



Art, Ecology and Art Education: Practices & Linkages

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ART, ECOLOGY, AND ART EDUCATION: Practices &

Are art and ecology linked, and if so, how? Two traditional linkages between art and ecology have dominated up to now: (1) ecology has been viewed as nature and has served either as a background in art or as the major theme in landscape art, and (2) art is a tool for illustrating ecological concerns and a technology for conveying messages about ecology. Art & Ecology was a colloquium that questioned pre-existing premises about linkages between art and ecology and suggested implications for art education curriculum. The colloquium was sponsored, in part, by the Getty Education Institute for the Arts and several Ohio arts organizations and institutions, including the Department of Art Education at The Ohio State University. Don Krug of that department directed the colloquium. Several guest artists, art education faculty, and local experts elaborated on colloquium topics. In this paper I tell a partial story of the colloquium as a participant and observer. My interpretation of participants' written and oral comments explores their understanding of ecology, the relationship of art to ecology, and interdisciplinary and community-based ecological art education.



The colloquium encouraged participants to work collaboratively in addressing particular environmental concerns in their community as well as to:

Understand the ecological nature of environment in which all things are related and affected by overlapping processes, resulting in a valuing of biodiversity...Develop a socially situated and responsible view of aesthetics...Become

Sculpture created for animals at the colloquium was soon used by Pickerington Ponds wildlife.

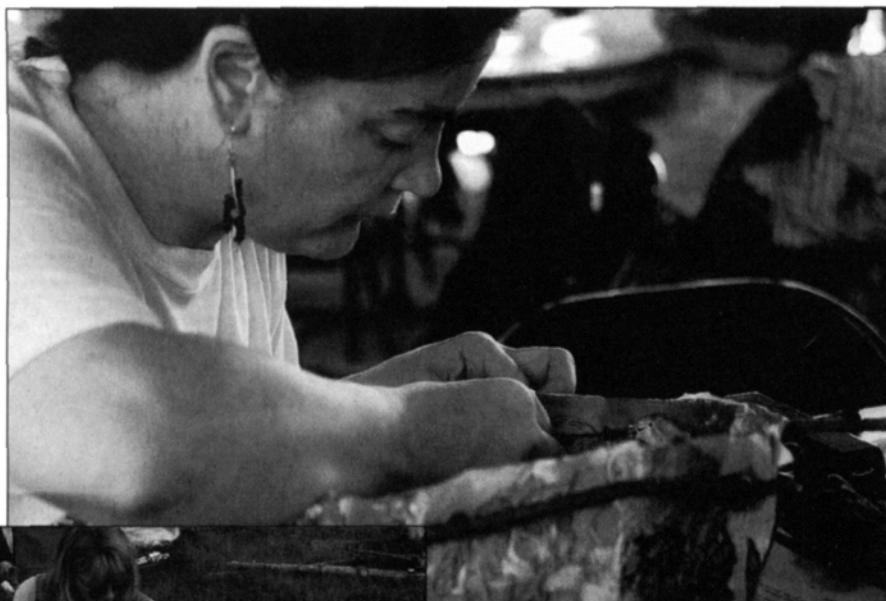
involved in developing creative, imaginative solutions to environmental problems,...Develop a sense of empowerment to recognize, improve, and reconstruct neglected environments through individual and communal actions. (Neperud, 1995, pp. 235-36)

BY RONALD W. NEPERUD

Linkages

Participants in the colloquium explored emerging themes, issues, and concepts related to art and ecology and designed ways to build successful interdisciplinary team relationships in art education.

Although attempts to establish connections between art and ecology are relatively infrequent in art education, such linkages have figured prominently in the work of some artists and critics who draw upon ecological connections in aesthetics and art. For example, Suzy Gablik (1991), a critic and colloquium participant, has written extensively



Participants enthusiastically explored ideas about symbolism and environmental issues by combining recycled and found objects.

about ecological artists. In a recent paper on "connective aesthetics," Gablik expressed the view that modern aesthetics with its emphasis on individualism and the separation of art from life makes audiences into detached observers and spectators. "Such art can never build community" but artists are finding "ways of weaving environmental and social responsibility directly into their work" (Gablik, 1995, pp. 86-87).



Colloquium participants discussed issues of urban ecology at the Columbus Topiary Park fashioned after Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon at La Grande Jatte*
Artist: James Mason

A persistent question was how art and ecology could be related, especially how ecology could be taught without losing the individual value of art.

THE COLLOQUIUM

Approximately 50 teachers and other educators participated in the colloquium. Other participants, including a Yellowstone Park ranger/educator, an artist, and a critic, added additional expertise to the colloquium and contributed to exciting discussions of environmental issues.

COLLOQUIUM CONTENT

Although the colloquium lasted only 5 days it was packed with a variety of engaging activities, which included art, ecology, and curriculum content. A rich array of resources drawn from local communities provided the setting for colloquium experiences. Recurring issues and themes relevant to art and ecology provided continuity for the diverse activities of the colloquium. Themes such as a community-based ecological art education, social ecology, ecofeminism, and ecological restoration allowed participants to confront environmental problems in differing contexts. An inquiry model consisting of direct experience, observation and reflection, critical thinking, and planned action served as a core for the various educational activities. The inquiry approach served as an issues-oriented, problem-centered basis for learning.

Art and ecology were woven into the content of the colloquium, as were cultural and curriculum concerns consistent with the goals of the program. Ron Hirschi, a biologist, ecologist, and author of children's ecologically oriented books, discussed and pointed out the symbiotic relationships among natural phenomena while conducting walks at the Pickerington Ponds Park through the head-high grasses surrounding the pond. He explained how

vegetation was nourished by pond nutrients, which sustained various forms of life such as frogs, insects, birds, and salamanders. Two park naturalists, including "Ranger Rick" as he was affectionately called, and an art educator provided a geological and historical account of the park's formation and ecological changes over the years.

Lynne Hull, whose work *Raptor's Roost* is featured in Gablik's *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991), led colloquium participants in creating ecologically sensitive structures for turtles, toads, dragonflies, birds, and other pond life at the Pickerington Elementary School Wetland. These constructions served not only as planned actions but also as restorative acts.

Several curriculum projects were directed specifically to linking ecology, art, and cultural matters to curriculum and action plans. These issue-oriented projects were designed to involve participants in using interdisciplinary approaches to curriculum thinking, but access to large quantities of art materials sometimes seemed to encourage traditional ways of making art, rather than focusing on the intended ecological issues.

An important part of the colloquium was a day spent at Serpent Mound. This largest and best known of the effigy mounds was placed in historical and archeological perspective by an Ohio State Historical Society official and a professor of anthropology. A *process drama*, conducted by a group of teachers from Duxbury Elementary School promoted speculation about the life and development of early mound dwellers.

Teachers were intrigued by this activity. Unfortunately, time limits prevented full facilitation of the process. Some leaders directed the process too much instead of letting it unfold. This led to heated questions among colloquium participants about representing others. The colloquium faculty developed a curriculum strategy which prepared the participants for ecologically sensitive curriculum construction considering and representing a sociocultural group. Important questions such as "Who should determine which aesthetic artifacts are worth preserving and for what reasons?" were raised by an art education faculty member.

Perhaps the most striking and complete example illustrating the focus of the colloquium was the work of Mary Sheridan at Pickerington Elementary School. Her accomplishments in ecological art education demonstrated how group efforts, led by an imaginative art teacher with a willingness to work with others, could integrate piecemeal information into a cohesive whole of interdisciplinary curriculum, ecology, art, and restorative ecology.

PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE COLLOQUIUM

In order to give participants a voice in the colloquium, and as a means of obtaining information useful to the staff in making adjustments, a brief paper and pencil questionnaire was distributed on 3 days. Among the first day's responses were suggestions for more time to reflect on connections between direct experiences and ecological and curriculum issues. A persistent question was how art and ecology could be related, especially how ecology could be taught without losing the individual value of art.

On the final morning of the colloquium participants completed a questionnaire about motivations and expectations, views of art and ecology, ecosystems curriculum and action matters. Most participants wanted to acquire more information on the ecological and environmental issues and themes provided by artists and ecological experts. Many were interested in the interdisciplinary dimension, linking art and ecology at both classroom and school/community levels. One teacher wanted to do more "than simply recycling materials." I found this comment insightful, for many think they are fully engaged in environmental issues when their sole activity is recycling. The opportunity to meet and talk with others of similar interests was highly valued as a source of energy and inspiration. Camaraderie and bonding developed among colloquium participants and became as valuable a gain as the formally acquired information.

ART AND ECOLOGY

How is art related to ecology? To some participants art celebrates the joy found in nature because nature itself is art. Some teachers saw art as a visual language capable of conveying strong environmental messages. To others art reflects ecological history, values, and hopes for future environmental relationships and is a means of enhancing an environment and developing awareness of environmental issues. Other teachers suggested that art and ecology are related in broader ways, for example, with the concerns of the society, giving rise to a socially responsible linkage of art to ecology, which was related to Gablik's "connective aesthet-

ics" (1995). Art is not solely a means of depicting or illustrating the environment, but is also intimately interconnected to attitudes about surroundings.

MEANING OF ECOSYSTEMS TO TEACHERS

Elementary art teachers' understanding of ecosystems and their functions was characterized by the reoccurring and overlapping themes of *balance*, *interactions*, and *relationships*. Teachers who used *balance* to describe ecosystems spoke of a system that included and involved all beings within it, humans, animals, plants, as well as the atmosphere. *Interaction* was another dominant theme in the teachers' views of ecosystems. *Relationships* were seen as the interrelationships of elements in a particular environment. Although colloquium participants used the terms *balance*, *system*, and *interactions* in describing ecosystems, the terms seemed to be used interchangeably. Most teachers recognized that if change occurs in one dimension of an ecosystem the remainder is also affected.

CURRICULUM INTERDISCIPLINARY VIEWS, AND TAKING ACTIONS

What does *curriculum* mean to you? Where and in what form does it exist? What does *interdisciplinary* mean in terms of curriculum and instruction, particularly as it relates to your own situation? How can you relate planned actions to your own particular work, school, situation, or community? Over 50% of participants held a broad, integrated view of curriculum, for example, "Curriculum is the culling of my life experiences, travels, and interdisciplinary study that I endeavor to impart to my students." This teacher-based, open-ended, flexible approach to cur-

riculum planning can be attributed in part to concerns with educational change and improvement. These teachers saw the need to engage their students in dialogue, discussion, and critical thinking in studio, as well as in other areas, as they worked toward distinct creative interpretations. Nearly 50% of the teachers used more traditional approaches to curriculum, using terms such as *goals for instruction*, *plans*, and *plan for action*. Teachers use the term *interdisciplinary* to describe coordinating curriculum as much as possible, eliminating boundaries among academic areas, and relating art studies to elementary classroom teachers' curriculum. These views, reflected in colloquium goals, were characteristic of three commonly accepted approaches to interdisciplinary education: (1) having a central theme as the coordinating element around which several disciplines make contributions, (2) emphasizing skills common to each discipline, such as generic higher-order thinking skills, and (3) synthesizing and using material from several disciplines to solve real life problems.

Most teachers planned to bring colloquium ideas back to their school and try them with their staff and students. Those who were not teachers intended to realize colloquium ideas by working in their community or neighborhood to effect ecological change.

LINKAGES, CONCLUSIONS AND COMMENTS

After participating in the Art & Ecology Colloquium, analyzing daily and final answers to questions, and talking with colloquium participants and faculty, I believe that several linkages are suggested among art, ecology, and curriculum.

1. First-hand phenomenological experience is an essential foundation upon which to build ecological concerns. In the construction of knowledge or in giving life to concepts derived from other sources, direct experience of one's environment is an integral part of an inquiry process. Direct experience was central to the colloquium—experiencing Pickerington Pond life, art at Ohio State University's Wexner Center, the Serpent Mound, and interactions with artists and writers. Experience of one's environment amplifies human-environmental interactions. When one becomes involved and familiar with an environment, decisions that harm the environment are less likely. Colloquium participants appreciated the direct experiences offered them. Because art is usually taught as a hands-on subject, linking it with science and social studies in an ecological sense makes all three subjects relevant and applicable to life for the students.

2. Some elements of the inquiry cycle (direct experience, critical thinking, observation and reflection, and planned action) were realized more completely than others. Direct experience was achieved successfully in the brief but intensive colloquium. Participants indicated that they needed time to think about and reflect on their experiences. Planned actions were projected in future plans for school and community actions. Critical thinking and reflection require time and space, which a colloquium does not necessarily afford; however, from observing discussions and assessing the results of the questionnaires, I felt that these ele-

“Curriculum is the culling of my life experiences, travels, and interdisciplinary study that I endeavor to impart to my students.”



ments of inquiry were taking place and would likely continue as participants returned to their schools and communities.

3. A team spirit and a sense of community were achieved through the colloquium. Many participants spoke of the camaraderie resulting from collaborative efforts and the fact that up to 12 hours a day were spent with others for the common purpose of relating art, ecology, and curriculum concerns. In unity there is strength for addressing world problems. This feeling of community education provided an arena from which to inspire and take ecological actions.

Journaling, sketching, and making art provide participants opportunity to reflect on relationships between art, ecology, and curriculum integration.

4. Multicultural and sociocultural concerns were represented throughout the colloquium, for example, the Serpent Mound experience and the Native American myths dramatized at the Chief Leatherlips' stage. Even the folksongs and stories about the social struggles of Appalachian coal miners in West Virginia told by two folksingers contributed to cultural concerns. Participants spoke of the "spirituality" of the Serpent Mound experience, especially after gaining information about the effigy mound, its discovery, and

speculations about its creators. Although many valued the process drama used to engage the audience in speculation about the mound's early inhabitants, heated disagreements arose over the cultural interpretations that some of the drama group leaders pushed too hard. Also, the dramas about Indian myths produced at the Chief Leatherlips' site were questioned by Native Americans.

Our interpretations of cultural events need to be carefully considered lest the history, artifacts, and events creating the context of others' beliefs are violated. We need to raise questions about cultural views embedded in environmental advocacy lest we project our own values onto others. Cultural topics should be presented as objectively as possible from more than one perspective. The time provided for discussion of cultural conflicts that arose in the colloquium was well spent; even though complete conflict resolution was not always apparent, the issues under discussion were clarified.

5. Participants completed the colloquium with an excellent understanding of ecosystems in different contexts. It was interesting that only two persons raised the question of urban ecosystems; human interactions within inner-city urban areas were seldom discussed. This was understandable considering the physical setting of the colloquium and the limited time frame; yet there are questions that need to be raised. What concerns do inner-city people have—smog, green spaces, sewers, water purity, public smoking, garbage disposal, opportunities to understand and experience natural ecosystems? How do built and natural

environments interact in cities? Inner-city ecology and art could be a topic for a future colloquium.

6. Both art and ecology as examined in the colloquium consisted of multidimensional networks as contrasted to isolated linear structures. The interacting relationships of art to ecology suggest two very complex networks, elements of which are set within particular contexts. In the interplay of art and ecology, a view of art or aesthetics that does not recognize its social and contextual parameters is contradictory to the philosophy of an ecological art education. A relevant relationship between art and environment cannot be achieved by simply considering nature as subject matter or as a material from which to create art.

7. Colloquium participants were very much involved with art through observing and creating works related to ecology. This was socially responsible art reflecting Gablik's connective aesthetics. Art and ecosystems came together in the creations at Pickerington School Wetland and in some of the interdisciplinary curriculum projects.

8. Interdisciplinarity represents different relationships among curriculum contents; depending upon the approach used, quite different goals are implied. Unless the meaning of interdisciplinarity is examined, it may become a well-intentioned catchall phrase. One needs to ask what elements are being related and toward what goals.

Relationships among art, aesthetics, ecology, and curriculum are part of a *holistic process*, for the moment one *experiences directly*, other linkages emerge. Embedded in experience is a *social relationship*. In considering art, aesthetics, ecology or other experience, one is intimately tied not only to one's own previous experiences but

also to a community of like-minded others. In an even broader context, one is inescapably tied to multicultural and sociocultural contexts. How do we see ourselves and others in this seamless process? This paper is *my* interpretation and representation of the colloquium; others may have experienced the process somewhat differently.

This colloquium demonstrated its power to be an excellent vehicle for the study of art, ecology, and curricular relationships. The participants left the colloquium not only with ideas about how to relate art and ecology within their classrooms, but also with a feeling that many others shared their educational philosophy, a philosophy that stresses connections and relationships relevant to students. It is a philosophy intended to create informed and involved inhabitants who will work to preserve, protect, and better conditions on this planet for all.

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