



BY HILARY INWOOD

Shades of Green: Growing Environmentalism through Art Education

Here's the paradox: if the scientists are right, we're living through the biggest thing that's happened since human civilization emerged. One species, ours, has by itself in the course of a couple of generations managed to powerfully raise the temperature of an entire planet, to knock its most basic systems out of kilter. But oddly, though we know about it, we don't **know** about it. It hasn't registered in our gut; it isn't part of our culture. Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas? (McKibben, 2005, n.p.)

I share McKibben's (2005) concern for the environmental challenges of our time as evidence of global climate change, air and water pollution, and habitat destruction mounts daily. While the Deepwater Horizon oil spill serves as a high profile example of this, there are thousands of other environmental issues for us to deal with around the world. Despite McKibben's lack of awareness of cultural interventions, I have seen ample evidence of artistic engagement with these issues over the past decade, and believe that the arts are playing an integral role in sounding the alarm over this looming crisis. Artists, musicians, dancers, and playwrights

have been using their unique talents for decades to not only raise awareness about environmental issues but also to invent creative, sustainable solutions to environmental problems in communities worldwide. In the visual arts, Joseph Beuys, Mierle Laderman-Ukeles, Alan Sonfist, Lynne Hull, Newton Harrison and Helen Mayer Harrison, Dominique Mazeaud, and Mel Chin, to name but a few artists, have demonstrated their deep commitment to improving our relationships with the environment. But what have art educators done to green their practice?

Above
Figure 1. Drawing outside is an effective way to get children to observe and reflect on aspects of a natural or built environment.

Eco-art education promises an innovative approach to environmental education, one that balances the traditional roots of this discipline, found in the cognitive, positivist approaches of science education, with the more creative, affective and sensory approaches of art education.

As a university-based art educator inspired by the efforts of environmental artists, I have been working to share their achievements with students and teachers through eco-art education. I aim to continue this work through this article by sharing recent developments in this emerging field of inquiry. In hopes of encouraging art educators to integrate eco-art education into their art programs, I provide a brief overview of the existing scholarship in eco-art education, as well as describe the successes of four elementary teachers from Canada dedicated to cultivating this form of learning in their own classrooms. Their stories illustrate the many rich shades of green (Selby, 2000)[*QUERY: Not found in Refs?*] that can be grown through eco-art education, ranging from lighter shades of green for lessons that simply touch on environmental concepts, to deeper shades for integrated experiences that engage students in, about and through the environment via multiple ways of knowing. They demonstrate the many positive effects eco-art education can have on the depth and breadth of students' environmental learning.

While I prefer the term *eco-art education* for its brevity, it is also referred to as *environmental* or *ecological* art education. Eco-art education integrates art education with environmental education as a means of developing awareness of and engagement with concepts such as interdependence, biodiversity, conservation, restoration, and sustainability. In this, eco-art education promises an innovative approach to environmental education, one that balances the traditional roots of this discipline, found in the cognitive, positivist approaches of science education, with the more creative, affective and sensory approaches of art education. Uniting these disciplines increases the likelihood that educators can help to shift students' attitudes as well as alter their behavior in positive ways toward the environment. After a decade of personal

investigation, I believe eco-art education offers the means to stimulate learners' senses, open their minds, and touch their hearts, becoming a powerful ally in fostering environmental literacy. I share the belief with others (Orr, 1992; Thomashow, 1995; Smith & Williams, 1999) that developing this form of literacy in children is essential to the continued existence of human life on this planet.

When I began my research into environmental art, I discovered that some of the theoretical groundwork for eco-art education had already been laid. Gablik's (1991, 1995) writings were central in their articulation of the need for a radical change in artmaking to reflect a shift to postmodernist aesthetics by criticizing modernism's "nonrelational, noninteractive, nonparticipatory orientation" (1995, p. 80) as being too removed from any living social reality or moral imperative. Instead she offered an alternate vision of artmaking based on her theory of connective aesthetics: She argued that by better connecting art to the realities of daily living, art can be used effectively as an agent of social change, one that would capture the public's attention through its creative, innovative approaches to society's problems. By documenting a growing trend in artmaking that related artmaking to environmental concerns, Gablik provided art educators with an entrée to art focused on the environment, as well as an aesthetic framework within which to present this art to students.

Another important influence for me was Blandy and Hoffman's (1993) article, which drew from eco-theory and community-based art education to define their vision of an art education of place. They defined eco-art education as a means "to teach students about art in a way that promotes an understanding of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things" (p. 28), and emphasized the need for art education to address environmental concerns. This key concept has continued to resonate over time, with scholars continuing to expand

on the concept of more strongly grounding art education in its place, whether this be in natural or built environments (Gradle, 2007; Graham, 2007; Inwood, 2008).

Art Education, the journal of the National Art Education Association, was also inspired by Blandy and Hoffman's (1993) emphasis on interconnectivity, demonstrated by its focus on eco-art education in a special issue 5 years later. The editors, Stankiewicz and Krug (1997), recognized eco-art education as a part of a collaborative learning process that valued sustainability by stressing its interdisciplinary nature. Lankford (1997) posited that ecological stewardship offered a way to conceive of a more environmentally-friendly art education; in this he saw eco-art education as "purposeful creativity" where people were "attempting to reconnect with the earth in positive, restorative, and often spiritual ways" (p.50). Neperud (1997) reported on the *Art and Ecology Colloquium* that brought together academics, teachers, artists, critics and ecology experts to explore their understandings of eco-systems thinking (seeing all forms of life as interconnected and of equal importance to human life), connective aesthetics (Gablik, 1991), and imaginative solutions to environmental problems.

These scholars and others (Garoian, 1998; Anderson & Milbrandt, 2004; Krug, 2003) provide surprisingly similar suggestions for delivering eco-art education to classrooms. Whether grounded on scientific or aesthetic footings, they recommend a pedagogy that is community-based, interdisciplinary, experiential, interactive, dialogic, ideologically aware, and built on the values of empathy, sustainability, and respect for the environment. Discussions of the delivery of eco-art education have prefigured and integrated various trends in contemporary art education, and provided a pedagogy on which any general art program can be successfully based.



Figure 2. Exhibiting art outside is one way to get artists and viewers to look at natural settings from new perspectives.

Evidence of substantial curricula development in creating and implementing eco-art education in classrooms is missing in the literature. I was intrigued by the few descriptive case studies I encountered (Blandy & Cowan, 1997; Anderson, 2000; Keifer-Boyd, 2001 [QUERY: Ck date: 2002 in Refs?]; Holmes, 2002) but realized that two important pieces of the puzzle were missing. One was a focus on teacher development, and the other a focus on elementary settings. If teachers are to introduce and teach students about eco-art education, they first need to learn about this area themselves. What types of professional development or support might they need to share their learning with students? I was also interested in eco-art learning in elementary settings: Why did most of the case studies report on programs at the secondary or post-secondary levels? I believe, as do many educators, that the age of the learner is an important factor in growing positive environmental values and behaviors, as the younger the learner, the more likely these will become second nature.

Our research study worked toward answering these questions by investigating how teachers' knowledge and understanding of eco-art education grow into curricula for their students. I formed a research team in Toronto, Canada consisting of four generalist elementary teachers from different schools, a university-based art educator, and myself, to work within a framework of collaborative action research. Aiming for cooperation and co-learning in eco-art curriculum development, it ran counter to more traditional approaches, which typically privilege the theoretical knowledge of academics over the tacit knowledge and pedagogical expertise of practicing teachers. Collaborative action research offered a unique opportunity for the team to generate and exchange practical and theoretical expertise in order to plan, implement, observe, and reflect on eco-art curricula over the span of a school year.

The team environment proved to be a supportive atmosphere in which each teacher could nurture her own unique vision of eco-art education. For example, as a founder of her school's naturalized school garden, Anne¹ wanted to take her

lessons outside and integrate her lessons into the garden. Her previous training in art education gave her a degree of confidence to start, but she wanted to move beyond the watercolors and drawings her class had done in the garden in the past. Dorie, in contrast, had little formal training in art but a desire to continue her own learning about art and environmentalism alongside her grade 5 class. She voiced a concern that she would have little to bring to the team, but was willing to bring her enthusiasm as a lifelong learner and teacher of 33 years to the inquiry. Like Dorie, Astrid had no special training in art, but was dedicated to raising the level of environmental literacy in her school. A leader of the school's lunchtime Eco-club, she was looking for ways to motivate the range of K-6 students with whom she worked. The fourth member, Karen, also brought a deep commitment to environmentalism to her classroom. Already experienced with traditional approaches to environmental education, she was looking for ways to better integrate art education into her primary program.

Our first meeting was reserved in tone; as the members were new to one another, I worried that their busy schedules and geographic distance might limit the team's effectiveness. By the second meeting I knew my fears were unfounded as the group met like long-lost friends who were continuing an ongoing conversation. And what a conversation it was! I hoped that each teacher might devise three or four lessons over the course of the school year; instead, the team collectively developed over 50! At each subsequent meeting the teachers shared lessons and teaching strategies, had lively discussions about the definitions and boundaries of eco-art education, and cheered each other's successes.

As the year unfolded, we discovered that eco-art learning came in many shades of green, for teachers as well as students. The teacher-researchers were happy to find the structure and pedagogy of eco-art lessons similar enough to general art lessons that they didn't need in-service training to undertake eco-art learning with their classes. They also found the supportive atmosphere of a team of colleagues was enough to inspire and enrich their own learning. Still, the team began their curriculum development in eco-art in a lighter shade of green by having their students undertake drawings and paintings of natural imagery such as flowers, leaves, trees, and landscapes, most often

outside (Figure 1). While Garoian (1998) might argue this simply reinforces humans' traditional conceptions of dominion over the natural world, the team found these activities provided a familiar starting point for their curriculum development and their students, and it also gave their urban students positive experiences in working outdoors.

The teacher-researchers also discovered that traditional art lessons, if framed in discussions about the environment, take on a deeper shade of green. For example, during a gallery visit Anne was surprised at the responses her grade 5 students gave to her query about whether Emily Carr was an eco-artist. Known for her compelling landscapes of Canada's west coast forests from the 1930s, Carr has long been seen as a nature lover, but not typically as an eco-artist. A lively class debate ensued about her status, with some students citing her use of materials (oil paints and gasoline thinner) as environmentally damaging, while others were declaring her spiritual depiction of rain forests as evidence of her love for the natural world. The exercise led to a realization that perspectives on environmental issues depend heavily on the angle from which they are viewed, and that all aspects of ideamaking, from materials to imagery to ideas, must be considered in eco-art lessons.

Dorie's students intensified the shades of green of their traditional nature drawings and paintings through their means of presentation. Exhibited on a sunny June day in the school's small butterfly garden, the artworks rested on the ground and hung from shrubs and tree branches (Figure 2), much to the delight of the other classes that came for art garden tours. While some of the class acted as tour guides, others performed on the drums they had made from found materials, and still others demonstrated the skills they had learned in landscape drawing. The event was so successful that 3 years later it has turned into a community eco-art event, with other classes participating and parents organizing a celebratory barbecue.

Astrid's desire to share her Eco-club's learning about eco-art with the community translated into a colorful mural in which the entire school participated (Figure 3). The children were inspired by the important features of their community, such as the nearby lakefront and shopping street, and the mural was installed to brighten a blank concrete wall in the school garden. Involving



all the school's students in an examination of their community exemplified Blandy and Hoffman's (1993) place-based approach to eco-art education, and built a strong sense amongst them of working toward a common goal. It captured a sense of what the students felt was special about where they lived, and shared this with other community members in a public setting.

After creating art from found and natural materials in many different forms throughout the year, Karen's primary class turned to video art as their culminating activity to share their learning with their families, making their own "Solution to Pollution" video. They wrote the script and music, created the sets, and conducted the interviews, all in an effort to summarize the knowledge they had developed about the environment over the course of the year. The video, a cross-curricular tour de force, exemplified age-appropriate artistic activism for younger students, and was the centerpiece of their class exhibit for the school's Art Night.



Figure 3. Community murals help children to consider what they like best about their place, as well as what they might like to change.

Anne's lessons also worked toward a deeper shade of green over the course of the year. Her students' interest in environmental art led to a study of the work of Andy Goldsworthy, whose use of natural materials greatly inspired them. They experimented with freezing branches and leaves into ice sculptures on a frigid February day, leaving the works in situ in the garden to decompose naturally. When the weather warmed they created artworks for their naturalized school garden that had functional as well as aesthetic dimensions, well illustrating Lankford's (1997) notion of integrating art and stewardship. Natural materials were woven into metal fences in the schoolyard to improve their appearance, as well as used to create a giant grapevine basket to protect an aboriginal healing garden. In the spring, the students' wool and wood sculptures were installed in the raised flowerbeds at the front of the school to keep others from trampling the plants. This not only attracted a good deal of positive attention to the garden, but also encouraged other teachers to take on eco-art projects with their classes.

By facilitating, examining, and documenting these teachers' experiences with the design and delivery of eco-art education, our study arrived at a number of insights into the curriculum development process. One

was that elementary teachers with little art training can successfully devise and implement eco-art learning with their classes; a supportive atmosphere and some encouragement from colleagues is useful in this process. The team also decided that the advantages of eco-art education far outweigh its challenges, and that few barriers exist to its implementation.

The team discovered it wasn't hard to link art lessons to environmental learning or to deepen their art lessons' shade of green. This could be done by modeling the environmental 3Rs (reducing, reusing, and recycling) through waste reduction and the reuse of found materials; utilizing sustainable approaches to artmaking such as the use of biodegradable materials and natural processes; emphasizing the environmental content of artworks (in addition to their artistic form and technique); and by framing discussions about art to highlight its connection to environmental concepts and issues. Taking students outside to observe, find materials, and/or create art proved popular, allowing them opportunities to experience different environments firsthand. The use of pedagogical strategies such as systems-thinking, cooperative learning, and place-based learning also ensured a close connection with environmental education.

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We concluded there are many practical ways that teachers and students can deepen their shades of green and contribute to the environmental movement through eco-art education. One is to green the art classroom by reducing the amount of waste being sent to landfill: can cloth hand towels be used in place of paper? Are there recycling and composting programs in place? Incorporating natural and found materials is an easy strategy to employ, but be sure to make explicit why you are doing it. Another consideration is the use of energy in the classroom—are computers, screens, lights, kiln fans, and heaters turned off when not in use? Our local school board realized tens of thousands of dollars of savings by promoting energy conservation. Minimizing toxins is another obvious strategy; shift to using natural cleaning products and art materials that don't cause air or water pollution in their production or disposal.

As an art educator, also consider greening your pedagogy. Take your students outside to make art, using your local community as an exhibition site or for inspiration. Explicitly teach and promote environmental concepts

and values through your choice of themes, images, and locations; sometimes this is as simple as framing an existing lesson with the environment in mind. Bring lots of examples of eco-art into your class via books or the Internet—websites such as Green Museum are an excellent resource. If you have the budget, invite an environmental artist, musician, or dancer to collaborate with your class on an artistic project or event. Most important, model green practices like the 3Rs and values such as respect and empathy for all life forms for your students, so they understand that your actions speak just as loud as your words.

Finally, deepen the shade of green of your program by sharing your students' efforts with the community. Organize eco-art exhibits in your school or at the local gallery and invite professional artists to exhibit alongside students' work. Link to community groups with similar interests, and create co-op placements for your students with them. And encourage your students to use their artistic skills to engage in age-appropriate activism outside class—designing environmental posters, creating paintings for

an eco-fundraiser, or installing biodegradable sculptures in the school's garden.

Our research team of generalist elementary teachers demonstrated that there are many ways to integrate environmentalism into visual arts education. As art educators steeped in creative approaches to learning, what could you achieve? As one of Dr. Seuss's characters, the Lorax, so aptly put it: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not" (Seuss, 1971, n.p.). Whatever shade of green you aspire to, greening your art program by developing your own ideas about eco-art education is an important step in creating a culture of sustainability and ultimately living more lightly on our planet.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The teachers' real names have been used with their permission, acknowledging their central role as teacher-researchers in this study.