

# Unfinished Business: Writing as if You're Dying

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## **Abstract**

*Participants in the 10th International Seminar in Health and Environmental Education Research in Montebello, Quebec were presented with the challenge of considering the question, "If you could only write one book and one paper in your life from now on, what would the titles be?" The task was structured to stimulate thought around colleagues' most important bits of "unfinished business." This paper provides an overview of responses and reflects on emerging themes of interest in the field of environmental education.*

## **Résumé**

*Les participants au colloque intitulé 10th Seminar in Health and Environmental Education Research (10e Colloque sur la recherche en éducation relative à la santé et à l'environnement) ayant lieu à Montebello, au Québec, se sont vu poser une question épineuse : « Si vous deviez écrire un seul livre et un seul article du reste de votre vie, quels en seraient les titres? » La tâche était structurée de façon à susciter chez les collègues un questionnement par rapport aux « questions non réglées » pouvant les hanter. Cet article donne un aperçu des réponses et examine les thèmes d'intérêt relevés dans le domaine de l'éducation environnementale.*

**Keywords:** environmental education research, emerging trends, research agendas

## Introduction

In Ron Meyers et al. (2007), Michael Brody, who had just volunteered to chair the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) Research Commission, describes the impact on him of attending the Seventh Invitational International Seminar on Environmental and Health Education in Anchorage, Alaska in 2003:

This event became my model for the annual NAAEE research symposium. I especially appreciated the openness of the session in Anchorage, the inclusion of "unfinished business" in environmental education research and the participation of many graduate students. (p. 645)

Since inception of the invitational seminars, the organizers have deliberately encouraged participants to present work in progress, rather than describing finished studies (see Hart et al., 2004; Myers et al., 2007). To aid the processes of reflection and reflexivity, each seminar has involved novel pedagogic

approaches varying from open space technology<sup>1</sup> sessions (Owen, 2007) to a modification of Charles Darwin's sand-walk<sup>2</sup> (Darwin, n.d.).

The 2009 invitational seminar held in Montebello, Quebec brought together 36 environmental education researchers and 12 graduate students from countries around the world including Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, France, the Netherlands, South Africa, Switzerland, and the United States. The two of us were tasked by Connie Russell, the seminar organizer, to run a session on the final morning, entitled "Reflecting on Conference Themes and Moving Forward." The overall conference theme was *Making a Difference*, and subthemes that arose during the week included the theoretical bases of the field of environmental education, human/non-human animal relationships, decolonizing environmental education, moving beyond "low-hanging fruit" in environmental education research, interdisciplinary and academic/community collaboration, and the close relationship of environmental education with social movements as well as other fields such as critical pedagogy and place-based education.

Tasked with facilitating the final session, we concentrated on encouraging the diversity of voices to forward-think with regard to future research agendas for the field. To that end, we devised a session that we hoped would be concurrently playful and thought-provoking, allowing participants to make a statement reflecting prospective research agendas while also using the pedagogical strategy of constrained choices to force distillation.

The inspiration for the activity came from Annie Dillard's (1989) encouragement to authors to "write as if you were dying" (§ 3). The activity proceeded as follows: After a brief introduction to the purpose of this session (to spur reflections on the seminar), we asked the participants: "If you could only write one book and one paper in your life from now on, what would the titles be?" We hoped the task would stimulate colleagues to consider their most important bits of "unfinished business." We provide this description of the results of the activity to offer insight into the diversity of perspectives held by current environmental education scholars, as well as a glimpse of future directions for the field.

### *Responses*

Responses to the exercise were insightful, intriguing, and, in some instances, humorous (Table 1). The responses could be grouped into a number of categories: environmental education as a field, educational theory, educational techniques, diversity and justice, culture and environmental education, passions and motivations for our work in this field, and the human/non-human animal relationship. Moreover, the titles—reflecting the work of the week—suggested content under-represented or missing altogether in the current lexicon, audiences not being reached, and collaborative possibilities among researchers and research areas.

Participants—through their suggested titles—indicated the importance of critical reflection on practice, theoretical bases, and on the application of

environmental education in a range of contexts. Some suggested the importance of understanding the history and providing a theoretical platform for the field—for example, “A Genealogical History of Environmental Education Research” and “Pedagogies of Living and Dying: Integrating Life, Environment, and Being: A History of the Environmental Education Revolution.” Others indicated the desire to gather examples of environmental education in different settings, with diverse audiences, and reflected a variety of potential desired outcomes, including pro-environmental behaviour, contribution to conservation outcomes, youth empowerment, and engagement with indigenous groups.

Several titles reflected an important theme throughout the week at Montebello—environmental education research methodology and methods and how these are similar to (and different from) methods employed in complementary fields. Several book titles reflected this interest: “Methodological Experiments in EE Research” and “The Research Road Show: Innovative and Effective Ways to Broadly Disseminate Research Findings.” Moreover, considering the role of environmental education with regard to other types of progressive educational strategies and topics—such as critical pedagogy, place-based education, and issues-based (for example, climate change and water) education—was a central theme that surfaced in the titles and in conversation.

Throughout the week, discussions emerged around the importance of theory in environmental education: How is it defined as its own field? What makes it different and unique? And when does environmental education build on the advances and history of others? Several titles reflected the suggestion that we continue to educate each other, as well as emerging scholars, in the history and theoretical underpinnings of our work through publications with titles including “A Socio-Ecological Theory for Education” and “An Eco-centric Theory of Experience.”

Recognizing the importance not only of what we teach but how we teach, several proposed titles emphasized educational practice. For example, “Snippets for Pippets: Learning about Living” suggests the importance of tying everyday experience to environmental education. Others (such as “Don’t Just Talk, Listen”) reflect principles of sociocultural learning theory, suggesting the importance of learning from one another and contextualizing environmental education within a broader socio-cultural-historical landscape.

Many conversations throughout the week related to the potential outcomes of environmental education—ranging from environmental behaviour to direct conservation outcomes to a focus on the culture/nature dialectic. Discussions centred, for example, on the relationship between environmental education and conservation, with a resulting proposed book title of “EE and Social Strategies in Environmental Conservation.”

Important questions were also raised regarding the links among environmental education and social movements for equality, justice, fair trade, labour, and other potentially related issues, which in turn led to critical questioning of the

role of environmental education in communities and, in particular, urban and/or among under-served populations. One of the researchers had recently attended

Theme	Proposed Book or Journal Article Titles
The Field of Environmental Education	
	A Genealogical History of Environmental Education Research
	Methodological Experiments in Environmental Education Research
	Environmental Education: Stories of Constraints, Possibilities and Hope (edited collection)
	Pedagogies of Living and Dying—Integrating Life, Environment and Being: A History of the Environmental Education Revolution
	The Research Road Show: Innovative and Effective Ways to Broadly Disseminate Research Findings
Theory	EE and Social Strategies in Environmental Conservation
	A Socio-ecological Theory for Education
	An Eco-centric Theory of Experience
	A Biology of Ethics and Education
Education Techniques	Never Teach as if Nothing Is Wrong Out There!
	Don't Just Talk, Listen
	Snippets for Pippits: Learning about Living
Diversity and Justice	Fairness, Equality, and Handprints of Hope
	Agency and Capability within Processes of Change
Cultural Focus	
	Cultural Sharing through Nature Encounters
	The Drizzle and Thunder of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in EE
	Freckles, Scars, and Tattoos: A Culture-Nature Book
Motivations and Passions for EE	Geographies of Memory and Place
	Why I Care, and So What?
Human/Non-human Animal Relationships	What's Love Got to Do with It?
	Inviting the Elephant into the Classroom
	Animal Collaborators
	Animals in Place
Humorous	The Animal Question in Education
	Beyond the Boundaries of Language
	Dazed and Confused
	Margaret Thatcher and Me
	I Speak to You with Water in My Mouth
	Baked Beans and Blueberry Pancakes

Table 1. Responses grouped thematically.

an international labour conference and several others were working on community-based conservation efforts. South African colleagues provided insightful perspectives on the role of education and citizen engagement, and others talked about their work with indigenous communities. Titles emerging in this vein included “Fairness, Equality, and Handprints of Hope” for a journal article, and book titles of “Agency and Capability within Processes of Change” and “Cultural Sharing through Nature Encounters.”

Many researchers—in this activity as well as during the seminar—expressed interest in and concern about what was perceived to be a lack of necessary focus on elements of environmental education dealing with place, traditional knowledge, indigenous practices, and culture in environmental education. Proposed titles reflecting this vein included “Geographies of Memory and Place,” “Beyond the Boundaries of Language,” “Cultural Sharing through Nature Encounters,” and “The Drizzle and Thunder of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in EE.”

A final theme that was present throughout the week and emerged strongly in the closing session related to the human/non-human animal relationship. A substantial number of graduate students working in this area attended the seminar and brought novel perspectives on this important and emerging topic. The proposed titles reflect their progressive ideas on this topic: “Inviting the Elephant into the Classroom,” “Animal Collaborators,” “Animals in Place,” and “The Animal Question in Education.”

### *Final Thoughts*

A gathering of international scholars of environmental education provides a unique opportunity to reconsider the direction of the field—areas of focus that are important in training up-and-coming researchers as well as areas that receive scant attention but deserve more focus. An activity such as this—with a minimalist yet forward-looking frame—forces distillation of ideas and can encourage thoughtful and playful discussion. It also provides a snapshot of current preoccupations and possible directions toward which some in the field may be heading.

Paul Hart (in Meyers et al., 2004), reflecting on his experiences during previous invitational seminars in the series, wrote that:

In the minds of those scholars who, with Jensen and Schnack, organized the first international seminar in Denmark, there were good reasons to open up the dialogue on the development of research issues, perspectives, trends, and debates. These have ranged from theoretical/conceptual preferences and priorities to practical, geographical and cultural assumptions and preoccupations. Although we are enmeshed in the politics of research within each of our own jurisdictions, throughout their history, these seminars have been characterized by attempts at openness to ideas, and a generosity of spirit towards those putting ideas forward. (p. 647)

Indeed.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Open space technology is a technique for running meetings. Sessions are run without an agenda and participants have substantial flexibility in how they achieve the overall aim of the meeting.
- <sup>2</sup> Darwin's sand-walk was a "thinking path" he used to cogitate on his theories.

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