

Being in Sync: Practicing Creative Nature Connection with Youth

By Lisa Lipsett

Abstract

This article and companion video briefly detail the Creative Nature Connection (CNC) program, its theory and application in schools. Findings based on informal observation, video interviews and teacher reports of student experiences point to the following key factors that support being in sync with nature through art: opening the senses, repeated practice, using simple materials, encouraging a silent, solo sit spot, and making time for improvisational free play art. Two goals of CNC are discussed: helping students shift into connection with nature and strengthening nature art skills through improvisational free play. Student's discoveries about art-making and nature are shared.



Figure 1: Painting with apples

“If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the Earth before we ask them to save it.” – David Sobel, author of *Beyond ecophobia: Reclaiming the heart in nature education* (1996).

To be in sync with nature depends on our capacity to open ourselves to more moments when we listen and let Earth teach (Cohen, 1997). We can't simply think our way to nature connection. As Gregory Bateson (1972) once said, “the way we think is not the way nature works”. In our hyper digital age it seems especially important to regularly be in sync with nature to develop a heart relationship from which meaningful action can take root (Louv, 2005). What do I mean by “being in sync”?



Figure 2: Drawing while touching bark

Mathematician Steven Strogatz states in his TED talk *The Science of Sync* that being in sync may be the most pervasive drive in all of nature: “From the sub-atomic level to the farthest reaches of the cosmos, it is a deep tendency towards order in nature.” Being in sync dissolves boundaries between nature and self. The joy it brings keeps us coming back again and again. We are nourished by those unique moments when psyche and nature fall together (Cambray, 2009). Also it has been my experience that being in sync soon leads to magical moments of synchronicity that lift our spirits with awe and wonder. What role can art play in this?

Physicist David Bohm reminds us in his book *On Creativity* (1998) that art is a fitting together of self and world, not only in an aesthetic sense but also in a plainly functional one. Bohm says fitting things together is art's most important purpose ultimately leading to beauty, not just in the end product but also during the process of its making, in the

moments when we feel everything fit together harmoniously in every sense. When we feel the beauty of a good fit with nature we know we belong, that all beings belong. We feel nourished and revitalized. We become participants in a creative unfolding. We are in the flow. The present moment feels expansive. We are in sync.

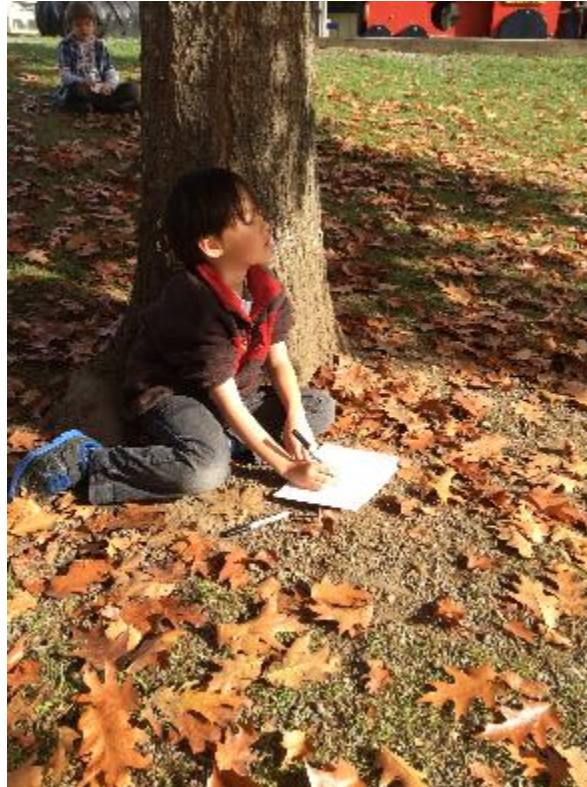


Figure 3: Drawing while listening

Improvisational free play art is a very powerful way to be in sync with nature and is available to everyone. What is happening when we improvise is scientifically observable. According to neuroscientist Charles Limb (2010), “creativity is magical but it is not magic”. Limb has successfully examined what happens in the brains of improvisational jazz pianists with the precision of modern fMRI brain imaging technology. Limb found that as each jazz musician began an improvisational session they “deactivated” their dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC). Important functions of the DLPFC are the executive functions, such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, planning, inhibition, and abstract reasoning. It is also a manager and is the highest cortical area that is involved in motor planning organization and regulation. This area is one of the most recently evolved parts of the human brain and it undergoes a prolonged period of maturation that lasts until adulthood. So it is less matured in children and at full capacity in adulthood. (I wonder if this is one reason why it can be powerful for creative flow to ask an adult to paint like they’re a five year old.)

So it is not as though we lose the capacity to create with spontaneous abandon as we grow up. Rather, we have not adapted to the strong tendency of the fully matured DLPFC to inhibit and otherwise “boss” natural ease and flow. We don’t often realize that to access creativity simply requires a literal mind shift. We must inhibit our inhibitions.

Further I find myself encouraged by Limb’s brain scan results. It is empowering to learn that creativity results from an observable shift in brain activity, and is not a gift given to a select few by a higher power. If creativity is available to everyone then maybe what we’ve come to call talent lies in those who are able to easily make the shift into art improvisation and who can hold the shift longer, thus staying in creative flow. Further, the more we are able to nurture our own creative spontaneity the more we learn to trust that what comes spontaneously has a kind of natural connected intelligence of its own. Learning how to shift into creative flow in connection with nature seems important. In my experience, with the right tools, this can be easily learned.



Figure 4: Drawing while touching

Many environmental education scholars emphasize the potential of art-making to strengthen nature connection (Bai, 2003; Inwood, 2008; Lipsett, 2013; London, 2003; Sweeney, 2013; van Boeckel, 2013). We know that regular art-making with nature supports the development of empathy, perspective taking, creative problem-solving, a capacity to hold ambiguity, and understanding of multiple ways to know — all considered key capacities for nature connection (Flowers, Lipsett & Barrett, 2014; van

Boeckel, 2013; Young, Hass & McGown, 1988). We also know from Wilderness Awareness programs that intimacy and deep connection can be strengthened and personal transformation realized when core connection practices like the daily solo sit-spot are adopted. We can return to the same location every day to observe and commune (Cohen, 1997; Young, Haas, & McGown, 2010). Yet most art-based environmental education activities neglect to provide for a repeatable regular pattern of engagement (Bai, 2003; Lipsett, 2009). Methods designed to allow for repeated practice seem important.

Therefore the two main goals of the Creative Nature Connection (CNC) program are:

1. To help students quickly and easily *shift into being in sync* with nature, through painting and drawing with the senses, at a regular sit spot, working silently, slowly and solo in a mindful way.
2. To *stay in sync* for longer periods of time to build student confidence in using their own improvisational drawing and painting practice for nature connection, joy, knowledge and self-change.

CNC is designed to help students learn how to inhibit their inhibitions and connect with nature in fresh ways with the ultimate goal of self-driving their own improvisational art experiences anywhere, anytime.

Being in Sync: The Practice of Creative Nature Connection

The Creative Nature Connection (CNC) program utilizes a modified version of the Creative by Nature Art Method and is designed specifically for schools. CNC is a contemplative painting practice that supports making quiet mind art with Earth and heart (Lipsett, 2013b). During 6 to 8 one hour sessions students learn to connect with something they love using their senses while they keep track via drawing and painting. They learn how to quickly make a shift into connection, to change gears from everyday mind to art mind. They explore textures, soundscapes, lines, contours and patterns of plants, animals and natural phenomena in the moment and keep track of their encounters via colour and line. In addition, 20 minutes at the end of each encounter are reserved for improvisational free play art to give time for spontaneous expression of their inner landscape and to playfully explore art making with nature. Having no plan ahead of time, students add colour to drawings, line to paintings, create spontaneous images and playfully improvise with what attracts them in the moment (Lipsett, 2009). Over time, when confidence and skill are matured, sensory engagement with something they love melds with free play art into an interwoven seamless whole.



Figure 5: “Camera and photographer” warm up activity



Figure 6: “Touch tourist and tour guide”

Nature encounters are simple in the first few CNC sessions and build to more complex encounters in later sessions. In this way equal weight is given to strengthening the ability to quickly shift into mindful connection, building drawing and painting skills, exploring diverse nature relationships with plants and animals, free play art, reflection and thoughtful inquiry at the end of sessions. Each support and strengthen the other.



Figure 7: Unfolding a Nature Art book

At the beginning of the program, each student is given an eight panel two-sided folded Nature Art book which affords 16 separate images. Older students are taught to make their own Nature Art folded books. In the final two sessions of the longer eight week programs, students also create one large final image that ties together all the skills they've learned so they can gain practice in directing their own encounters going forward, picking and choosing what actions best keep them in sync.

CNC is facilitated over the fall and spring of the school year. A typical session begins with an opening circle with a quick go-round of one thing students appreciate or are grateful for. Each session also starts with an interactive sense-based exploratory environmental education game like Joseph Cornell's (1998) "Touch tourist and tour guide", "blind touch tourist" or "I spy". After the warm up a new way to draw and/or paint using touch, sound, pattern is demonstrated. Then children head off to their sit spot to create.

Students get "in touch" with nature textures, "tune in" to the local soundscape and "see beyond" first glances to notice miniature worlds and tiny treasures as they create. The aim is to balance sight (a dominant sense for many) with deep listening and touch to awaken fresh ways to shift into nature connection. While connecting they keep track of their experience on the page through drawing and painting with both hands in equal measure. In my experience this deepens the connection because more of their sensory capacity is awakened.



Figure 8: Painting while touching bark

Whether they are touching a tree, listening to the wind or observing the meandering wander of an ant, students learn to focus on the connection they feel while letting their hands keep track with pen and paint with fingertips directly on the page using both hands simultaneously, and paint or draw with their right and left hand in sequence (to access left and right-brain processing), sometimes with eyes open, sometimes closed. They learn to keep their hands in sync with whatever is holding their attention. They don't "boss" their hands; rather their hands keep track of and express what they are experiencing in the moment. Often with closed eyes they let their hands choose the paint colours.

Towards the end of each session, a signal tells them it is time for "free play art". Students are given watercolour pencils for this time. If their eyes have been closed, they now open them to respond to what they have drawn or painted. Students work totally spontaneously and intuitively at this time. They can continue with nature connections but also bring in their inner landscape. They also add colour and line to images from previous sessions.

To finish, students are invited back to the circle where they share one thing that they noticed about themselves, nature or the drawing/painting process. Sometimes they share an "I wonder" sentence related to some aspect of that day's encounter. Older students (grade four onwards) take time to write a few words right in their books. Younger students can be helped to do this afterwards in the classroom.



Figure 9: Students write a few words

Each session students practice the Create Cycle.

Six Step Create Cycle:

1. Set an intention and ask for permission to connect;
2. Open your attention to direct sensory engagement (touch, listen, track with your eyes), as you tune in to a plant, animal, pattern, natural element;
3. **Create**¹ – draw and/or paint with the textures, sounds, patterns, shadows, movement; extend images with spontaneous free play art;
4. Dialogue – let images and nature speak then express gratitude;
5. Reflect – write down and later share what you notice or wonder about;
6. Share – images and experiences with a partner or whole group. Students are helped to learn their own personal affinities and image language – e.g. what

¹ When they **create**, students paint slowly with fingertips directly on the page using both hands simultaneously to access both left brain and right brain processing, sometimes with eyes open, sometimes closed. For the “Create” part of each session students are taught the acronym **S-L-O-W**. **S** – silent, solo, sit spot, synchronize both hands, synchronize sensory connection with artful expression, engage your senses, single snaky lines, go slow, steady your mind, smile, share **L** – work with what you love **O** – stay open **W** – wander & wonder.

colours they like, what plant or animal they enjoy working with, what engages their imagination and how their images develop and change over time.

A full series of classes looks like this:

1. **Get in touch I** – Draw texture – left hand, right hand, eyes closed, free play
2. **Get in touch II** – Paint texture – left hand, right hand, eyes closed, free play
3. **Tune in I** – Draw sound – left hand, right hand, both hands, eyes closed, free play
4. **Tune in II** – Paint sound – left hand, right hand, both hands, eyes closed, free play
5. **See beyond I** – Draw small patterns – left hand, right hand, both hands, eyes open, free play
6. **See beyond II** – Paint small patterns – left hand, right hand, both hands, eyes open, free play
7. and 8. **Put it altogether** – govern your own process in connection with nature, free play

Once the students have learned the Create Cycle, the principles behind S-L-O-W, and techniques to shift them into being in sync, they have a variety of tools at hand to guide their own artful encounters with nature. The idea is that the children come away with a drawing and painting practice they can call their own.

Student Experiences of Creative Nature Connection

To date, over a thousand children, youth, adults and educators from a variety of educational settings have participated in CNC programs.

The following observations, video interviews and students words come from the 2015-16 CNC program on Salt Spring island BC. Please see the companion video with student words, images and experiences: <https://vimeo.com/199260818>.



Figure 10: Painting while listening

During the CNC program, students were given tools to connect and co-create with nature. They followed what they love, had unique nature encounters and emerged from each session with totally unique images. Students were encouraged to be archaeologists of their own experience to discover what helped them stay in sync with the natural flow and to observe what pulled them out of sync again.

After demonstrating the day's art encounter and sending students off to their sit spots I speak with them one to one, observe, photograph art work and videotape student encounters. At the end of the full program I also ask for student and teacher feedback.

Based on this somewhat informal inquiry into student experiences I have found the following strategies to be useful to support a shift to being in sync: connecting through the senses with drawing and painting, repeated encounters, using simple materials, making encounters personally meaningful, solo silent time, a quiet mind and opportunities for improvisational free play art. What I share here is a taste of themes to be explored in follow up activities later. A much more formal and thorough inquiry into student experiences might deepen our understanding of the most effective strategies. However, as a dedicated practitioner who is encouraged by the results observed so far, my current focus is to offer this practice to as many students as possible.

The following is a brief survey of effective strategies for being in sync, followed by student art and nature discoveries.

Awakening the Senses

“There is an intimate reciprocity to the senses, as we touch the bark of a tree, we feel the tree touching us; as we lend our ears to the local sounds and ally our nose to the seasonal scents, the terrain gradually tunes us in turn. The senses, that is, are the primary way that the earth has of informing our thoughts and of guiding our actions” (David Abram, 1996, p. 268).

By beginning each session with a different sense, students are able to experience nature in fresh ways. Elsewhere I have presented a more detailed explanation of sensory connection in general and touch in particular (Lipsett, 2014a; 2016b). Working with their fingertips directly on the page helped many students to begin to trust their hands to create and appreciate the freedom this supported. One student excitedly shared that she could paint with 10 colours at the same time (one on each fingertip). A number of kids commented that they feel like they have eyes in their fingertips when they explore textures as they draw.



Figure 11: Painting with all 10 fingertips (1)



Figure 12: Painting with all 10 fingertips (2)

Painting became a full body experience for many students. Sometimes students came back from their session with painted faces, arms and legs.

Many students extended their sensory engagement. Some extended their sense of touch when they said it also encompassed the feeling of the wind on their cheeks. Listening to the surrounding soundscape became listening to breath and observation became close up, far away and of the completed images themselves.



Figure 13: Student with painted face

Others discovered that painting and movement went well together. For example a grade three boy drew while he walked as he listened to birdcall. A grade 3 girl discovered she loved to dance and paint (her dance is shared in the video: <https://vimeo.com/199260818>).



Figure 14: "I think I am a dancing artist"

Many expressed excitement about how easily they were able to draw and paint. Even reluctant "non-artists" dove right in because their eyes were closed and they were using their non-dominant hand. One reluctant child said "I can't draw, I can only scribble." The class teacher showed him an example of my scribbly work from a sample of a completed nature art book and said, to the child "that's perfect, that's exactly what we are doing!" After the session the student said, "look what I did!" as he proudly held up his work.

Other students commented about how closing their eyes and using their non-dominant hand and both hands at the same time helped them shift into being in sync. Here are a few of their comments:

"Closing my eyes really helped with concentration."

"Before I didn't see how different it was to use my other hand. Now I have a better idea about it."

"I now sometimes try at home to draw with my eyes closed (I also try drawing with my toes). Before I never did that."

"Now I can hear a lot more noises when I close my eyes."

"I feel confident to draw with my eyes closed."

“I like having my eyes open to make snaky-lines, drawing without looking at the paper.”

Many students learned to trust their hands. One student shared, “I learned that I can do a cool drawing without meaning to draw anything at all”. Another said, “it is almost like the plan is already there in our hands and we just need to get it out”.

Regular Practice

“Creative work requires a loyalty as complete as the loyalty of water to the force of gravity” (Mary Oliver, 2016).

In CNC students are invited to choose the same sit spot each session. They practice being solo and silent in this alone space. For many there are very few other regular times by themselves of not sitting in front of a screen.

Students’ ability to manage the art materials and be engaged and innovative improved over repeated sessions. Most rewarding is how even the most reluctant students (often the youngest boys) were fully participating by the last session and often making very interesting insect and rodent discoveries because they stayed in one place over the sessions, with focus. One teacher said, “I am looking back at the pictures I took from last year and the students were popping up all over the place, having trouble sitting in their place. They now appreciate the time to sit by themselves to feel calm and quiet. It is so exciting to be able to do this a second year and to see their progress.”



Figure 15: Happiness is a sit spot in the leaves or in a fir tree (1)



Figure 16: Happiness is a sit spot in the leaves or in a fir tree (2)

Children regularly asked to have more painting time and more time to extend their images with detail, colour and line. Many also mentioned that more practice time with their left/non-dominant hand would have been nice. Repeating the sessions was an attempt to meet this need.

The teachers noticed there was ease – piece of mind, flow, accelerated discoveries and a complexity of art forms, feelings and discoveries – that developed over the sessions. Many children wanted to create their own books to keep going after our sessions.

Using Simple Materials



Figure 17: Painting the pavement

Nature can provide a rich selection of tools and palettes so students simply need a “way” to approach art-making or support to develop their own process to follow using these materials.

The art materials used in CNC are simple and portable. I have also found that teachers need support to incorporate regular CNC into their programs and simple materials help with this (see Lipsett, 2013a).



Figure 18: Painting with dirt

When art materials are simple, students soon discover the power of using materials readily available in nature. Working with no brushes, using both hands with fingertips directly on the page animates the students' exploration of nature. Frustrated that water was not available during one of the drawing sessions, one child discovered how to paint with spit! After he shared his discovery with the group we spoke of land artist Andy Goldsworthy's spit welding of icicles and of all the interesting body substances like blood, sweat, spit and excrement that early artists used.

Many discovered that colour can be made from glass, dirt, berries and leaves. A six year old girl discovered she could make yellow with dandelion flowers and green with grass: "Oh, I am so excited! I can draw things, all kinds of things and I don't even need a pencil!" she said. This led to discussions about the indigenous roots of art and how painting has connected people to the land for millennia and has been a powerful vehicle for self-expression, community building and collective identity using just the materials available, like plants and soil.



Figure 19: Making colour with rose petals and dirt (1)



Figure 20: Making colour with rose petals and dirt (2)

Regular Contemplative Practice

Contemplative art practices inspired by Eastern approaches have different intended purposes. Some practices focus on how to open to mindful connection to self, others support attention and mindfulness in relation to the world, and finally a few marry connection to self and other in a seamless process. However, all engage “the artful eye” as a way to open and commune (Lipsett, 2014b).

In my experience, if contemplation opens us to be more present to the world and ourselves, contemplative visual art allows us to mindfully take creative action in the world, encouraging us to make it anew. We transcend our ideas about things and dive into experiential moments of intuition and feeling. With practice we learn to shift from planning and thinking about our art to being responsive to the world and ourselves as we create.

In the book *Zen seeing, Zen drawing: Meditation in action*, Frederick Franck (2009) describes a kind of contemplative doing that softens our gaze and opens our hearts to the beauty of the world.



Figure 21: Painting the sky

We engage our wakeful attention. Franck describes sitting on a park bench and simply seeing what is there. He describes it thus: “When I see I am suddenly all eyes. I forget the ME, and am liberated from it and dive into the reality of what confronts me.... It is in order to see ... more deeply that I draw.... I have learned that what I have not drawn I have never really seen.... I discover that among the ten thousand things there is no ordinary thing.”

Many pivotal characteristics of contemplative practice such as in-the-moment presence, receptivity, following what attracts, cultivating joy and wonder, closing the eyes, being alone and in silence are supportive of making a shift to being in sync (Lipsett, 2014b). The slow pace of the sessions supports quiet introspection and receptivity making it very inclusive and also accessible to autistic, hearing impaired and visually impaired students. Since students closed their eyes and used their hands they all experienced the world in new ways and learned to be by themselves. One child discovered that he didn’t need his eyes in order to see. He could see with his hands.

Sometimes children broke into song. On more than one occasion, students could be heard humming to themselves as they created. Sometimes students made up songs and chants as they drew and painted. In one class four students broke into song in unison while they painted!

Students soon learned that the longer they waited to open their eyes after drawing and painting, the bigger the surprise. One grade two girl noticed that she could see faces and animals in her drawings. She saw a bird in her third session. Then she saw it over again the next two sessions. This was magical for her.

Assumptions about what students listen to were turned upside down when one girl said, “I was listening to the sounds in my head”.



Figure 22: Left hand/right hand paintings of cedar bark texture

Some of the children learned that it takes time and patience for interesting things to happen. Sometimes things happen slowly in nature. One boy shared, “I saw a centipede, not at first. He came by after a while, then I started drawing him.” A grade 4 boy found some abandoned wasp nests under the potting shed table. He discovered they are hard to take off, that the shapes are many, and they are made up of circles with angles. He said it takes a long time to draw them because there are so many. He appreciated how long it can take to do a detailed realistic drawing, what artists have to put into their work in terms of time and energy and how time consuming and therefore precious the intricate work of nature is too.

A teacher who tried some of the art encounters said, “This is very relaxing. I listened to one sound with one ear and another with the other ear. I enjoyed taking time to really ‘be in nature’ – it was focusing, to use various senses using both hands to create art.”

Improvisation – Free Play Art

“Looking out, now, over the ocean, the birds, the vegetation, I see that absolutely everything in nature arises from the power of free play sloshing against the power of limits.... These creative processes inherent in nature are called by some people evolution, by others creation” (Nachmanovitch, 1991, p. 33).



Figure 23: Fun drawing with multiple pencils



Figure 24: Fun drawing with falling acorns

After working silently, slowly, solo, accessing their senses, using both hands, and closing their eyes for most of each session, students quickly and easily shifted into nature connection and creative free play art. One teacher commented: “It was wonderful seeing the students create art in a new way and see them make all kinds of discoveries along the way. Students discovered splatter painting, painting with water, dance painting, finger painting, painting with grass, leaves and petals, painting with their eyes closed, and with the hand they don’t normally use for drawing. It was wonderful how much they explored and created!” One student discovered the joy of painting directly on rocks. She said, “Do you like my fire rock?”



Figure 25: “Do you like my fire rock?”

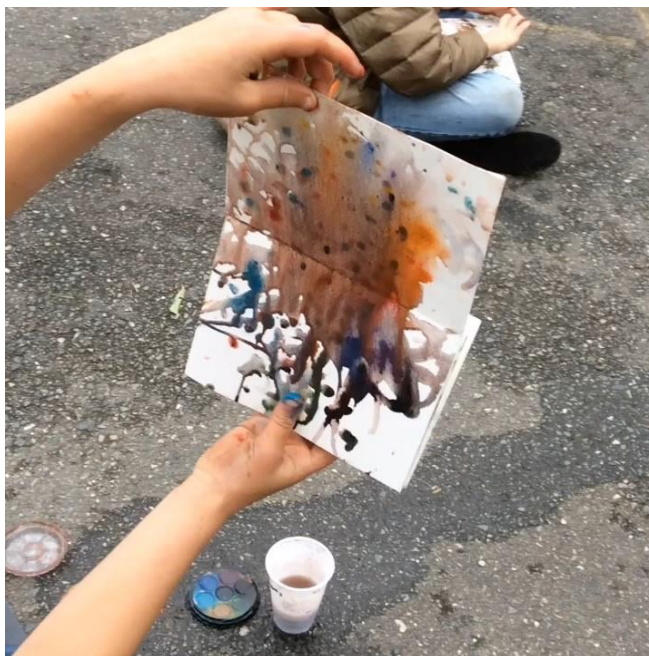


Figure 26: Drip painting

Another teacher reported, “Many students are now more open to different styles of art and are more appreciative towards art that doesn’t necessarily ‘look’ exactly like it does in real life. They are also more adventurous with their art and take more risks. Some of the students really loved painting with their eyes closed! I think it has helped the students to even further deepen their connection to nature. The students all seem very proud of their work, and so they should be! The students are excited to continue on doing art in the outdoor classroom.” More than one student declared that they think they are becoming an artist.



Figure 27: Finished image of leaf texture

Nature Discoveries

I love this turn of phrase by van Boeckel (2015) about how the magical appearance of an unexpected image is like something coming from “behind one’s back”. I think this applies to unexpected nature encounters as well. Artful magic and surprise nature encounters not only tell us we are in sync, they also help to keep us in reverential relationship with natural forces not in our control. We take a natural place in the world as humble creatures.

Students felt excited about noticing something new. Each session most students shared at least one new discovery about a plant or animal that was previously unknown to them.

Things like: the bark on a cedar is different depending on where you touch it, the undersides of leaves can have surprising textures, flower stems have all kinds of nubs and there are close up and far away sounds, many human made.



Figure 28: Painting with a dead vole

Here are some additional student discoveries gathered from the sessions and shared in their own words:

“I listened to Amelia chewing her apple.”

“I listened to the sound of a boy doing a bird call in the forest and the sound of the wasps buzzing.”

“I can hear the baby apples clicking in the tree.”

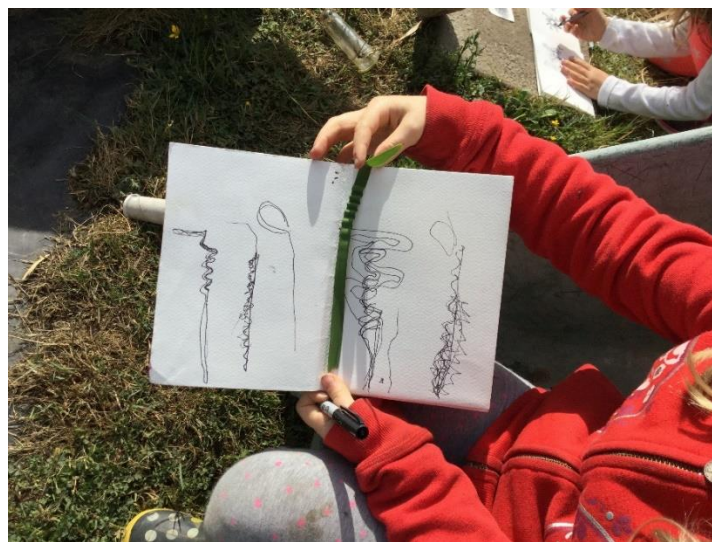


Figure 29: Drawing with bendy grass



Figure 30: Drawing tiny mushrooms

“I noticed that the bark at the bottom of the tree feels smoother than the bark higher up.”

“I saw all kinds of baby spiders.”

“Look at the little angle shapes in this wasp nest!”

“I was painting the moving clouds.”

“An earwig just crossed my page!”

“I just almost sat on a vole!”

“I found this bendy folded grass.”



Figure 31: Painting with a dragonfly

Many of these discoveries led to questions that could be followed up with further inquiry and exploration in the classroom. This was especially true of the discovery of a dragonfly being stung by a wasp shared in the companion video. Many questions were raised by a full class of students and much excitement was generated. I would like to find ways to support teachers to do more after session follow up.

Discussion

Regardless of what we believe to be true about how nature works, art-making done with an intention to connect, focused on empathic attunement (Gablík, 1991) and practiced for all life's sake (Lipsett, 2001) helps us to shift from our thoughts about things to direct felt experience. As educators, when we trust this innate capacity in ourselves and our students, we strengthen caring, belonging, hope, and resilience. Creating with nature just may be “our healing medicine” (Bai, 2003, p. 39). By bringing ourselves out from our enclosed world of human verbiage, we can tune in to nature's creative embodied language (Abram, 1988). We learn to shift into being in sync to feel, listen and see deeply through art-making with nature.



Figure 32: Looking at a finished Nature Art Book

Further, as *art*-based environmental educators, we balance the scientific lens that still dominates much environmental education practice and heed the call for more

opportunities for creative expression (Sandri, 2013). Being in nature seems to animate our creativity and being creative outdoors strengthens our nature connection.



Figure 33: Student art work

Nature speaks to each of us differently. Our individual sensitivities, skills, and perceptions allow us to be in sync in diverse ways. I have observed this to be especially true for children. Thus nature connection practices need to be flexible, allowing for varied individual entry points that support personal exploration, discovery and encourage multiple ways to build lasting heartfelt relationships. Painting and drawing are but one way to build such a relationship. Children need to play, create, inquire, dialogue and reflect in nature to come to know themselves and the living world on their own terms. Designing creative tools that help shift our ability to more fully perceive the living world is key. As Marion Milner concludes in her book *On not being able to paint*: “So what the artist ... is doing, is creating what is, because he is creating the power to perceive it. By continually breaking up the established familiar patterns (familiar in his particular culture and time in history) of logical common sense divisions of me/not-me, he really is creating ‘nature’, including human nature” (p. 189).

While facilitating CNC sessions, doing informal observation, performing student video interviews and recording teacher feedback, it became clear to me that students developed focus, built confidence in their drawing and painting skills, and became inspired to reflect on questions that show curiosity and that became the backbone for future nature learning and research. They also learned to care for a special place. I observed through their actions and words, that they also know it better.



Figure 34: Finished Nature Art Books

Some of the younger children in the fall sessions were resistant to changing or experimenting in any way with their already established art process. I felt uncomfortable making them try things when they already enjoyed what they were used to do, especially so early in their first school experience. They had easy access to the ability to smoothly shift into connection with nature and be improvisational and spontaneously creative without any lead in. It was some of the older children with more school lessons under their belts who initially struggled with the shift to art-making. By the end of the sessions more children demonstrated the ability and confidence to ‘take a chance’ and not have something on a page that is ‘perfect’, to try something new and create different forms of art-work. Maybe the older students were just out of the habit, never had much support in this area and learned early on that art-making is only for artists. The sometimes negative effect of schooling on creativity is worth exploring further.

I believe that the more children and adults practice being in sync with nature, the easier it becomes to access nature connection on demand. Shifting into being in sync with nature is relatively easy to learn. By understanding that nature connection is not about thinking but rather a more visceral spontaneous creative way of being, we animate our full capacity for connection with ease. This has certainly been true for many of my students.

Practical classroom issues such as time constraints, access to suitable outdoor areas, funding for art materials and lack of educator confidence in facilitating art-based environmental education have all contributed to slow adoption in my local Gulf islands BC school district. CNC is an attempt to address this gap by sustaining itself with outside funding and melding with existing programs.

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Figure 35

About the Author

Originally trained as an elementary school environmental educator, Lisa Lipsett has a Doctorate in Transformative Learning from the University of Toronto with a focus on creativity and nature connection. She has developed the Creative by Nature Art Method – a contemplative practice of making quiet mind with earth and heart. As a professional

exhibiting visual artist, she works in mixed media: earth pigment, acrylic, oil stick, ink and cold wax. Her work is driven by the desire to experience the living world with body and sense through painting. Her images make visible both the joy of nature connection and the beauty of the often unseen. Her book *Beauty Muse: Painting in communion with nature* (2009) invites readers to begin a painting practice of their own. It is loosely based on her thesis *On speaking terms again: Transformative experiences of artful earth connection* (2001). She is currently writing a practical guide to the Creative by Nature Art Method. She lives, works and plays on Salt Spring Island, BC, Canada and loves gunk holing around the Pacific Gulf Islands with her husband and daughter on their sailboat Phoenix. www.creativebynature.org.

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