

Exploring the Role of Wilderness and Story in Shaping Our Understanding of Self, Place and the Other-Than-Human World

Scott Caspell (Lakehead University)

Abstract

In this presentation I will provide an overview of my master's research, which explores the potential for wilderness education programs to help people develop a better understanding of self, strengthen connections with place(s), and improve interpersonal relationships. This qualitative study is grounded in narrative-inquiry methodology, drawing heavily on self-study and a critical analysis of literature from the fields of place-based education, environmental education and Indigenous education. Much has been written about how schooling serves to disconnect people from the natural world, and the effects this has on human well being and the sustainability of our socio-ecological communities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Orr, 1992; Louv, 2008). There exists a powerful need and opportunity for educational programs to foster place consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003) and holistic human development (Plotkin, 2003, 2008).

As part of my research, I will outline Outward Bound Canada's Nunavut Youth Leadership Program, which I helped design and implement. This program has been designed in collaboration with community partners in Nunavut with the goal of preparing Inuit youth to become community leaders and help create healthy, vibrant, culturally grounded Inuit communities. This program has an emphasis on community building, through which participants experience first-hand what it means to live well within a communal context. There is also an emphasis on developing connections with the arctic environment, as well as intra-personal (self knowledge) and inter-personal skill development (e.g. communication, conflict resolution, leadership).

I propose that providing opportunities for people to develop leadership, coupled with connections with the natural world, are essential components of sustainable well being for people and places. I then put forward that other educational programs, in both formal and informal contexts, can draw on the approaches highlighted in my research to foster sustainable well being for individuals, institutions and communities.