

# The Art of Reflection

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## Abstract

*This writing shares a course designed to reconnect middle school students to the natural world. In reconnecting to nature while in nature, students are afforded the opportunity for deep reflection, and the space to wonder and realize the interconnectivity between things. We highlight transformations in thinking and feeling awareness as students' connection with nature is expressed through art and writing while being deeply immersed in the natural environment.*

## Introduction

Nearly ten years ago, my colleague and I sat down to discuss how we might make learning more holistic for our middle school students. Our students appeared more and more distracted in class. High stakes testing, non-stop scheduling in and out of school, pinging of phones, intensive use of social media, and feeling the impact of peer pressure all seemed to have our students' attention anywhere but the moment they were in. How could we slow them down, quiet their minds and engage their whole beings in creative learning experiences? Middle school is such a hugely transitional space and we both felt that we needed to do something radically different. We set out to create a different kind of learning experience. An experience that nurtured wonder, ignited the imagination, and promoted creativity.

At the time, we collectively embodied the learned experiences of 35 years of teaching. I was the artist/teacher, she was the language arts and history/social studies teacher. We believed that collaborating between the two of us would expand the possibilities and offer a more holistic encounter with learning; we sat down to imagine a new course.

Our discussion brought forward that we had both noted a distinct disconnect from nature within our students. This was curious to us as our school was situated on 240

acres of land, complete with three small lakes, heavily wooded areas and beautiful fields. We noticed our students related to the ecology around them as if they were separate from it, or worse yet, feared it. This disconnect alarmed us. The underlying implications of this disconnect alarmed us even more. Louv (2005) expresses a similar concern. He refers to a widening circle of researchers who believe “that the loss of natural habitat, or the disconnection from nature even when it is available, has enormous implications for human health and child development. They say the quality of exposure to nature affects our health at an almost cellular level” (p. 43). The famous conservationist Rachel Carson (1984) wrote about an experience of lying out on an island beach at night and looking up noticing the beauty of the sky and stars above. She wrote about the people in their cottages and notes, “because they could see it almost any night perhaps they will never see it” (p. 55). We were concerned this might be happening to our children in Northern Michigan when it came to the woods, water, and fields they could see *any time*. We were concerned they too might fail to *see it* – unless we created a place and time for them to wonder and explore. Believing in the validity of our own convictions about the importance of nature coupled with the convincing statements by Louv and Carson, we felt compelled to create a trimester long course that gave them an opportunity to be reflective about themselves and nature. In the fall of 2007, we designed and offered, *The Art of Reflection*.

### Art/Reflection/Ecology

Situated in an exceptional natural environment, we were excited to explore how our course might impact our students’ relationship with the natural world. Joy Bertling (2015) suggests that research is needed to determine how students in *ecologically responsive art education* experience ecological paradigms and an empathetic relationship with the environment. What follows are examples of ecologically responsive art education brought to life. We share examples from our 9-year span of guiding our *The Art of Reflection* classes. It is important to note that the creation of this course was not motivated by formal research questions; rather, it arose organically in response to the needs of our students, as we perceived them to be. It arose from within each of us due to our shared empathetic relationship with nature. Memories of our own childhoods, of romping unattended in the woods, and of imaginations running wild inspired us! The writing here is a window into our experiences with our students. We offer examples that share student experiences and the transformation in their thinking and attentiveness as a result of spending extended time in nature.

### Designing the class

Our school is a K-8 public charter, nestled in the woods. It is small, averaging 200 students. We draw our population from five school districts so our population, although

not racially diverse, is socioeconomically diverse. The school is modeled on a multi-aged paradigm with students K-2, 3-5 and 6-8 in mixed classrooms. Middle school students select 6 elective courses each trimester. Electives include science, history, art, music, theater, PE, additional math and writing courses etc. Electives which are offered each year must evolve to accommodate students who are passionate about a subject as they may re-take courses.

Teachers have tremendous autonomy over scheduling and course design. In thinking through *The Art of Reflection*, we decided one critical aspect of the course was *time*. In order for our students to slow down and unplug, they not only required a space, but also adequate time in that space to slow down and relax their attention into the moment. Therefore, we elected to structure our class during the final two periods of the day, three days a week. Monday and Wednesday would be a double class, a block of time equaling 110 minutes spent outdoors. Friday would be a single class period. We planned Fridays to be in the classroom. This was a time to interact, process and share our explorations and discoveries from the week. The courses began in September and ended in early December.

Almost before we began designing the class, we could hear the arguments from other faculty. Namely, how could we justify spending time outdoors when we had so many disciplines like math, writing, history, and science to cover in an academic year? We worked with the assumption that being in a place where students could slow their thinking down and increase their observations of what was going on both in themselves and in the world around them would serve as a critical juncture for interdisciplinary learning. This learning we called “wonderings.” Wonderings emerged from asking *what if* and *why* questions in response to time spent outdoors and undergoing encounters with nature. These wonderings would later point us in the direction of inspired investigations emerging first through artistic explorations and written reflection, and organically leading to questions connected to history and science.

We selected a remote area around one of the lakes that is 5 acres in size as an outdoor classroom. Aspen Lake was our destination. It is a half-mile into the woods from the school building. Due to its specific location it was unlikely we would be disturbed by other school activities. We found the walk into the woods a useful *winding down* time. The lake and surrounding woods were also large enough to afford that each person in the class could locate a “personal spot” which they would inhabit for the duration of the course.

The activity of walking to Aspen Lake was done in silence each time, giving it a meditative quality. It was as if the path absorbed much of the stress, worry, and pressures of the students’ thoughts. We also found that when we traveled into the woods,

mindful of the sounds we made, we were often greeted with many animal sightings. Deer grazing or resting in the woods, birds of prey taking flight from a nearby tree, or small ground mammals scurrying industriously about. The walk to the lake initiated the contemplative space for our time in nature. Even with the walk to and from the lake, we still had nearly an hour left to sink into our experience.

### In the woods

When arriving at Aspen Lake for the first time, we instructed our students to pick a spot that would be theirs for the duration of the class. The only restrictions were to be able to see the lake and not be in eyesight of or knowingly near someone else. Each student carried a small bag that contained a hardcover journal, a pencil and other drawing tools to use at their spot. No other objects were permitted, specifically no electronics such as phones or music players).



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

During the months of September, October, and part of November, we spent most of the time outside in our spots, rain or shine. Each time we arrived at our spots we asked the students to observe their own inner ecology and make notes in their journals about how they felt upon arrival. Where was their attention? What was on their mind? What did they notice about the spot when they arrived? How had it changed? We assigned specific tasks for observation. These included paying attention to texture, color, mood, and smell, attending to all the senses, observing for changes both internally and externally. Some days, we sketched what we saw from our spots, noticing everything around us. On other days, we wrote from the point of view of a natural object. Sound maps, personification narratives, poetry, ecological wonderings inspired by something we noticed, paying attention to thoughts, and reflecting on them were some of the activities we engaged in.

We instructed the students to ask questions such as, “What am I doing when I am out here?” “Do I feel differently when I am out here than I feel in other places?” “How do I feel when I arrive and how do I feel when I am leaving?” Further into the trimester, as the seasonal changes became more obvious, we introduced the question of how they

have changed while spending time at their spots. Visual observation was encouraged through various drawings and mapping exercises. Scientific and historical questions and investigations tended to emerge as a result of wondering about something observed during their time outdoors.

As teachers, we read their journals each week. Over time, we noted evidence of a transformation in their thinking and attentiveness. Early writings often spoke to future events, a trip to the mall, one boy spoke frequently about a car for which he was saving money so he could buy it when he was of age. As the weeks progressed, we noted their attention shifting to the present, speaking to curiosities inspired from observing something in their spots. They were questioning and wondering about things directly linked to their experiences and direct observations. We noted in our reading of journals that their attention seemed to be inspired by the present place and moment.

### Wonderings

With this shift in attention, we were pleased with how easily the students' curiosity and sense of wonder led them into scientific and historical oriented questions. The following excerpt is from a sixth grader's journal:

*What would happen if my tree fell? Would it be a stump? Would the roots come out? Which way would it fall? What's the cause? Would it become dead? Can termites get it? Would it snap when it hit the ground? Would moss cover it? Would it bring the water in the lake up? How deep in the ground would it go? Why do animals attract (sic) to dead trees? What does the bark do?*

Historical inquiries emerged as well. In an imaginary conversation with a tree at her spot, an eighth grade student asked her tree, a white pine, what it was afraid of. The tree responded, as she put in her journal, "*I was mostly worried about the Native Americans using me for a wigwam or a canoe or some other purpose.*" This imaginary conversation prompted research into the way of life of indigenous tribes of the area.

During our Fridays, we gave students time to research their scientific and historical questions. Students were interested and invested in doing research in response to questions they had generated themselves, rather than having an assigned topic to research. Carson (1984) stated, "It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he (or she) is not ready to assimilate" (p. 45). In much of education, we too often are busy offering "a diet of facts" to which students are not emotionally or passionately connected.

Student interests were later woven into the larger final project. We integrated different disciplines through arts experiences, inspiration, and cultivating a connection with nature. The students started with being in the present, engaging all their senses while embedded in a particular place in nature, and wondering about that place. Students explored ideas through an interdisciplinary lens by exploring and answering some of the questions generated by the direct experience of that place. We as teachers designed a final project that integrated history, science, literature and the visual arts, inspired by their time in nature. In *The Art of Reflection*, we not only connected to the various academic disciplines, we also created a culture of artistry, creativity, passion, and excellence that was reflected in the arts based collaborative final class projects.

## Reflections

The first year, we were amazed at how quickly the students' journaling reflected the quieting effect of nature. In school, we noticed many students often going through their day not giving conscious attention to the moment. We observed that they frequently don't really see what they are looking at. That there is often a lack of participation and interaction with their immediate surroundings. As evidenced by their early journal entries, their attention was typically focused on happenings in the past, a future event, or their social standing with their peer group. During *The Art of Reflection* courses, we strongly stressed the need to pay attention to all of their senses, here and now. It was our intention to utilize nature to assist drawing attention to all the senses. We asked them to sit, close their eyes and listen, investigate surfaces, be curious about scent, to be very present. This resulted in some of the following lines in their journals.

One student wrote:

*Here at Aspen Lake everything is quiet, other than the frequent sound of dew drops falling from the dense foliage. It has been raining, although now the air is fresh and new. I am feeling contemplative.*

Another student, trying to give expression to the point of view of a tree, wrote:

*The first time you came out here you were being very loud and moving around. There were fish jumping in the lake, birds flying in the air, and instead of watching them you were playing with a pine needle. As you started coming here more you started to settle down more. Now when you come down and sit by me, it seems as if you're a part of the forest. Sometimes I forget you're even here.*

Others commented on sensory experiences:

*I smell a leaf. It smells like crisp autumn wind. I love how the light shines off of the pond. (...) Everything is so quiet. It makes the wind sound so loud, every few minutes the wind roars and makes me feel like I'm going to tip over.*

As they used their senses, we asked our students to keep open minds and do some active wondering and develop questions. Here is an example from one of the students:

*The ant. Why is it that every time I sit in that one spot, the same ant climbs up the tree and sits and looks at me? But every time I move he scurries up the tree. I mean, is he scared but interested in me? Does he have a home in the tree? But I never see him carrying food. Do ants usually live in trees? Why are ants so common? How long do ants live? Why do ants go in your pop? How long have ants been around? Do all ants bite?*

In saying goodbye to her spot at the end of the class, another student shared:

*I will miss you a lot. I will miss the somewhat silent conversations we had, and the colorful leaves that have turned dull brown. I will miss your whispering and your blanket of soft leaves that surrounds me. You are not only my spot, you are my friend. And you, my spot, are one of the only places I know where I can unwind and relax. I will miss your view and your tiny saplings that brought me gentle thoughts when the day I was facing was hard.*

Another wrote:

*I will miss the gentle breeze that blows on my face every time I come out here; how the quiet takes me into somewhat of a mindless trance. I will also miss how it seems like I'm the only person on earth and yet another person is only a short walk away. The one thing that has the most value to me is being able to watch everything change. So I thank you for showing me how fast time goes by and the things I have never paid attention to before.*

## Creating

Each year, our process in engaging with the ecology of the land produced a final art piece, which integrated writings on science and history. In our first year, we created a handmade book, to which each student (and teacher) contributed a double page.





Figure 3.



Figure 4 (grade 6).

Each page had five required elements: (1) a research section that included facts about an ecological or historical phenomenon that they wondered about at their spots, (2) a

linoleum block print representational of that object or idea, (3) a narrative about their spot, (4) a poem inspired by their spot, and finally (5) a colored pencil observation drawing of their favorite view from their spot. This was hand-bound creating a visual community of image and voice representing our reconnection to nature. This was subsequently shared with later classes.

During another year, each student created a photo documentary (using mostly disposable film cameras that would force students to make intentional choices about what image to capture). This art piece was designed for a specific audience of younger students. It was older students' intention to ignite curiosity in other younger students to inspire a connection with nature by documenting color, texture and change. During yet another year, the students developed a dialogue with an element of nature they focused their attention on at their spot. They researched this natural object for both its scientific and historical significance, and recorded their findings in their journals. This dialogue continued throughout the entire class and concluded with a detailed drawing of this natural being (a tree, a rock, the lake, etc.). The final project became a book of imaginative letters supposedly written by this natural object addressing the student concerned, sharing its observations of growth in the student and his or her deepening relationship with nature.

In 2015, our final year teaching together, we asked students to contemplate how the macro-ecology/environment in which their spot was situated might be reflective of their own inner ecology/environment. After research of specific plant organisms and symbiotic relationships within the natural ecology at their spot, they designed and created a terrarium. The terrarium was to symbolize those qualities of nature that they wished to carry within them. One student was drawn to the moss and lichen and wrote an overview of the kind of qualities she wished to cultivate in herself (softness, diversity, developing symbiotic relationships). They carried their terrariums to and from their spots as they nurtured the mini ecosystem representative of their own inner microclimate, creating a direct link to the natural world.



Figure 5 (micro-environment).



Figure 6.

In the many years we have taught this course, the general structure has remained similar although we vary the final art project each time. In this way students may take the course all three years of their middle school experience. Many have shared, it the best part of their week, it is where they feel in touch with themselves, and where they have time and space to be quiet.

## Conclusion

Our teaching of *The Art of Reflection* validates Louv's (2005) thesis that children's direct connection and involvement with nature nurtures all the senses which in turn enhances curiosity, creativity and its role in learning. In a similar vein our class is an expression of Carson's (1984) viewpoint that authentic seeing and feeling of the natural world are far more important than labeling, knowing facts, or categorizing the natural world. In interacting with nature, students are offered the opportunity to rediscover the magic of the natural world and to remember their connection to it. Each year, the process and path to the final product differed slightly, but it always seemed to reflect our students' curiosity, wonder, and exploration. The lines between disciplines blurred naturally, and students came to appreciate the relationships between the different disciplines and began to understand that learning is an inherently creative process requiring the ability to make connections and to utilize many skills. In addition, and more importantly, students interacted with the environment from a place of reverence and a sense of stewardship. We noticed this sense of stewardship as our middle school students guided and mentored the younger students during recess, or during outdoor school events. They no longer feared bugs, and they stopped moving through the forest ripping off branches. As writer and speaker Ken Robinson (2009) frames it, "With imagination we do something profound, through imagination, we fuel the power to create" (p. 58). We witnessed this time and time again in our class as students made connections through their writing and discussed their learning. Spending time connecting with nature altered *how* students engaged in learning. And they carried this learning within them.

In reflecting on and connecting to nature, *in nature*, we remember a deeper part of who we are and what we are connected to. It is as if math, science, writing, history, and art become secondary and the inspiration to learn and discover is primary. Berry (1999) speaks to the rise of modern science and its impact on humanity's relationship with nature. He notes that our relationship with nature has become objectified, it has lost the essence of mystery and connection: "we no longer hear the voices of the rivers, the mountains, or the sea" (p.17).

We hope that our students will carry with them what one sixth grader observed for herself in the letter she imagined the tree had written to her:

*I hope she will remember the silence. Silence is good for everyone once in a while. I think she has found it is good just to get out of the hectic world and be quiet. I hope she takes the time someday to find a new spot or write in a journal. She now knows that outside is a good place to be.*

Spending time in the deep silence of the woods, juxtaposed with the cacophony of our busied minds, creates a sense of separation only healed when we remember we are part of the natural world. We believe it is critical to reestablishing the deeper connection with ourselves as a part of the natural world. In *The Art of Reflection*, each experience we designed attempted to heal this rift and illuminate our connection with the natural world. By employing interdisciplinary arts experiences as holistic learning, we found that students saw themselves as a part of the natural world. In doing so, the students' interaction with and connection to nature, were realized.

## References

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