

Embodying Environments: Walking Through Your Body

By Julia Lane

Theatre has taught me about art, music, dance, performance, acting, character building, how far we've come as a people, how far we have to go, how good we are, how evil we can become, how generous and open hearted we are and can be, how hard a heart becomes when love and kindness are absent from life. (Slotkin, 2003, p. 105)

I come to outdoor education from a background in theatre training. I was recently fortunate enough to combine these two passions on Manitoulin Island where I was studying and working as an apprentice of the Pochinko style of clown training with celebrated Canadian clown John Turner. Although this program is not explicitly "outdoor education," it is easy to make connections between creative learning experiences and the natural world when you spend a solid month sleeping in a tent, bathing by a hose and keeping warm by a fire.

Richard Pochinko developed the foundational components of this style of clown training in the 1970s and 1980s. An important aspect of this training is the experience of walking through your body. I will not go into details about how this process is used in clowning, as this needs to be experienced to be understood. I will, however, share an environmental activity that I devised based on that experience. I will begin by framing and explaining the exercise itself and will then articulate the ways that I see it connecting to students' well-being.

It is a cold and snowy Monday morning, and both students and teachers would rather be relaxing by the fire than gathering in the classroom. Or, it is sunny and unseasonably warm and everyone would rather be playing outside than sitting in the classroom. Perhaps everyone is tired from the weekend past. Maybe they are just looking forward to the

weekend coming. In just such situations it is important to engage the body — so frequently overlooked or forgotten in educational practice — in our learning activities.

In the theatrical world we know that the body remembers what the mind does not, or cannot. There are thus entire theatrical programs dedicated to developing the senses and training the body to engage beyond the facility of the mind alone. Anyone who has ever smelled a familiar scent and been "transported" to a different time and place knows about the power of the body's sensations to trigger thoughts and memories that the mind had previously forgotten or tuned out.

The activity I am proposing for the sometimes-dreaded Monday morning engages the unique capacity of the body to experience learning in new ways and also to retain this learning beyond the scope of the thinking mind alone. According to Burch (2002), these two components — learning that is experienced and that is remembered — define "lived experience." What is particularly amazing about this activity is that it is relevant for students from K-12 at almost all levels of development. Additionally, though it is a physical exercise, it can be easily modified for use with students with a variety of physical limitations. Though this activity can be done in any space where desks can be pushed aside to create an open space for movement, as an advocate of outdoor education, I believe it to be a completely different experience when taken outside.

To begin, invite each student to find a special, individual place. I frequently ask students to find a place that they think is beautiful. It would be interesting to do the activity both inside and outside to see how long it takes students to find something beautiful in both

contexts. A meaningful conversation about beauty in the natural world may develop out of such an experience. If conflicts arise when students are looking for their individual place, remind them that if someone is already in a chosen special spot, they can find another, equally beautiful, place to be.

Once all students have found themselves an individual place, ask them to focus on one aspect of it. The most beautiful part of it for them may be one petal on a flower or the bark of a tree. Encourage students to experience this aspect of their place with as many senses as they can without causing damage. They can smell, gently touch, listen to, observe from all angles, and perhaps even taste. After they have learned about their place using their senses, ask them to feel the sound of the chosen aspect rising out of their bellies into their throats and out of their mouths. This is

not the sound that the place itself makes, but rather the sound that they feel compelled to make as a result of their sensory experiences. They are to make these sounds out loud. It may be helpful if the teacher provides an example of a sound to ease students' fears about "sounding silly."

Now ask students to walk while repeating their sound. Have the students breathe their sound into each part of their body. They can do this by physically directing the sound to each body part (for example, by looking directly at a foot and directing their sound there) or by visualizing the sound entering each part of their body. I find that it is most effective if students physicalize and visualize. As the teacher you become the coach for this experience. Encourage students to continue with their own work as you call out directions and questions. Some questions that the



students may find helpful: How does this sound make you want to move? How does making and hearing this sound change the way that you walk? What is the rhythm of the sound? Can you walk with this rhythm and against this rhythm?

Depending on the ages of the students you can alter the instructions for this part of the activity. For younger students perhaps they move about the room with their sound, changing their physicality as they wish. Older students can be asked to isolate parts of their body and feel (not think about, but feel) how this sound makes that part of the body want to move. Regardless of age remind students to keep breathing as they walk around in the space. If students are feeling disconnected from the activity, ask them to return to their special place and breathe there for a while. Does this cause their sound to change? Continue to coach students from the sidelines and, if they are having a hard time getting into the activity, surprise them with your cues. You can ask them how their sound and their body would move low through the room, how it might jump, how it could travel quickly or slowly. Keep the students on their toes!

Depending on the time available you can invite students to come into a circle and share their sound and movements with each other. If you do this it is beneficial to have the group repeat each student's sound and movement. This repetition encourages acceptance and can help to put students at ease with the experience of "performing" their personal sound and movement in front of others.

Make some time at the end of the exercise to allow students to share anything about the experience that they learned, enjoyed or found unpleasant. You might ask: What was that experience like? Do you feel you learned anything new about your object or place? Did your sound or the way it made you move bring to mind a particular character or experience? What was the rhythm of your sound or your movement like? It is important that you do not judge the students' answers.

The lessons students learn from this activity may not be the kinds of directed learning objectives we frequently expect in the school setting, but this is precisely the point.

One of the most impactful ways this kind of exercise can contribute to well-being is also one of the simplest: In this activity students exercise their freedom of choice and are (it is hoped) liberated by the fact there are no right or wrong answers. I am aware that in outdoor education there are frequently clear right or wrong choices (or at least very clear wrong choices!) and that these often have drastic impacts. This is true whether the outdoor education in question emphasizes tripping and survival skills or the science of climate change and biodiversity. I believe it is important for students to learn these things and to be able to distinguish between problems and solutions, a warm shelter and . . . well . . . no warm shelter. However, I also believe that there is a huge environmental weight currently being shifted onto students and, without the proper outlets for expression, this weight might lead students into disconnection, apathy, fear or, as David Sobel has argued, "ecophobia."

So what can this exercise contribute to well-being? To begin, it encourages students to connect with a place in the absence of right or wrong — there is only the student's individual experiences, reactions and expressions. Just as passionately motivated outdoor educators sometimes experience burnout and need to find ways of reconnecting with their original motivations, I believe that this activity can help students to, subconsciously, (re)connect with what they see as the beautiful aspects of the Earth.

This exercise engages the body, the senses, sound and movement, while encouraging the intellectual mind to take a backseat to the experience. I also believe that it can serve to reconnect us to ourselves as learning beings. According to David Wright, "This overt attention to embodied consciousness ensures drama, theatre and performance are remarkably appropriate laboratories for

research into the relationship between bodies, minds, communication and learning" (2005, p. 90). In reflecting on the activity afterwards, the intellectual mind is once again invited in, if only to marvel at what can be learned by and through the body. In this way, the activity can facilitate a shift in understanding that encourages us to see ourselves as beings that learn through our bodies, emotions and relationships as well as minds.

Finally, I would like to suggest three other simple ways in which I believe this activity facilitates well-being. To begin, it gets students outside. As outdoor educators we feel the value of having students outside as much as possible, even if we cannot always articulate why this is important. Significantly, this activity puts students in the schoolyard during a non-recess time. Frequently the schoolyard is not a place that is considered part of "the natural world." Paved basketball courts, gravel or sand, playground structures and flat grassy fields dominate many schoolyards. The schoolyard also seems designated for recess or "non-learning" time, a distinction that may cause some students to (subconsciously) discount their experiences in this outdoor space. Reclaiming the schoolyard as a natural learning place by changing the physical space with school gardens — as many schools are now doing — and by shifting how and when this space is used is important. The reinvention of the schoolyard contributes to the well-being of this place. It can also facilitate the well-being of students who may feel more connected to nature when it is conceived as an accessible, everyday place of learning and fun.

Fun is the next point. This activity is fun — especially once students are able to get beyond their initial self-consciousness about making sounds and walking in silly ways. I understand well-being to be a physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual state and I believe that having fun has positive implications for each of these aspects of well-being. If students perceive that learning is fun, they are more willing to challenge themselves intellectually and enjoy their learning experiences; when students have fun engaging their bodies in a learning experience

they can become more aware of and in tune with their own physicality; having fun in a way that is deeply personal and embodied like this activity can put us in touch with our spiritual desires; and it is easy to emphasize the positive in our emotions when we are having fun!

My final comment about well-being is that this activity allows students to explore their physicality in a personal way. Schools can sometimes be places where students are shut down physically both because of the demands to be seated during class time and because of the pressure of being around other students who collectively define a normative physicality. This activity asks students to focus only on themselves and their relationship with their chosen place. The more that teachers create a safe space for this activity in which students are encouraged to work personally and be silly, the more potentially free each student's physicality will be. I believe that this (re)connection with the range of movement available to the body supports physical well-being as it allows students to experience physicality previously unavailable to them.

As I write these suggestions and re-read them for clarity I am keenly aware that what makes sense to me from my previous theatrical experiences may be incomprehensible to others. And yet, I feel as though these kinds of activities provide meaningful and valuable learning opportunities for students, perhaps especially the students who are not always engaged in typically conventional educational situations. I would thus invite anyone interested in understanding more about this specific activity, or other ways in which the body might be brought into outdoor education through theatrical experiences, to contact me for clarification or expansion of these ideas. Until then, Happy Monday!

References

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Information about John Turner's Clown Training is available at www.theclownfarm.com

