

# Toward Resonant, Imaginative Experiences in Ecological and Democratic Education.

A Response to “Imagination and Experience: An Integrative Framework”

*Michael Derby, Sean Blenkinsop, John Telford, Laura Piersol, Michael Caulkins*

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## Abstract

In this response to Fettes’s “Imagination and Experience,” the authors further consider the varieties of educational experience that inspire ecological flourishing and a living democracy. The essential interconnectedness of encounter-driven and language-driven ways of knowing are explored with particular reference to the authors’ involvement in a research project at an innovative elementary school in British Columbia, Canada.

## This article is a response to:

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**I**N HIS COMPELLING paper, Fettes has thoughtfully addressed the persistently ambiguous nature of experience in education. His assertion that primary experience is at risk of becoming a “dwindling resource” (Fettes, 2013, p. 1), increasingly eclipsed by, for example, the normalization of second-hand digital mediation, is cause for great concern for those educators who recognize that “when we cut ourselves off from direct immersion in the natural world, in rich sensory experience, we cripple our ability to think creatively and well” (p. 6). An equally important education concern—and one equally fraught with ambiguity—is the complex role language plays in experience and how our experiences are understood. Drawing upon the work of diverse thinkers, from American pragmatists James and Dewey, to Polanyi, to Canadian poet-philosopher Zwicky, Fettes discerningly reasserts a key insight: The meaning of experience is “never just individual and idiosyncratic but also profoundly collective and cultural” (p. 2).

Awareness of the extraordinary tension between direct, tacit, embodied knowledge and explicit, linguified, culturally mediated knowledge thus lies at the heart of education in a democratic society. In order to assist educators in thinking about new forms of democratic education practice that incorporate this awareness, Fettes (2013) offers an integrative framework that gives greater weight to the connection between variations of experience and those of imagination based primarily on the writings of Roberts and Egan, respectively. Although sensory impoverishment may

initially appear to be primarily an ecological concern, we share Fettes’ contention that a theory of educational experience that considers both encounter-driven and language-driven engagement is necessary for the building of a living democracy in an age of mounting ecological degradation.

Presumably, the kinds of educational experience favorable to nurturing notions and behaviors that instill ecological responsibility and democratic literacy would be both experientially diverse and cognitively enriching—which is to say, varieties of experience that provide somatic diversity with ample opportunities for immersion in and direct interaction with the natural world, complemented and further enriched by educators who imaginatively engage students and draw them toward increasingly sophisticated reflexive and critical understandings. We contend, however, that educational experiences of this variety are not common in

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The authors are all members of the Ecolearning Research Group at Simon Fraser University. The authorship team consists of an assistant researcher, a PhD candidate, two postdoctoral fellows, and an associate professor. The authors of this article, along with other members of the Ecolearning Research Group, endeavor to find ecological ways of working and researching. This research has been made possible by an environmental Community-University Research Alliance grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

much of the conventional school system, where sensory impoverishment and mechanistic learning models remain the norm. This fact legitimizes, in a sense, the convictions of those environmental educators who strive essentially just to get kids outside (Carson, 1965; Cobb, 1977; Louv, 2005; Thomashow, 1995).

### Maple Ridge Environmental School Project

What would happen if we were to remove the rigid structures and learning objectives of conventional public school? What if we were to remove the walls completely and think through Fettes's inquiry at a school immersed in the natural world on a daily basis that actively seeks to increase opportunities for sensory-rich, primary experiences? This response paper arises from the authors' lived-experiences of such questions. All of the authors are members of the Simon Fraser University Ecolearning Research Group, working with an innovative environmental school project on the traditional lands of the Katzie and Kwantlen First Nations in British Columbia, Canada (<http://es.sd42.ca>). The original vision for the project was a community-based school that would be guided by concepts related to place-based (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004), ecological (Bowers, 1993; Cajete, 1994; Carson, 1965; Hutchison, 1998; Sobel, 1999; Stone & Barlow, 1995; Thomashow, 1995), and imaginative (Blenkinsop, 2008; Egan, 1997, 2005; Fettes & Judson, 2010; Judson, 2010) education and whose underlying project was to question whether education can be an agent for cultural change. The school was envisioned as a fundamentally democratic project whereby students would deepen relationships with the more-than-human world, and then, presumably, work toward developing a sense of themselves as agents of cultural change toward a more ecologically just society. As might be expected in a project with such a sweeping mandate, we have found there are often divergences between the original vision and the everyday realities of the school.

The school opened its doors, figuratively speaking, as there is no actual school building, in the fall of 2011 to 60 children ranging in age from 5 to 13. In its second year, it expanded to 88 children. The school employs four teachers, two support teachers, two teacher assistants, and a principal. The research team has conducted several rounds of interviews with parents, students, teachers, and support staff, and one to three researchers are at the school every day. We have not witnessed any definite sense from teachers or parents that the learning community is actively engaged with or interested in pushing the limits of democratic education, but it has been surprising to witness the willingness of teachers and parents to try something new. Based on the number of students and parents who have had negative experiences with the conventional school system, we might speculate that this inclination may have less to do with a desire to transform wider cultural presuppositions and more to do with a reaction against particular practices and processes within mainstream public education.

Interestingly, there also appears to be a deep rejection on the part of the administration and teaching staff of anything resembling conventional schooling. Particular bugbears are: behaviorism and all its accoutrements; objective-driven curricula; extended planning; and central components of a child's elementary school

life: nonsituated, physically restricted, time-consuming rituals involved with learning to read, write, and do math. The school represents an almost complete reversal of the problem Fettes (2013) pointed to with respect to the conventional school system. Instead of primary or firsthand experience being at risk of becoming a "dwindling resource" (p. 1), explicit, linguified knowledge that draws upon cultural cognitive tools (Egan, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978) is increasingly marginalized. Alongside the rejection of education convention is a kind of faith in the power of unmediated somatic experience of the natural world to provide for rich, transformative learning, a tradition of experiential learning that Roberts (2008, 2012) refers to as "embodied experience." The school staff and administration have so far displayed a significantly hands-off approach with regard to facilitating students' reflections and interpretations of these embodied experiences. There is an apparent hesitancy to mediate the nature of students' primary experiences, and the school might be considered a kind of 21st-century Rousseauian enclave with an ecological twist.

In light of our observations at the school, we believe the modes and pathways of imaginative development that Fettes has outlined are a much welcomed means of considering how we might navigate education development in a way that is experientially diverse and also embraces cultural and historical contexts. This is essential in order to avoid "treating experience as if it were somehow sealed off from all our inherited baggage of meaning-making" (Fettes, 2013, p. 4). Drawing upon research at the environmental school allows us to respond in two ways to Fettes's paper. First, we continue the discussion regarding the essential interconnectedness of the encounter-driven and language-driven pathways of meaning-making. We address this by considering what happens when an overcompensation in favor of embodied knowledge is made at the expense of explicit, reflective, linguified ways of understanding. Second, we guard against the potential for linear or hierarchic interpretations of Fettes's table and reconsider the framework such that the tension between these kinds of knowing might come into resonance and mutually reinforce each other for the purposes of democratic teaching practices.

### The Pendulum Swings

The Imaginative Education project (<http://www.ierg.net>) that informs the language-driven side of Fettes's model is a relatively well-conceptualized theory of education development (see Blenkinsop, 2009; Egan, 1986, 1990, 1997, 2005, 2006; Fettes, 2005), replete with frameworks that describe the cognitive tools associated with different kinds of understanding and supplemented by a website containing curricular materials and best practices. Roberts (2012), in opposition, suggests that the field of experiential education is theoretically shallow and has likened the field to a Romantic transcendentalist who struggles to communicate the nature of his experiences with society, preferring instead to retreat to "his isolated world rather than engage with difference" (p. 106). In this section we draw upon our research at the environmental school in order to explore the consequences of overcompensating on the encounter-driven side of Fettes's model and placing too

much faith in the education value of primary experience in the absence of thoughtful, intentional, and imaginative mediation.

The need to spend meaningful time in the outdoors in order to nurture a relationship with the more-than-human world is a common theme in environmental education literature (Carson, 1965; Cobb, 1977; Louv, 2005; Sobel 1999). We wholeheartedly agree that it is necessary to provide rich, sensory encounters in order to develop the sensitivities and attentive capabilities of mind that inspire ecological ways of being in the world. We further agree with Fettes (2013, p.6) that by narrowing the range of this immersion, truncating it in a rush to conventional classroom literacy in childhood and minimizing its value in adulthood, there is a danger of actually limiting the ability to think creatively and well, subsequently threatening the ability to participate fully or critically in a complex democratic society.

We have witnessed examples of the way in which certain students' thinking has flourished as a result of the significant time available to them to engage in diverse somatic ways of encountering the world. For example, cultural assumptions regarding what constitutes bad weather have changed for many students and parents. Rain is no longer necessarily regarded as oppressive and restrictive. This may seem a simplistic example, but when one considers the barrier to human/more-than-human relations that such pervasive attitudes present to the vast and affluent populations of temperate climatic zones, it begins to take on a different hue. However, sole reliance on such tacit, somatic ways of knowing quickly proves inadequate. Language-driven ways of expanding and extending students' abilities to make meaning through cognitive tools associated with mythic understanding—such as narrative structuring, imagery, metaphor, rhyme, and rhythm (Egan, 1997)—have been sparsely employed. Students, as a result, have been limited in the ways in which they can reflect on and share their experiences with others. The following description of an ongoing learning episode at the school allows for further, contextualized discussion of this point.

### **The Fort Village**

Picture a boreal rain forest in November; nimbi descend from the sky and filter silently between towering conifers like ghosts. Despite the dull tones from an overcast sky, the forest glistens with verdant hues, and raindrops drip off salal leaves and drop onto a drenched, moss-covered floor. The air is cool and a crisp, yet subtle fragrance radiates throughout the copse, saturated with life. Suddenly, a chorus of excited voices builds in the distance, faint at first, and then drawing closer and closer and louder, until children clad in all manner of brightly colored rain gear burst onto the scene wielding saws and twine. It is fort time at the environmental school, and students from kindergarten to grade 8 are genuinely thrilled to get into the "village"—the arborists at the university-managed forest have allowed the young students access to a small section of deciduous trees—where they have made structures from sawed tree branches and bailer twine. Some of the structures are very basic lean-to shelters created by laying branches over a fallen log or a depression in the ground. Others are two-story affairs with solid lashings holding in place the supporting spars that the students

have carefully measured and cut. Some students busy themselves gathering various materials necessary for framing, roofing, tying, weatherproofing, and designing comfortable interiors. Imaginative narratives and possibilities emerge in abundance from the students' play and offer entry points into further explorations of learning related to varied topics such as politics, law, economics, gender, and ecological awareness.

With this scenario in mind, let us consider some of the insights that have emerged over the time (a year and a half for the majority of the students) spent working and playing in the village in relation to what Fettes (2013) has called imaginative realization: "the pursuit of consciously planned activities for preconceived ends" (p. 9). Fettes tellingly warns that the Harmonic mode of meaning-making and the Romantic kind of understanding have the potential to veer into triviality unless guided by a combination of wisdom, tradition, judgment, or discipline from a teacher (p. 11). Students at the school have been allowed a great deal of freedom in terms of what they do with fort time, and unfortunately there are signs that this trap that Fettes highlights has not been avoided. For example, there has been little effort to embrace the tools of Romantic understanding in order to explore some of the more troublesome root metaphors (Bowers, 2006) and cultural behaviors that have emerged from the students' play. As a result, rich opportunities for learning in areas such as governance, economics, history, and citizenship have not been widely explored. Similarly, the absence of a real sense of purpose, a characteristic of Fettes's Harmonic engagement, has meant that there are only glimpses of the craft development and artistic creation that one might hope to see emerge in students' forts. The passion, sense of possibility, and heroic characteristics associated with Romantic kinds of understanding are only thinly apparent in work, physical or otherwise, related to the forts. What has become abundantly clear in the school's first year and a half of operation is that faith in the educative value of direct, relatively unmediated experience, is only one part of the discussion.

Ideally, we might imagine a reciprocal and simultaneous interweaving of these ways of knowing. Doing so would allow students to mature within the Harmonic/Romantic (and subsequently into the Endemic/Philosophic) with roots that reach wide and deep. Focusing solely on one mode of meaning-making as if disconnected from the other, is rather like a tomato plant growing in limited light: All that we can expect is a tall and stringy body producing limited fruit with the likelihood of falling over from its own weight. A robust democratic and ecological literacy is based on our ability to draw upon a reservoir of rich primary experience with the more-than-human as well as an ability to critically analyze experience with cultural-historical understanding.

### **Overlapping and Reinforcing: An Imaginative and Experiential Framework**

Fettes notes that his modes and pathways table is a fiction, a heuristic to assist the reader. Nevertheless, its tabulated format does two things worth noting. The first is that it potentially insinuates a hierarchy or even a hierarchical developmental process such that an individual begins at the bottom of the table and progresses

upward, leaving behind the previous step as each move is made. The second point is that the framework may be misinterpreted as suggesting a separation between language and experience that, as mentioned above, is deeply troublesome. In this section we explore, through the notion of resonances, how the table itself is relationally interconnected from top to bottom, corner to corner, and side to side.

Egan's imaginative education approach (e.g., Egan, 2005) focuses on particular kinds of understanding (Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic, Ironic) and the associated set of cognitive tools students draw upon to make sense of the world within that particular kind of understanding. Thus, if the students primarily are working in Mythic understanding, which generally predominates around 3–7 years of age, then the teacher attempts to guide students by employing and developing the appropriate cognitive tools. The result is that there is maximum uptake, imagination is engaged, and students gradually expand the sophistication of their own use of the tools. Ultimately, even though there is an attempt to maximize the tools, the students partially leave the tools of each mode of understanding behind and pick up a new set as the next mode of understanding begins to predominate. Thus, Egan does a wonderful job of exploring a little-recognized concept: Education is a process of losses as well as of gains.

### **Sympathetic Vibrations**

In order to illustrate our understanding of how encounter-driven and language-driven modes of learning are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, we use the metaphor of a piano. Every piano has 88 seemingly separate keys, and yet when one pushes a key, middle C for instance, the string the hammer strikes is not the only thing that vibrates. A series of sympathetic vibrations radiate from that center. The string an octave above resonates, the string a fifth above does as well, as does the one a fourth higher, and so on. Thus, the striking of one key results in myriad resonances across the instrument, and the result is a rich, layered, and melodious note. We propose that working in a particular language-driven kind of understanding or encounter-driven mode of meaning-making—hitting a single piano key—creates resonances throughout that mode of engagement (Philosophic, Romantic, Mythic and Endemic, Harmonic, Somatic, respectively). There is more happening than the simple striking of a single key loud and strong resulting in a single wavelength until it is time to “progress” to the next key. Striking the key creates resonances that work not only into the shorter wavelengths above middle C but also into the longer deeper recesses below.

Thus, it is possible that when an individual has a learning moment in the Philosophic kind of understanding, there are sympathetic vibrations right through into the Somatic understanding—a sort of enriching, harmonious polyphony. Furthermore, if we are right that experience and language are intrinsically linked and mutually reinforce each other, there is, in fact, a duet of two simultaneous notes to be played. Teachers must make sense of how a lesson relates to both language-driven and encounter-driven

modes of understanding and facilitate it in such a way that both modes are given the opportunity for enrichment. Taking into consideration the harmonious resonances throughout the language- and encounter-driven modes, our contention, therefore, is that this is not merely a duet but rather a kind of ghost sextet where there is the potential to have multiple strings vibrating around a single strike. Thus, a chord struck in the Endemic/Philosophic has the potential to vibrate right through into our Somatic/Mythic suprastructure.

### **Encounter on a Knife-Edged Ridge**

To give an example of how this might work in practice, let us imagine teaching a challenging philosophical concept—Buber's concept of the educational relationship through exposure to the I/Thou and the asymmetrical relationship—to graduate students in education who have limited exposure to reading philosophy and, more important, to reading philosophy well (see Blenkinsop, 2005). The instructor, knowing that at least some of these students want to thoughtfully backfill (i.e., explore Somatic/Mythic understanding), wishes to guide them without insulting them. The goal also is to provide the stuff upon which and with which they can think in order to assist them as they read the prose, to get as many strings actively and thoughtfully resonating at the same time as possible.

The instructor begins by telling a story to the students: “You are high in the distant ranges, mountaineering through magnificent terrain. You have decided to take the fast way out along a knife-edged ridge. The ridge runs for as far as you can see, and you are trying to forget the fact that on one side of the ridge there is a 3,000-foot slide down a steep slope into a bank of fog, while on the other the slope is even more precipitous, but thankfully only drops 2,000 feet to a hard stop on the valley floor. You are gently edging your way along this narrow ridge, placing every step of your crampons with utmost care, calling on all your reserves of mental strength to maintain safe and steady progress. Then, you discover another mountaineer approaching you on the same ridge from the other direction. Now you have to negotiate a safe pass of each other because neither of you wants to go back.” At this point the instructor stops the story and initiates a group activity for the students built upon the mountain ridge metaphor. In Buber's thinking, each person on the ridge of being has to encounter—to embrace in the particular moment—both themselves and the other in order to live. In the activity, the knife-edged ridge becomes a narrow wall of bricks, or a low concrete parapet, or a tree lying near ground level. This decreases risk but does not significantly alter the physical and relational positioning of the people engaged in the action. Participants experience what it is to move responsively, sensitively, thoughtfully, communicatively, always with awareness of the other. Without engagement and being present, the encounter fails, and the student falls into the abyss.

This combination of physical experience and story—working within Somatic and Mythic modes of meaning-making—provides the students with a shared grounding in the idea of relationship: an encounter of two unique individuals holding/helping each other in

a particular moment. Our experience as teachers has been that this process opens up the philosophical text and the students' discussions in ways that simply offering the text never does. Students leave with a vivid memory of the weight of a hand in their own hand, of the intimacy required to successfully negotiate the encounter. They also have a linguified narrative that provides them with the means to further explore and, crucially, cogently express to others what that hand and that closeness may symbolize in the context of dialogue and relationship. They are left with much more than a philosophically shallow sense of teamwork or an experientially limited understanding of relationship.

The above example illustrates the ongoing way that all the modes of meaning-making need to be present for deep understanding. Mythic and Somatic modes, for example, should not be considered lost or irrelevant when subsequent modes of understanding develop. In the mountain ridge lesson, the visceral physicality and tacit ways of understanding—along with the Mythic aspects of life and death, danger and safety, trust and suspicion—send vibrations that resonate through the other modes of understanding. In turn, the language-driven philosophic reflection, extending from both the Buber text and the narratives related to the exercise, resonates into and enriches the Somatic understanding.

## Conclusion

In considering the varieties of experience essential to the building of a living democracy, we fully endorse Fettes's (2013) proposal of a theory of education development that propounds the essential interconnectedness of language-driven and encounter-driven ways of knowing. A robust democratic and ecological form of education requires that educators work to avoid the possibility of students becoming either experienced illiterates or inexperienced literates.. Educators must beware the danger of falling into the trap, highlighted by Dewey (1938, p. 20), of acting primarily on the basis of opposition to or reaction against an "other." Resonant education experiences, framed within locally sensitive ways of understanding human embeddedness in the more-than-human world, offer the possibility of drawing students toward a deeper attentivity to their ecological-ontological relationality and, ultimately, a flourishing democratic and ecological society.

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