitivity to the environment and a more integrated grasp of scientific knowledge can be developed in young people through artistic activities.

Psychologist Gregory Bateson refers to this approach as 'the pattern that connects'. It is a way of seeing the world that emphasises connections in human experience, between humans and their environment, between mind and body and between academic disciplines. The arts have a huge part to play in encouraging this type of 'joined up' thinking. A number of projects exist in Ireland and further afield which follow this thread in lying at the intersection between the arts and the natural sciences. A common goal of these projects is to create a shift in school culture away from a focus on rote learning and fragmentation towards creativity and integration.

In the arts world in Finland, the tool of choice has been predominantly through art education. The concept of Arts based environmental educational (AEE) was first coined by Finnish art educator Meri-Helga Mantere in the 1990s and has been employed by many educators working in schools in Finland. Mantere describes AEE as a form of learning that aims to develop environmental understanding and responsibility through "becoming more receptive to sense perceptions and observations". A work in action, one such project is 'Silva - in Art Education' focusing on "creativity and aesthetic vision in the cognition of the Finnish forest." The students visit forests in different seasons accompanied by professional visual and performance artists and produce works of art that stem from their perceptions, sense impressions and experiences.

A number of projects have developed which arise from a similar premise but employ music and music composition as a point of departure. One of these is the Biophilia Education project which has been developed by the Icelandic singer Bjork and is set to be integrated into the school curriculum across the Nordic countries. It is "designed to inspire children to explore their own creativity, and to learn about music and science through new technologies," according to the official website of the project.

Developed in Ireland in association with the Arts Council, The Ark, the California Academy of Sciences and the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Little Woodland Heights is an interactive work for children investigating the world of forest canopy ecology through musical composition. The project is described as "an immersive educational environment that explores ecology, botany and anthropology and transforms scientific data into musical vocabulary intuitively accessible for primary-age students." The nine-week programme culminates in the live performance of the children's music and the planting of a tree.

These three projects are representative of a broader global movement towards a re-imagining of our educational environments. Uniting disciplines, cultures, communities and species, these works are geared towards a radically new approach to our scientific and artistic understanding.

References

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