

# Using a Council of Beings to Ascertain Student Understanding of the Relationship Between Sense-of-Place and Environmental Sustainability

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A modified J. Seed, Council of Beings is used to ascertain participants' understanding of their sense of place within the environment. Over the past 15 years, students in environmental education, teachers in-service programs or undergraduate face-to-face and Internet sustainability education courses have been exposed to pedagogy that leads to the development of interdependence and interconnectedness. This reinforces foundational concepts of ecology. It includes intellectual, affective and attitudinal perceptions of the ecosphere and its inhabitants. To ascertain students understanding, they were asked to express their views from the perspective of other creatures or entities that exist interdependently with the environment. One concluding concept is that we are one and in relation to each other. Data indicate that many students develop a sense of care for and about the earth, work towards healthful practices for the earth's sustainability and provide for each other's space and needs.

*Keywords:* environmental education; sense of place; council of beings

## Perspective

Individuals with a strong sense of place command cognitive and affective knowledge in multiple academic disciplines. Teaching strategies that accentuate the interconnectedness among disciplines and interdependence among people reinforces the integration of the ecological sciences with a proactive environmental attitude that leads to civic action.

## Program Design

Teachers from the Southeastern United States participated in 10-day environmental education institutes based on the awareness to action model found in project—Project W.I.L.D (Wildlife In Learning Design) programs and a study implemented in the early 1990s and the metacognitive model for environmental education (see Figure 1) which employed a modified J. Seed's, council of beings as an assessment strategy (Bogan, 1992, 1998; Seed, Macy, & Flemming, 2007 (new edition)). The metacognitive model moves from individual performance towards interdependence of group members and groups. This mimics the natural systems. Additionally, undergraduates, across the academic disciplines at the Florida Gulf Coast University, are required environmental sustainability course and participated in a modified council of beings (Bogan, 2002). The council was held to ascertain students' sense of place. This provides students environmental health on from a broad and global perspective (Xu, 2005).

### Metacognitive Model for Curriculum Development in Environmental Education : A Process

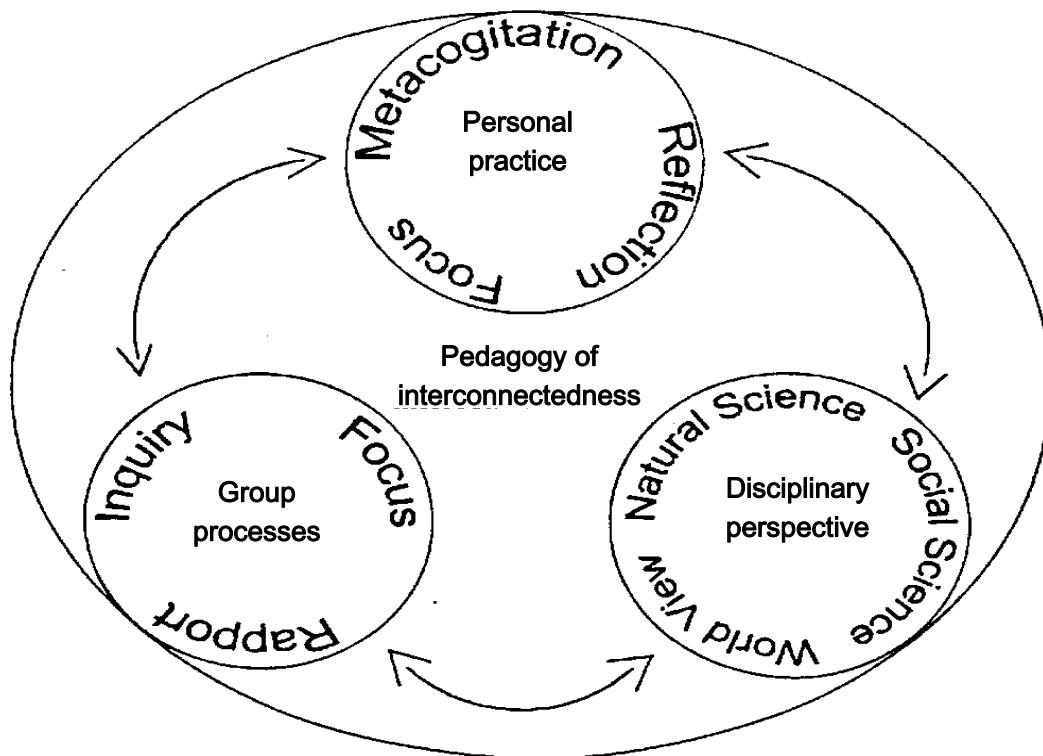


Figure 1. A metacognitive model for environmental education.

All groups of students participated in activities either as individuals in small groups or in a large group. As previously reported, the personal practice, group process and disciplinary perspective couched in the pedagogy of interconnectedness that constitutes this curriculum model tend to reinforce interdependence and metacognition among group participants (Flavell, 1976). The concept of interdependence is foundational to the field of ecology, therefore, environmental and sustainability education. The pedagogy of interconnectedness gulfs personal practice, disciplinary process and group process and is the glue that connects them. Developing an understanding of the interconnections and interdependence among beings within the ecosphere leads to the development of a sense of place for people.

Participants were immersed in curricula which further fostered the development of sense of place between themselves and the earth. Field experiences in wilderness settings placed students in arenas which stimulated senses and spirit. The importance of first-hand experiences with nature is to create a place-based sense of connection and compassion (Kellert, 2005; Orr, 1993). A modified council of beings was used to ascertain students learning across the attitudinal, affective and intellectual levels of learning about the environment (Seed, 2007). This assessment strategy was used to ascertain individuals understanding of species relationships with each other or humankind, and therefore, their sense of place on the earth. Additionally, curricula were based on McClaren's (1985) ecosystem of environmental education which invites the reader to view issues and relationships from numerous perspectives, using multiple processes.

### **Method: Holding a Council of Beings**

#### **Purpose**

A council of beings is an anthropomorphic, creative and focused free-writing activity which invites one to speak about the wishes of another being for the earth's sustainability. It is used to demonstrate one's understanding of their sense of place within the ecosphere. Words emerge from a blend of ancestral lineage, spiritual being or intellectual knowledge base. When speaking anthropomorphically through the worldview of another being, students are afforded an opportunity to demonstrate their relationships with the earth. The words of participants are used to better understand their knowledge of the world around them. Their voices can be used to relate personal world views and concern for planetary health (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1982).

#### **Procedure**

Each participant randomly selected a being with concomitant focus-topic. A table of beings is included to serve as examples or to use as your council members:

- (1) A two-legged who is speaking for the indigenous peoples of the world;
- (2) The cardinal who is speaking for the nations of song birds;
- (3) The cedar tree who is speaking for the nations of plants;
- (4) The deer who is speaking for the mammalian nations;
- (5) The eagle who is speaking for the large bird nations;
- (6) The ivory-billed woodpecker who is speaking for the nations that once were;
- (7) The leaf litter who is speaking for the decomposers;
- (8) The mountain who is speaking for all and nations;
- (9) The night who is speaking for the spirit beings;
- (10) The panther who is speaking for the large cat nations;
- (11) The peeper (little frog) who is speaking for the amphibian nations;
- (12) The river who is speaking for all water nations;
- (13) The spider who is speaking for the earth mother;
- (14) The sun who is speaking for time;
- (15) The tortoise who is speaking for the turtle nations.

Participants were directed to select an out-of-doors location in which they felt comfortable. Students became absorbed, therefore, becoming a part of the total environment. The students' beings of choice then opened into the consciousness of the student. Thoughts and/or feelings were then translated into words or body movements, so that humankind could be invited to understand the needs or eternal truths from the perspective of other species. Members join each other in full circle to convene the council of beings. Individuals speaking for the earth are invited to speak first. Their presentations are followed by those who speak for an ancestral stock, modern day beings and beings of the future.

The following is a record of excerpts selected from numerous councils held over the past 15 years. These are the exact words participants presented to the entire council and are meant to guide the human species into the 21st century.

### **Date and Discussion: The Council of Beings**

Selected reports include:

Spider said: “I may be small, but I am here and watching you for all nature in the following piece”. This student sensed that we are only a part of nature, which looks to us for assistance and respect.

### **The Spider—That Speaks for the Earth Mother**

The spider said:

I am who whispers to earth mother. I am the spider who can go unnoticed when you are too busy to take time. I am the spider who speaks of rain, wind and change. Humans underestimate my abilities of what I can foresee. Earth mother gave me eight legs and eight eyes to watch and observe the earth.

I am the spider who might bite you if you do not stop and slow down. I am here to guide you, watch over you and predict you unknown. Take notice when I am present, I was given eight legs and eight eyes to watch you, guide you and carry you in time of need.

These students represent the sun as all knowing and wise, as it has been a part of the solar system longer than any other of the planet of the Milky Way. The sun uses its own resources to continue. The sun asks that we use resources wisely. To date humankind has not done so and the sun cannot protect us from its power.

### **The Sun—That Speaks for Time**

I am the sun and I speak for time, because that is what I know best. I have been here a billion of years before your planet could sustain life, and I will be here a billion of years after you have gone. The warmth created by my energy created your life and in the end my energy will take it away. Use my energy wisely, conserve it and convert it, like the plankton in the sea to create oxygen. Give power to your world, a natural clean power that only I can provide. Stop using the un-restorable resources of your delicate environment to power your puny devices. I am the source and the catalyst of life, without me your crops will not grow, and your world will freeze. The pollution you put into the air traps my energy in the wrong way and hurts your world, for my energy is powerful and unrelenting. All the fossil fuels that are on your earth were made in only a few millions of years I will melt the ice and flood your world, I will burn your atmosphere and make you sick. Mankind must learn to harness my energy for I give earth 5,900 times what it is now using and which is wasted. Grow crops for biofuels; turn my light into electricity and heat. I create the winds that blow the windmills and the tides and currents which churn the seas, all these things are the powers I give to you, use them wisely. I will see you in a billion years.

I agree that the sun would be one of the oldest and wisest beings and would know and understand the most about the devastation people have caused to the earth over time; therefore, I think the sun is a great choice for the council of beings and your reason for picking it was good too. I like it that you included the dependence that all beings on the earth have with one another. This interconnectedness was something that really shocked me in this class and was not something I had really thought of before; especially in terms of biodiversity. I did not realize how important biodiversity was to say farming or the maintenance of a species. I agree that sustainability is very important, but I have learned that without biodiversity, sustainability is impossible. I also like it that you talk about other humans in time that have damaged the earth because people tend to think that this is a new problem and that our current generation is causing all the damage, but that is not true and entire civilizations have wiped themselves out through their poor treatment of the earth. I enjoyed your council of beings and think you included some great information.

I am the sun. I have been here longer than you and your earth. I have seen your beauty but witnessed your destruction. My rays may cause you harm these days, but they used to be a source of astonishment to you. You have replicated my light using my own energy, but you have never been able to see me straight in the eyes. If there is one truth, I would like to teach you. It is that of your insignificance. You have forgotten that there are stars that shine brighter than you and that you are only a small piece to an ever-expanding universe. You have forgotten that my light is worthy of you but also of those that share earth with you. You have underestimated me. You have destroyed the barrier that protects you from me and now know all on your planet are suffering because of this. You have tried to outsmart me but are learning the consequences to your actions. Do not doubt my intensity, do not think yourself greater than me. Most importantly, do not forget who I am and what I do for you and the rest of Earth and remember that you can't hide from me.

James (2001) quoted Ryden, “A sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a

landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing history within its confines”. As with the following student’s response, removing him from school and visioning him in another place, another time.

### **The Mountain—That Speaks for All Land Nations**

I believe the mountain is a good choice for me. Since there are no mountains in Florida, I will go to the biggest hill in the garden of Lake’s Park. I will also draw from past experience in Garmisch, Germany. I have already completed this exercise several times in the past and never realized it until now.

The mountain brings the history of mankind to fruition. Entire civilizations have been built and destroyed all in efforts to gain control of these majestic creations. This message is one of perseverance. They have been here long, before I came into existence and they will continue to be just as beautiful long after I am gone. In a society that is built on change and upgrades, mountains remain the same. No matter how technological we get or how sophisticated we think we are, the humankind can never come close to competing with this creation.

When I gaze upon the mountains, I am amazed of what I am looking at. As I get closer, I feel myself being enveloped by the earth. I believe that they are telling me that there is a higher power. Once I start the ascent, I feel the earth. I can now physically see and feel the contours of the rock, as it towers above me. If the rocks could talk, I believe that they would tell the following:

- (1) All the love that was given when babies first drew their first breath of air;
- (2) All the life that was created to roam free from any unnatural harm;
- (3) All the people that were buried, young or old, in the name of progress, war, love, hate, greed, passion and king;
- (4) All the castles that were built and fell;
- (5) All the nameless kings that took throne no matter how short a time;
- (6) All the tears that were cried when kings waged war for their own selfish gains and endeavors;
- (7) The reason why they were created to be appreciated and nourished so that life may flourish for as long as they remain.

I am the eyes that see it all. My peak will only be reached by those who have the courage. I inspire the troubled souls, with my peaceful setting. Through me, you will witness beautiful sightings. What I can offer no one can. Although I am large and people assume, I can care for myself. I need you to take care of my beauty, so I can continue to inspire. To bring about the happiness of those who reach me, I speak for the land. I want you to admire the beauties I offer. You live on my lands, and you shall respect it as you respect me.

Those speaking for the river are represented by this one excerpt. The student invites awareness as to waterway ill-health and implores humans to clean up waterways for planetary health. That we need each other is the connotation when the student said, “We want the healthy life to flow through us once again. We cannot do it alone”.

### **The River—Speaking for All Water Nations**

Dear Council:

I am the river, speaking for all water nations. We are defined by life, but do not see traces of it. We flow through misery the humankind has inflicted upon our path. We flow in dirt and chemicals. We can no longer sustain our marine habitants. They are sick and die in millions every day. We pass by it without being able to help them. We, the water of all nations, demand for our care. We need the humankind as much as they need us. One cannot survive without the other. We seek alliance to fix this tragedy. We do not seek to accuse anyone, but simply ask to help fix it. We, the waters, are at our last breathes and need help. We have long been fighting this war against these consequences and seek only for help. We want to bring awareness of our weak status and ask to spread this situation to all humankind. We want the healthy life to flow through us once again. We cannot do it alone.

The cedar tree speaks for all plant life. It talks about how plants protect, warm, provide shelter and clean the air. The cedar asks: “How long will you last when we are all gone?”.

### **Cedar Tree—Who Speaks for the Plant Nations**

I am the cedar tree speaking for the nation of plants. We provide shelter, shade, food and oxygen for all who need it. We are the backbone of all life, without us, everything would perish. We plants are all connected in some way. Our roots grow deeper and limbs longer each day. We have been here many generations and have seen many things. We provide food for all species on this planet. Our bodies store carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere. If combined, our bodies can provide medicine. However, we are being exploited for all that we give. For every life that is taken, we lose a bit of ourselves. Many brothers have fallen and are never replaced. But we hope that something will change. We hope that you will see killing all of us is also killing you and that you learn to cherish us and let us grow. But we know today is not that day, and we will fall too. How long will you last, when we are all gone?

The nations who once admonished us to identify that humankind is on the same path are becoming a blur as they are in humankind's memory.

### **Ivory Billed Woodpecker—The Nations That Once Were Humans**

I am an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. You might have heard that I am extinct. I have heard that there are a couple of biologists that would love to have their organizations pay you thousands of dollars, if you could lead their team to another like me. Unfortunately, this is not likely to happen. For me and thousands of other animal and plant species, we exist no more. "Only in a textbook" as you might refer to my status, and normally you are right. Except today, I come before you with a message. A message to instill hope in my current fellow endangered brethren. The reason of my kind no longer is allowed to breathe the air that so many of you take for granted, is due to your often reckless, careless and selfish nature. For many of us extinct creatures, we have resided on this planet far before you even discovered it was indeed a planet. The life we lived and sought was far different from that of your standards. The things we looked forward to each day with excitement, food, water, beautiful scenery and flourishing life are all subconscious thoughts barely meriting any importance or precedence throughout your lives.

Today, I hope to inform you, make you think more of the "others" on this planet in all the decisions you make. All the great things you strive to enjoy in your lives will mean nothing if you become like me. Make sure to give back to this earth that you have taken so much from. Never needlessly destroy habitats to thousands and thousands of your neighboring species. Please heed my word and keep from destroying that which is not yours in effort to obtain more things to call yours. That is all.

To convey a message obsequent, to know my past, you would easily faint  
 Species and civilizations crumble, all over pointless fights humans fumble  
 Taking all and never giving back, a talent only you humans' knack  
 Stop polluting the lands and sand killing life, continuously underestimating this blight and trife  
 I speak to you from nations that once were; correct your wrongs, or you will be just a blur.

I am the Ivory-billed Wood pecker (see Figure 2). I have recently been declared extinct, because I have not been seen for many years. Because I am most recently of your world I have been chosen by the nations that were to speak to you about the path of destruction you have set for yourselves and all living things around you.

When I was alive, there were not many of my kind left because you had taken away my home, my source of food, and left me with the polluted land, water and air you created. Finally, I was no more. If you do not change your destructive ways, many more nations will die until life is no more, even for you.



Figure 2. Ivory-billed woodpecker.

It is said that man fears and even hates what he does not understand. If the nations that are still alive are to survive, then man must learn to understand creation and live in harmony with it. Man searches for cures to diseases, yet he/she destroys the plants that contain the secret of the cures in his/her quest for this paper man calls money. You search for places where the air is clean while destroying rain forests and plant plankton in the oceans that provide together almost all of the world's oxygen. In your greed and false sense of superiority, you have taken for your own the land that the creator meant for us all. The plants and animals were willing to give their lives for you so that you might find food, clothing and shelter, but you took more than what you needed and did not give back to mother earth. You went so far in your greed and carelessness that you annihilated others of your own species.

Seek understanding from the plant and animal nations. Listen and learn from what they have to share. Turn from destroying that which is here to help you and teach you. If you do not, then your fate will be our own. You will cease existing, because you would not learn to live in harmony with other nations.

The eagle and the cardinal say we are here, we are beautiful and we understand the circle of life. What must happen in the human experience, so that they will soon see the error of their ways, so as not to banish goodness.

### **The Eagle—That Is Speaking for the Large Bird Nations**

I am the eagle speaking for the large bird nations. We soar high above the earth from a vantage point not shared by others. Our superior vision allows us to see all that is happening below. As we observe what goes on in the world below, we are concerned. We see that the earth has been changing and much of nature has been harmed. Man is using the resources that belong to all living things. History shows that man realized the error of their ways when they saw my eagle population declining. They realized that I was an important part of the web of life. They changed and thereby helped us to survive, and now our numbers are increasing. Large birds have been hurt by man, and now they are being helped. My hope is that man will spread this wisdom to all the natural resources we have been blessed with. The natural world shares itself

with all living things, and then those living things must give back. This is the circle of life and the law of nature we must follow.

### **The Cardinal—That Speaks for Songbirds**

We need to be loved for our colors, our cheerful songs and our function in nature. Without songbirds, you will be greatly deprived of wonder, happiness and a well cultivated environment. Who will eat your garden pests, cross pollinate flowers, or promote new plant and tree growth by carrying the seeds? Songbirds are the key to healthy environmental upkeep. We are great in diversity with 4,000 species, but our numbers suffer with the changing of the earth and its atmosphere.

Some songbirds are hearty and common, like the raven and crow, but thousands of warblers are endangered by the annual loss of habitats, flux in temperatures and air pollution. As songbird habitats are cleared for their wood, housing or farming, not only do the songbirds lose nesting places, but they become dramatically more vulnerable to carnivorous predators like snakes and raccoons. The predators who would hunt raccoons and snakes have also suffered loss in numbers due to habitat destruction. Studies also show that birds that are forced to live in urban environments are only half as likely to reproduce.

Please stop deforestation in South America where we are in winter, and please replant trees where land has already been cleared. Songbirds are as integral to the circle of life as any other creature, and songbirds are beautiful. Let us continue to soar and sing. Let us paint your experience in nature with vibrant reds, yellows, blues and oranges. As God's creatures, we do not worry where tomorrow's food will come from, but we depend on man to leave a proportionate share of the earth in which we can flourish. Please keep our rural habitats alive.

The panther senses the danger that is about on the planet.

### **The Panther—That Is Speaking for the Large Cat Nations**

Silent I wait wondering  
 Sounds unknown  
 Land bare  
 Food scarce and little  
 Hiding, seeking, pacing  
 Hunger is present  
 Crowding my way  
 Voices in the distance  
 Shots sound out  
 Constantly in danger

The night asks humankind to remember and appreciate all that is before it is too late. If humans could only learn to treasure what they have, share in an historical, spiritual past so as not to forget and through this process renew itself daily.

### **The Night—That Speaks for Spirit Beings**

The wisdom/message that the night wants me to teach humankind is the lesson of appreciation and remembrance. The night speaks for the spirit beings and I feel they want me to relay that we should cherish every day we have and not take anything for granted because you never know what tomorrow will bring. We do not need to focus on the negatives, but we should try to turn around bad situations into positive ones, because life is too short to dwell on the bad. We should appreciate everything we have, such as the people that are in our life, the opportunities we get, and the ability to live life to the fullest. When someone passes into the spiritual world, everyone reflects on everything they accomplished or the



persons they were. So, the question is how you want to be remembered and will everyone appreciate the things you did just like you appreciated the things that people who have passed did for you.

The second message the night wants me to teach humankind is remembrance. These spiritual beings want us to remember where we came from and that we should respect the past and how far we have come. We have to remember where we began in order to measure how far we have come. Remembering where you come from is important to carry on cultural traditions as well as family traditions. Spiritual beings want to see their loved ones carrying on special traditions and remembering their roots. It is important that we respect these beings by making them proud of the hard work they put into getting us this far and making sure we continue to make progress in making the world a better place and educating the younger generations on all aspects of life.

The night is meant to teach humankind of renewal. It is a dark cloak that covers the entire earth at the end of every day; a cloak that revives the spirits of the plants, animals and forces of nature during the day. In daylight, mankind is awake... living, working, tending and taking from the land on which he/she exists. When night comes, man sleeps and nature is free to exist in its rightful solitary state. Living and breathing, and recovering from all that man has inflicted upon it.

Our fellow people of the world say to modern man, and stop your destructive ways. They are unclean and harmful to all beings. Give back what you have taken and treated irresponsibly and let health return to the system.

### **The Two-Legged—Speaking for All People of the World**

Dear Humankind,

We have been around for many years. At first, we used to live in peace, until your guys showed up and took our lands. Our love for the nature was immense, we treat nature as if it was our mother and now you took our lands, you have made it only into dirty polluted cities. Every year it gets worse, more trees and animal species are dying only because you want to make your cities bigger. We think you should stop and think about how our land was before you took it from us; it should be clean and green and treated with love and respect. Thank you, the indigenous people of the world.

### **Conclusions**

Three populations of students participating in interdisciplinary environmental education or sustainability education curricula targeted to hopefully engender the development of a sense of place. The voices of the students presented as data in this paper are from all three programs, and therefore, data sources. The method of delivery of instruction not the actual content of the instruction hindered students' ability to grow to see themselves as a part of the ecosystem. All participants dealt with new content and process knowledge that resulted in intellectual, personal and spiritual growth.

There were some outliers to this study. The words of these participants were not presented for review. Statements, such as when speaking for the cat nations, an individual stated that, "I like the tigers best. Auburn has the best sports program!" or "Spiders cannot speak for any one. They are small pest insects". Such statements indicate that these persons did not either read the directions to the project or understand the purpose of the curricula.

A council of beings can be used as a values-clarification teaching and assessment method to ascertain students' belief and knowledge about their roles in fostering sustainability. Students freely express themselves from the worldview of a planetary inhabitant, showing both depth and breadth of understanding of their place and developing sense of place on the planet through the scientific (intellectual), aesthetic and attitudinal (affective knowledge) domains. It permits the human species to share what it knows through the eyes of another

bringing all entities closer; developing partnerships with nature.

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