Island Ecology: An Exploration of Place in the Elementary Art Curriculum

BY ERICA HANSEN

Environment

Today, the term environment is a kind of cultural barometer, connected to other terms such as environmentalism, environmental degradation, environmental art, environmentally friendly, and environmentalist. All of these terms can feel distant and disconnected from our everyday lives. The environment is comprised of multiple dimensions, including natural, social, and built surroundings that each one of us experiences locally. Taken as a whole these local environs make up the larger ecological conditions experienced globally.

As an artist and educator I question the role of our environment in artmaking. I ask myself if art can approach the intimate relationship between ecological and social issues in a way that other processes cannot. If so, how can I create a unit of instruction that fosters a critical awareness of nature while engaging the imagination?

Many researchers, artists, and educators of our 21st century take issue with systemic problems such as dominance and oppression, social inequality, resource depletion, and socio-cultural neglect. Graham (2007b), Hicks and King (2007), and Blandy, Congdon and Krug (1998) see the state of the world today as a call to action. Environmental degradation in the form of pollution, loss of species, global warming, and over-population threaten human and non-human life on this planet. We exist in a state of social and cultural dislocation that permeates our natural, social, and built environments. Gradle (2007) along with Hicks and King (2007) call this “displacement,” and purport a
re-connection and re-contextualization within our varied environments. In this article, I will illustrate how big terms such as ecology, place, and site can be defined locally, and used to hone the intentions and means of student art making.

Ecology

The term ecology has always implied a relational function. The Greek words oikos (dwelling) and logos (study of) were combined to designate the study of the household of nature. From its conception, the word ecology is centered on the very idea of place. In order to reconstruct our relationship with the environment, humans must understand our place in it.

As a culture we are beginning to reconnect the functions of our human-made environment to the functions of the natural environment. Innovations in design, local and national conservation initiatives, and strategic environmental planning are en vogue, and a priority for many communities as we try to navigate our relationship with the environment.

During the fall and spring of 2008, I created three units of instruction for third through fifth grade students to examine the tension and resonance between their socio-cultural and natural environments. Two premises provided the theoretical construct for this exploration.

Premise one: To find connections that create critical awareness about the interdependence of nature and culture is a primary responsibility in this postmodern era.

Premise two: Postmodernism has erected itself philosophically against the exploits of modernity. It seeks to invert the dominant structures of the past, and give voice to the other. Ecologically speaking, the other is the natural world itself.

Place

A place, defined in terms of visual art, can be reflective, illustrating the reality of one’s environment. In the 1970s, Parsons, Johnson, and Durham (1974) addressed the need for students to develop an accumulated and personalized relationship to the world around them. Today, contemporaries like Lippard, Lacy, and Sutton articulate the importance of a critical pedagogy of place. By reflecting socio-culturally and ecologically on their local environment, students can construct a picture of that place that illustrates the interdependence they feel between the human and natural worlds.

Examinations of place in visual art can also be imaginative, creating new realities within one’s environment. Neperud (1997) and Hollis (1997) call this type of engagement “first-hand phenomenological experience.” These experiences allow students to address real-life situations in a creative mode. Students learn to recognize that they have power and creative options for addressing real-life problems.

Seeking to understand how elementary students on an island 15 miles off the coast of Maine could depict their socio-cultural and natural environments through artmaking, I developed three units of instruction for students in the third, fourth, and fifth grades. The first was designed to get students into the field and engaged with local bird life, real and imaginary. The second looked specifically at migratory behaviors in humans and birds, and asked students to create work that illustrated the relationships between the two species. The third unit was created as a response to students’ desire to make work that was not only environmentally reflective, but proactive. What I discovered in the process of designing and implementing these units was a sea of elaborate solutions that were not only reflective, but remedial, amplifying the students’ relationship to their environs.

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Site

Lobsterhaven is first a working-class community and second a summer retreat. The town’s 1,276 full-time residents include 579 lobstermen and women. Family homes, cycling, sailing, and kayaking bring up to 7,000 summer visitors to Lobsterhaven each year. Visitors are drawn by the landscape and the uniqueness of life off the mainland. The island is a tight-knit community, inclusive of summer people, to a point. Year-round islanders draw a strong distinction between those “from here” and those “from away.” A similar influx of bird populations occurs in Lobsterhaven each summer. Lobsterhaven and the surrounding islands are nesting sites for eiders, guillemots, gulls, puffins, and terns. There is also a very unique array of migratory birds that pass through seasonally. These avian visitors are seldom seen on the mainland, but use the island as a feeding and resting spot on their journey south in the fall and north in the spring.

My students are familiar and comfortable with the seasonal change in our natural environment; however, they express discomfort with the social changes that take place in their community throughout the year. The influx of summer visitors is exciting, and intimidating. Likewise their retreat in the fall is marked by feelings of relief and sadness. Summer visitors bring new experience, knowledge, and friendship; they also bring changes to daily life that can be disruptive and detrimental. Added pollution, traffic, and noise are a few of the effects that year rounder inhabitants do not enjoy. By examining the relationship of these two populations in the studio, my students illustrated the social and ecological impact that both populations have on the local environment.

Unit One: The Local and The Imagined

Motivation

Many of the activities in this unit began as games, informal performances, and outdoor activities. Students were given research journals to collect drawings and reflective writings throughout the project. I showed examples from my research journals, and talked about an artist’s relationship to ongoing investigation, in and out of the classroom.

In this unit, students created illustrations and writing for field guides about local bird populations. The students used the guides on our field trips, and distributed them at four land-trust trails for other visitors to use. Students were motivated by the exhibition of their work, and the opportunity to use what they have learned in the field.

Idea generation

Ideas were generated by our visiting ornithologists, creative writing prompts, and group brainstorming activities. Hands-on experience with bird anatomy and migratory behaviors generated ideas for those who are not visual thinkers.

Knowledge of art and artists

We looked at “The emotional atlas of the world” by Kathy Prendergast. Discussing the map’s ability to show physical and emotional reality simultaneously. Students mapped their personal “nesting” areas, and the nesting areas of local birds.

Practice / Skills

Many of the projects in this unit had material and thematic constraints. They were designed to push students outside their area of comfort, and encourage new skills to develop.

Search / Research

Research was in the areas of: bird anatomy, migratory routes, and nesting locations. Local ornithologists John Drury and Kirk Gentalen presented existing research. Students researched at home in their journals as well.

Dialogue and reflection

Large and small group discussions took place in class. Reflections and collaborations with parents and other community members took place at home, and in the research journal.

UNIT ONE: The Local and the Imagined

My students and I examined local bird species, real and imaginary. Through careful observation and illustration of local birds, the students created three field guides. Local ornithologists Kirk Gentelean and John Drury provided the students with taxidermied birds, as well as field opportunities, to observe and illustrate Lobsterhaven’s birds seasonally. The first product was a field guide to summer bird populations. The second was a guide to winter bird populations. The third was a guide to imaginary bird populations.
Our local land-trust provided funding for John and Kirk’s time, the use of trails for field study, and the use of taxidermy collections. The field guides to summer and winter birds were donated to the land-trust for visitors to use. The organization was thrilled that the students wanted to donate their field guides for community use. They even offered to pay for the printing of additional guides for use in the future.

Students exhibited their guides to imaginary bird populations in a performance of sorts. Posed as trail guides, the fourth grade students led kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade classes through an installation of their imaginary bird sculptures, complete with a student-created imaginary bird guide. These sculptures drew from the students’ understanding of anatomy and adaptations in the bird world. Each bird sculpture was designed very specifically based on the students’ local lexicon. Birds such as the daredevil lovebird and two-headed trash eater, were thoughtfully described and identified by the students during our hike.

Throughout this unit my students made pragmatic connections between the lives of local birds and local humans. They also made conceptual connections between what they had learned and their desire to share that new knowledge with their community.

**Unit 2: Here and Away**

**Motivation**

In this unit students designed and built shadow puppets. The students were already interested in the art form itself. Students were motivated by work they created at home, illustrating comic strips about a bird’s life, and creating invitations to their shadow puppet play.

**Idea generation**

Idea were inspired by the drawings and journal entries from the previous unit, as well as from group brainstorming activities. The 3D and 3D exploration of bird anatomy and migratory behaviors helped generate ideas for those who do not think as clearly in 2D.

**Knowledge of art and artists**

We looked at the work of Walton Ford. We discussed his work’s ability to show specific physical and behavioral characteristics of the animals he illustrates. Students selected a bird to focus on for the illustration unit by the physical and behavioral characteristics they relate most to.

**Practice / Skills**

Many of the projects during this unit had material and thematic constraints. They were designed to push students outside their area of comfort, and encourage new skills to develop.

**Search / Research**

Research was in the areas of bird anatomy, migratory behaviors, and performance sequencing. Students were researching the daily life of individual birds at home in their research journals.

**Dialogue and reflection**

Large and small group discussions took place in class. Reflections and collaborations with parents and other community members took place at home, and in the research journal.
Unit 3: Useful Debris

Motivation
What’s for dinner? started us off on the right foot for this unit. This game puts students in the bird’s position of looking for food and nesting materials under various constraints.

Idea generation
Ideas were generated this week by: our visiting high school tech students, creative writing prompts, and group brainstorming activities. Hands-on experience with design, building, and installation of the feeders generated lots of energy and excitement around the project.

Knowledge of art and artists
We looked at the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko, and discussed it in terms of social responsibility and sustainable design. Krzysztof is a frequent visitor to Lobsterhaven; so many of the students have met him and seen his work in the past. His work is socially remedial and illustrates the artists’ attempt to protect and serve a human population. His work was inspiring to the students working on their designs for bird populations.

Practice / Skills
Students were presented with the opportunity to take from, learn about, and act upon the environment while at the land-trust. They drew, wrote, and cleaned up the trails while we were there. Students separated useable trash from non-useable trash, addressing our ability to transform what was waste.

Search / Research
Research was in the areas of recycling and reuse of waste, as well as identification of wintering and migrating bird populations. Students drew, wrote, and gathered materials for their research journals. Students researched at home in their journals as well.

Dialogue and reflection
Large and small group discussions took place in class and on our field trips. Reflections and collaborations with parents and other community members took place at home, and in the research journal.

UNIT THREE:
Useful Debris

This unit was designed based on the students’ desire to give something back to the birds that had inspired them. The focus of unit three was to examine the feeding and nesting habits of local bird populations and compare them to related tasks in the human world. Students kept track of their consumption and waste, and experimented with nest building. By developing a respect for the equilibrium between birds’ needs and habits, the students were presented with an opportunity to take from, learn about, and act upon their local environment.

Two different sculptures were produced, along with preliminary designs and drawings around the idea of “useful trash.” The first was a shadow box created from the students’ accumulated visual culture. The second was an object designed for birds to use, created from collections of un-recyclable plastic. Some of these objects were birdfeeders or nesting boxes; some were more like amusement parks for the birds. Functional or not, each illustrated a student’s unique ability to create from a place of empathy and empowerment.

I watched my students formulate this empowered view of the environment, and a prolonged engagement with environmental issues. Through their thoughtful designs, the students demonstrated an understanding of the true ecological nature of environment, in which all things are related and affected by each other.

Implications for Student Learning
What is the value in having students approach artmaking in relation to their local environment? First, there is an inherent value in developing an empowered view of the natural and socio-cultural environment, and a prolonged engagement with these issues. My students’ awareness of their environmental impact, coupled with their understanding of the balance that birds achieve within their local ecosystem, empowered them to find positive solutions for lessening their own negative impact, and giving back to the birds they came to admire. By creating the opportunity for inquiry-based explorations and action-based outcomes, we as teachers encourage students to think beyond themselves and create works that have distinct visual and functional purpose. This marriage of visual and functional aesthetics heightens students’ engagement in designing creative, imaginative, and functional art objects that can address local issues, now and in the future.

Neperud (1995) discusses the emotional and material consciousness that art making evokes in relation to the natural world. He writes: “Texture is our personal communication with natures dialogue: it is the experience of craft which intimately binds our consciousness with the earth’s material consciousness…one cannot get closer to the earth than the touch of the hand” (p.126). To me, experiencing one’s environment through art making is not simply an examination of objective reality, it is an examination of the web of relationships between physicality and perception.

Hollis (1997) states, “An art curriculum that deals with ecological issues can empower students with the understanding that they, as creative individuals, can have an active voice in protecting their environment and changing current devastating ecological trends” (p. 21). I add that social and ecological issues are intimately bound, and that through dealing with both simultaneously, students will understand and empathize with non-human aspects of their environment.

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Most significantly, my students demonstrated an understanding of the ecological nature of environment in which all things are related and affected by one another. My students drew correlations between the bird world and their own, and witnessed the reciprocal nature of ecology. They were able to articulate the ways that local birds inspire and affect their lives: the two most potent examples being human aspirations for song and flight. Furthermore, they described ways that humans can impact the lives of birds for better or for worse. Their engagement came from their deep connection to these birds coupled with a desire to understand and affect their local environment.

Conclusions
Fostering a critical awareness of nature is the first step in supporting ecological or social change. As art educators we have a responsibility to bring our students’ everyday lives into communion with artmaking in the classroom. A primary responsibility of art education in the 21st century is to help students examine local culture and ecology—how else will our students be ready to impact the new world?

The type of artmaking that results from this unit gives students first-hand experience in their own environments, creating awareness, through observation and participation, of their relationship with place, their immediate environment. By expanding and deepening students’ areas of concern, art educators can encourage a more informed and responsible engagement with the world; establishing an aesthetic of responsibility that will affect their future choices. If students learn to address the issues they consider significant with artistic solutions, they will have a direct impact on the conditions of life in their community and in relation to their planet.

There is a fundamental difference between environmental awareness and environmental responsibility. Hicks & King (2007) state that to be responsible citizens, we must not simply understand nature’s ecological workings, but allow those understandings to inform and pervade our participation in and cooperation with nature. Bequette (2007), Graham (2007a), and Ulbricht (1998) assert that teaching practices must be broadened to include artwork that has a socially and environmentally functional purpose.

Students learn from what has been accomplished in the past, but art is not a past event. Likewise, it is not a set of tools and materials. It is a way of seeing, perceiving, responding, creating, and walking through the world. This type of art making affects not only the students themselves, but their natural, social, and built environments. As a result, students begin to consider themselves in relation to others socially and ecologically, leading to an informed and responsible engagement with the world around them.

Erica Hansen is an artist and educator in residence at The Creative Alliance in Baltimore, Maryland. E-mail: hansenerica@yahoo.com

REFERENCES