

Graduate Students Lend their Voices: Reflections on the 10th Seminar in Health and Environmental Education Research

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Abstract

Graduate students were invited by their faculty advisors to attend the 10th Seminar in Health and Environmental Education Research. Afterward, they were encouraged to comment on their experiences, involvement, and positioning. Two main authors developed survey questions and retrieved, analyzed, and synthesized the responses of four other graduate students. The overall experience of attending an invitational research seminar evoked various ideas about graduate students' present and future roles in research communities.

Résumé

Des doctorants ont été invités par leurs conseillers pédagogiques à participer au colloque intitulé 10th Seminar in Health and Environmental Education Research (10^e colloque sur la recherche en éducation relative à la santé et à l'environnement). On les a par la suite incités à formuler des commentaires sur leur expérience, leur engagement et leurs opinions. Deux éminents auteurs ont élaboré un sondage et recueilli puis analysé les réponses de quatre autres doctorants. L'expérience globale du colloque de recherche sur invitation a évoqué diverses idées sur les rôles des doctorants aujourd'hui et demain dans les communautés de recherche.

Keywords: graduate student contributions, conference experiences, environmental education research

Le Chateau Montebello in Quebec, Canada is a luxury hotel that boasts being the largest log cabin in the world (an interesting, rather contradictory, claim to fame). In February of 1930, Le Chateau Montebello was constructed from cedar in just under four months. Construction and woodworking teams worked in overlapping shifts around the clock to ensure its speedy completion. At the peak, there were as many as 3,500 workers. Ten thousand red-cedar logs were used in the three main buildings, all cut and set by hand. This log Chateau was the private retreat of the Seignior Club until 1970, when the Canadian Pacific Hotels took over and opened the doors to the public (Fairmont Le Chateau Montebello, n.d.).

This historically contradictory location is where Canada chose to host the 10th Seminar in Health and Environmental Education Research. Le Chateau Montebello is now owned and operated by the Fairmont Group and is well regarded

as a luxurious, five-star hotel, yet it is a surprising venue for a seminar hosting environmental education researchers. The venue, however, served as more than just a fancy locale. Participants certainly enjoyed the beauty and serenity of this location on the nearby Ottawa River, alive with migratory birds and surrounded by cherished paths for contemplation and exercise. Additionally, Montebello proved an enticing location because of its proximity to Montreal, the location of the 5th World Environmental Education Congress that followed the seminar.

The theme of the seminar was *Making a Difference: The Opportunities for and Challenges of Producing “Useful” Research*. In total, there were 36 attendees, 12 of whom were graduate students, with the rest comprising faculty in various stages of their careers. Seminar attendees represented 11 countries from 5 continents. The graduate students in attendance were guests of invited faculty members, and were asked to write a proposal of research-oriented topics and themes they were both interested in and capable of discussing at length. There were no formal presentations at the seminar; instead, organizers compiled stated interests into thematic subjects and questions that a small panel of discussants were to lead. Discussants did not necessarily know each other, nor did they necessarily speak or prepare before converging at Montebello. Often, there were only a few moments to toss around the meaning of a question, locations of the discussants, and possible discursive twists and turns. Both graduate students and faculty members took on these roles together. The negotiation of this task had varying degrees of success.

The importance of diversity in epistemic communities requires that we include those at the fringes of discursive circles, and we argue that graduate students are certainly a part of that fringe group. As the ratio of faculty members to graduate students at the seminar was 2:1, the setting up of “triads” (of one graduate student and two faculty members with whom they had not previously worked) allowed students unprecedented time to reflect upon common issues and concerns with researchers whose influence, prowess, and visibility in the field seemingly outpaced our own. Most reported that these “triads” were highly useful in their own processing of information, insights, and ideas that arose from the more formalized discussions. It is almost impossible to say what the contributions of graduate students were upon the process and practice of faculty members present. In lending a few of our voices in reflection, we hope that dialogue continues to move forward in a forthright manner so as to further grow the field of environmental education research, to sprout forth new shoots in a rhizomatic endeavour to encourage complexity, inclusion, and multiplicity in our collective and individual paths or work.

In putting together this paper, the two primary authors—Joshua Russell and Peta White—communicated via Skype and e-mail to set out their own ideas and concerns, based upon personal reflections, discussions with supervising faculty, and casual conversations with the other graduate students in attendance. A series of questions was assembled in the form of a survey and sent to all graduate students who attended the seminar. The surveys were not anonymous, but

respondents were assured that their responses would not be directly attributed to them, in an effort to maintain some degree of anonymity. The students who responded were not asked to contribute directly to the writing process.

In addition to the two authors, four other students participated in the survey. All responses were analyzed thematically to flush out the main reflections in this paper. The six participants engaged with the themes from their own grounding, both in their individual graduate programs and within the field at large. In addition, some data in this paper corresponds to conversations held with other graduate students in attendance at Montebello: conversations that occurred both during and after the seminar with students who did not respond to the survey.

Student Responses: On the Theme of “Useful” Research, and On the Montebello Experience

As the overarching topic of the Montebello seminar involved questioning the “usefulness” of environmental education research, we considered it important to explore graduate students’ approaches to this guiding thematic. Specifically, the following two questions were asked:

1. *Research, to what end? What is useful research? What insights and understandings did you gain from your participation in this seminar?*
2. *Has participation in this seminar changed/influenced your research practice in any way?*

Of the more practical responses, two students discussed an interest in the role of action within research design, and both made it clear that a certain amount of clarification and translation needs to be done within the field of environmental education research and in seminars such as Montebello regarding the theoretical grounding and enactment of action research. Participants were from various disciplinary backgrounds and, understandably, a common language was not always available. As a result, some students found that a certain amount of knowledge and meaning was lost in translation. Said one respondent, “research is performative... language is practice.” Perhaps this statement was meant to draw attention to the ever-present partiality that occurs in an attempt to recreate a discourse, moment, or event from the past, especially one as complex and multiple as a research project or seminar.

On a more thematic note, some students expressed surprise over the lingering question of “usefulness” or “utility” at this moment in the history of environmental education research, it being over 14 years since the first journal dedicated to environmental education research saw its first volume published, and over 30 years since the Tbilisi Declaration. Respondents nonetheless found

that the struggle of addressing such a foundational question created space to enter the dialogue on more even footing with more senior members of the research community. In a similar vein, one student noted that “usefulness” in their own research requires them to acculturate to the “process” of research, suggesting personal growth and issues of political action are integral in developing a position within a research community. Others noted feeling marginalized by that very same process, relaying their frustrations with playing what they perceived to be their various “roles” within the seminar (i.e., student, learner, not-yet expert). For example, one graduate student replied:

In a couple of the sessions, I did feel as though there was an implicitly normative and almost cynical discourse regarding present and future realities and research currents in the field. I also had the impression that some of our conversations about ontological and epistemological questions and debates in environmental education research were without grounding in any particular stories, experiences, and strategies. For the newer academics, we felt that we could have benefited immensely from the situated reflections of more seasoned participants, who have long been navigating the rugged terrain of research in the field. However, I found that these tensions were somewhat resolved with the more candid and dynamic personal conversations I was able to have with participants over the few days.

Certainly, all agreed there were moments of inclusivity or intimate collegiality, as well as moments of “performativity” and posturing. This may be a common experience among graduate students, newer faculty, and senior faculty. The need to position oneself within the discourse, while being an important ontological and epistemological step, can also enact a politics of discursive control and unintended silencing of alternative voices, new ideas, or researchers on the fringe of the community. One graduate student responded:

The “power dynamics” of the Montebello seminar, in a first take, seem to recall an image of the organization of the current field of environmental education, as represented by the participants of the seminar, as being similar to concentric circles that follow a stone being thrown into a pond... [w]hat I would call an image of “expanding concentric bands” moving out from a (Anglo-American?) central impulse. The seminar saw the emergence of a vital “inner circle” providing impulses to the other (perhaps de-centred) participants, who could be positioned at different “distances” from the origin of these impulses. This idea of “distance” being the result of a range of factors such as, for example, language, academic practices, personal relationships, institutional background, etc. (with this list, of course, being neither exhaustive nor generally applicable, therefore providing nothing more than a starting point for the exploration of these potential dynamics). Much like the original metaphor of the stone being thrown into the pond, the direction of the impulses however seemed to have been somewhat unidirectional, with an apparent need for reflection on how spaces were created for new or counter impulses, for example from the periphery.

We found this quote evokes a strong image of the power dynamics and posturing within various concentric circles of inclusion and representation, and

perhaps the subsequent exclusion of new or alternative ideas and directions. Reflecting on these postural movements is an important step in seeking plurality, continuity, and the hope of a new generation of thinkers that Arendt refers to as “natality” (1993, p. 171) in our educational and research communities. This generational change may be a key point of the shared experience between faculty and graduate students. As a community, we may be committed to larger goals such as decolonizing our research, which is understood here as those steps of addressing the lingering problems associated with European colonialism and re-establishing the vitality of Indigenous and other cultures in educational theory, practice, and research (Lowan, 2009). However, there is no absolute dissolution of power dynamics, and often the idea of ideological “generations” fails to become a part of those de-centering discourses. The next generation of thinkers is not often considered part of the “periphery.” While this paper does not have the room to suggest new courses of action at this time, we are seeking a more explicit in-road to such discussions.

In a similar vein, all of the graduate respondents firmly established their commitment to reflexivity in practice, something that was discussed at length throughout the seminar. All participants seemed to agree that this is a crucial step in moving forward in the field, both in terms of our direct—and hopefully positive—interaction with research communities and stakeholders, and in our own intellectual and embodied positions within academia and the wider world.

3. Describe aspects of the seminar that were: (a) positive and (b) negative.

Positive. The “slow conference movement” (drawn from the slow pedagogy concept (Payne & Wattchow, 2009)) and the “un-conference” idea (a popular term for open-space technologies employed at gatherings) seem to have been applied in planning this seminar, as the pace was deliberately manipulated to facilitate networking and deeper discussion. This seminar was designed to facilitate ongoing conversations, which are often not possible at typical conferences characterized by quick presentations of research results and little time for discussion. Graduate students found considerable comfort with this format, as participation was not rushed or forced. A sense of community was quickly established and resulted in greater intimacy, the inclusion of graduate students, and formal and non-formal discussions. As previously stated, the ratio of graduate students to faculty was 2:1 (past seminars have had fewer graduate students present). Each faculty was encouraged to bring one graduate student, however, this was not possible for all.

The seminar program addressed a range of topics and used a variety of strategies, including small group discussions (of 3-20 participants), held both inside and outdoors, and whole-group discussions. The seminar program was obviously planned and executed with awareness and flexibility. Further, the previously discussed “triads” provided a wonderful way for debriefing, challenging

one another, and articulating thoughts, feelings, and desires in a safe, collegial environment. Said one respondent:

The triads in particular were memorable—I had a lot of laughs in my group, but it was also good to hear the perspectives of two more experienced folks in the field. The triads gave me a sense of grounding throughout the day, as the three of us would discuss our impressions of particular ideas raised.

The “Wall of Gratitude” (where participants were encouraged to leave notes of thanks to other participants so that each participant would leave with an envelope full of positive feedback) and the Cabaret (a night where participants were encouraged to sing, dance, tell stories and jokes, or otherwise be publicly playful) also enabled graduate student participants to feel welcomed and cherished, facilitating a deep sense of belonging.

Negative. Reeling from the ethical dilemma of holding an environmental education research seminar in such an opulent setting, and the difficulty in justifying such significant expense while being a full-time student, made it complicated for some to make peace with the venue. Perhaps the high cost of attendance attributed to the lack of cultural diversity found amongst participants, or this could be a more general reflection of the field. It certainly maintained a low faculty to graduate ratio, as not many graduate students could access funding support to attend the seminar. However, Lakehead University financially supported a large number of graduate students and York University also encouraged a large group of graduate students to attend. So, perhaps the issue is more about institutional support of graduate students in the form of financial assistance for conference attendance.

Time seemed short in some sessions where it would have been fruitful to deepen discussions; for example, some graduate students wanted to spend more time on decolonizing research practices. However, issues with timing and programming are certainly not isolated to this seminar experience. Generally, there was a pleasant mix of large- and small-group discussion, time inside and outside (although never enough outside, but at least there was some), and a variety of leaders, both faculty and graduate student, in each session.

Some specific concerns related more to the potential historical protocols within the field of environmental education research. One graduate student wrote:

While I felt no personal conflict, I felt at times as if I was being asked to carry a torch within the environmental education community rather than to provide new ideas, alternative insights, or lead discussions away from the traditional lines of discourse or those that more established faculty members considered important. While I consider the history of the field and the work of those long-standing researchers to be vital and important, the field relies on an influx of new ideas and fresh perspectives in order to both avoid stagnation and to address and diversify our approach to the meta-narratives of progress and development that threaten our world(s).

Another graduate commented about their preconceived notions of what the seminar experience would involve: “I had anticipated being able to talk more about my research with people who cared and wanted to listen and to help. I guess I was a bit disappointed that this didn’t really eventuate.” Similarly, another student offered suggestions for how such opportunities might have been woven into the program:

I would have liked to have heard more about the focus of other participants’ research and their experiences with the research process. While I knew some people at the seminar beforehand and was familiar with some of their work, many of the people I was meeting for the first time and it might have been helpful, from a networking and community-building perspective, to have had time devoted to discussing our work or at least identifying our areas of research interest. This idea came to me on the final day of the seminar, as I learned in conversation with another participant that we shared research interests and perspectives. I surely would have arranged a little more networking time with this individual during the seminar, had I known about her interests earlier. Thinking about the organization of the seminar, this perhaps could have been addressed as one of the opening activities, or it might have been coordinated through a poster on the wall, where people could have written their areas of research interest.

In various ways, graduate respondents felt placed, and held in place, by some re-inscribed practices within the program. A team of graduate students, the self-titled “Lakehead Ladies,” facilitated a great set of introductory activities (“ice-breakers”) and simultaneously re-inscribed notions of the appropriate use of student support in conference programming. Was this re-inscription of position, or was this a team of colleagues working to ensure the delivery of a wonderful program? It is difficult to draw distinct boundaries between the contributions of faculty and those of graduate students, and perhaps even more difficult to maintain what is appropriate in terms of academic, institutional, and social mores. Given that attendees came from diverse locations, there were bound to be moments of awkward role-playing, yet, there were some obvious and wonderfully transcendent moments, such as Joshua’s piano playing and singing with four faculty back-up singers during the Cabaret!

It is appreciated that the majority of faculty participants in this field are well known to each other, however, it would be good practice to create an opening for new people (faculty or graduate students) to be able to discuss areas of current research (struggle or success) at the beginning of such a program, if just to facilitate informal conversations throughout.

4. How did you participate in the seminar at Montebello? How did you feel about this participation? How did you feel about your positioning within the seminar program and participants?

Following an inclusive model, everyone was asked to participate in the seminar in some way (some omissions unfortunately resulted, however, significant

attempts were made to rectify). Most participants (faculty and graduate students) were given sessions to lead and some were more active in assisting to organize specific aspects of the seminar. All were encouraged to participate in discussions and the triad discussions meaningfully supported inclusivity.

This model did not work for everyone, however. For example, one graduate student wrote: “I was told from the start that I would be participating and leading a session. I didn’t get much notice as to the specifics of that session and I felt unprepared and out of my depth ... I did not enjoy the experience.”

Others, however, found their participation a positive experience, although this is likely due to the collaborative nature and insider perspective of their involvement. For example:

I first participated in the seminar as a member of the “Lakehead ladies” crew, helping to organize it in advance. Because of this, I had a sense of how the program would unfold and I helped to coordinate some of the activities (e.g., the opening ice-breaker sessions, the Wall of Gratitude). At the seminar, I participated in the discussions, triads, and other organized events. Overall, I found the conversations and keynote speeches interesting and productive, although the conversation that most piqued my interest was the one entitled, “How do we move beyond the human?” From this discussion, several people expressed interest in writing a paper about the convergences of animal studies and environmental education (the paper has been published in this edition of *CJEE*). Thus, I have had the great opportunity to continue, in writing, some of the conversations that began in Montebello.

For those who were not positioned as “part of the crew,” and who were new to the seminar experience, there were issues of difference (cultural and beyond):

The seminar made me think about how, as a European (whatever that means?), I relate in a North American context. For example: what is speakable, and what are appropriate ways of engaging with each other? Perhaps I was running into “cultural barriers” and then I wonder if I am re-enforcing/re-inscribing them. I wonder how else could I engage in this seminar?

As previously noted, many participants entered with a great deal of familiarity with each other. Perhaps there is a need for organizers to be constantly vigilant in considering how an “outsider” (in culture and experience) might successfully navigate this seminar.

Some students participated in ways that felt appropriate and supported by all. For example:

I was a facilitator for two sessions; while the discussions were oddly phrased and left open-ended for the facilitators to interpret before leading the session, I felt that in my specific groups there was an open and honest sharing of ideas among facilitators before initiating conversations. I wasn’t surprised when faculty members made attempts to guide the overall direction, but I never found that my ideas or voice was not being considered—at least in those sessions in which I was a co-facilitator.

This quotation foreshadows some of experiences around power dynamics felt by other graduate students, and these are specifically addressed in the next section.

5. *What were your perceptions of the power dynamics at play, both within the field of environmental education research and within the seminar?*

This clearly is a leading question, yet based on the experiences and resulting conversations of many at the seminar, it was necessarily articulated and included. Power dynamics at play refers to the perception of how leaders might manipulate the thoughts within the field and, more specifically, the seminar. Issues of gender, age, race, and academic position are all open for interpretation. One graduate student expressed surprise and disappointment at the gendered positioning explicitly practiced within the seminar:

Although I am quite new to this field, I was surprised and challenged at the active positioning that took place at the seminar. A gender analysis of the “leaders in the field” revealed a distinct bias. I wonder about this. I am impressed with the female leaders actively taking part in the seminar, however, their numbers are considerably lower than the males. At times some of the males seemed to take very antagonistic roles, positioning themselves as the powerful leaders, yet this demonstration of power did not impress me, it had the opposite effect.

For some, the dynamics of power related more to age and academic experience. For example, one participant noted: “At times, I sensed intergenerational power dynamics. For example, younger scholars/researchers were more open to take drastic steps while older ones seemed to prefer the “drizzle” approach.”

From a different perspective, we are reminded that the “younger” researchers have much to offer and that “experience” can be interpreted and expressed in many ways:

I was also struck that despite obvious differences amongst participants within the terrain of experience and positioning in environmental education scholarship, there was not necessarily a correlation between the level of a participant’s experience in the field and their ability to transgress the core questions that we had gathered to query. It was evident that many of the newer academics present were quite committed to, and active in, their processes of reflexive inquiry while attempting to create critical, collaborative, and meaningful research in their respective projects.

Similarly, energy and passion for the field seemed to fall across a spectrum with all participants. This was demonstrated via one final seminar activity relating to the level of individuals’ optimism for the field. One graduate student discussed this activity:

Not surprisingly, there were clearly differences amongst participants in approaches and understandings of what needs to be done to move environmental education forward. That we are not all on the same page, so to speak, became especially

apparent on the final day of the seminar when we lined up, in a human continuum, based on our level of optimism or pessimism regarding the effectiveness of the field as a whole. There was a wide spread of opinions and positions in the room, which could have offered an opening for a much longer and more in-depth conversation to happen had we had time (unfortunately we did not).

This brief activity demonstrated to me that there is a great deal of divergence in the field, regarding not only how we measure our successes but what we consider a success to begin with, what work we understand as lying ahead, and what methodological approaches we might take to get there. Again, there were surely epistemological and ontological differences among participants as well, whether or not these were voiced or acknowledged. Perhaps there were also differing levels of tolerance for these various positions (and likely, someone with a long-standing attendance at these annual seminars could unpack the dynamics around this much more capably than I could). However, to respond to the question of the power dynamics at play, I can say that I had some sense they were there.

The question of power dynamics prompted one graduate student to reflect on a quote:

I am reminded of Russell's (2006) assessment:

The field of environmental education research has much to gain if, as researchers, we all become better at keeping conversations alive by being open, playful, respectful and generous. We need to move beyond working across difference to working with difference, that is, beyond mere tolerance for methodological, epistemological and ontological diversity to actively working to creating spaces where such diversity can flourish. (p. 410)

I found the Montebello seminar deeply effective in modeling a format that entails less hierarchical relationships and more lateral ones. The format itself reflects a particular understanding of community: one that helps to break down hierarchical power dynamics and foster openness.

This prompts thoughts around how explicitly seminar organization is described and articulated to all participants. Perhaps the organizers could offer participants more descriptive annotations as to what is being “done to them,” and why!

And So What...

It is perhaps unwise to try to “conclude” this discussion at this time. Only a small number of attendees chose to respond; many sent along apologies for their inability to take time out of their busy schedules to answer the questions. We do, however, feel comfortable saying a few things as we wrap up. It is certainly not surprising that within the culture of academia there remains, and perhaps will always remain, a distinctly tiered approach to inclusion based on

experience, publication record, and perhaps visibility. In this sense, we would expect to find graduate students feeling themselves both benefiting from invitations and intimidated by the playing out of various generational and gender roles at certain moments. Not one of the respondents wrote of the experience overall as a negative one. Yet, three of the respondents spoke of the disconnect between the location of the seminar and the need for a more deliberate practice of environmental awareness and action for how we transport, house, and feed our bodies while we come together.

As the “next generation” of researchers in environmental education, it is important to not only include graduate students in seminars such as this but also to engage with their multiple locations and experiences of gender, race, sexuality, class, and so on, if we are to continually re-assess the “usefulness” of research within the field. Returning to Arendt’s notion of “natality” and the importance of reflection, this paper suggests that those of us who are newcomers to academic and educational communities need introductions that do not seek to predefine our contributions or roles. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that some of the power dynamics at play—in particular, the relationships between faculty mentors and graduate students—*can* provide grounding or structure within which we can grow our ideas and future actions in the field, provided they are committed to openness and honesty.

This seminar itself set out to approach “usefulness” through the lenses of complexity, inclusion, action, and reflection; it seems that graduate students can only add experience, knowledge, and ideas to such a multiple approach. This may require a new, humbler focus on inclusion among more established and vocal members in the field, a possibility that does not ask for any premature passing of the torch, but rather, a more participatory orientation to the messiness that is environmental education research. As the field grows and expands, *all* researchers must seek multiplicity in representation and method while expecting and hoping for the filling of present gaps and problems with the voices and concerns of others, graduate students included.

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