

The delight factor: Exploring the role of landscape in transformational learning

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Hand, Heart, Head

For many years educators have spoke of the importance of the emotions in the learning process. The 4H (Hand, Heart, Head, Health) movement in the US, for example, from the beginning of last century identified the emotions as crucial to both healthy living and the learning process. Those who have written about the role of the environment in learning are perhaps most eloquent. 'Nothing without joy' (Malaguzzi), 'a sense of wonder' (Rachel Carson) 'a symphony of the senses' (Sally Jenkins) 'extinction of experience' (Robert Michael Pyle) among many others. All seek to communicate the intensity of the experience where the emotions are integral to the learning process and all seek to communicate the intensity that environmental learning can bring to the child's feelings. For me their beautiful words come together in what I call 'The Delight Factor.'

Such writings guided us in the development of both the design of the Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden and its programs. The garden itself, situated at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne, opened in 2005 and 'is a place where children can delight in nature and discover a passion for plants. It is a garden that celebrates the imagination and fosters the creative nature of play.'

How do the children who visit the RBG Melbourne express their emotions? What is their expression of the Delight Factor? It is in their small hands holding mine and it is in their small emphatic faces and their words when they say, 'this is the best day of my life!' or 'I love you' because they are deeply connected (in love) with the experience.

So, within the scope of emotional possibility what is our objective as facilitators of experience? I hope that within this state of being 'in love' with the experience, there is the life-changing moment; the trigger, the seed planted, a new way of seeing, a new way of feeling about plants. Within this context we choose not to preach about the destruction to the world's natural ecosystems and the depletion of its resources, or place responsibilities on small shoulders (Sobel) Working with people's natural propensity to affiliate with other life forms, or biophilia (Wilson) is a powerful point to work from.

If the goal of our teaching experience is to engender joy, exuberance, enthusiasm, wonder, curiosity, amazement and passion and then the outcome of that must surely be for learners to respond with passion, joy, innovation, optimism and hope.

Sensory immersion: The emotions and memory

“In nature play, in which all the senses are active, a correspondence of feeling within the child, a symphony of responses to the world is aroused. Our first feelings are educated by our senses, for it is our senses that begin the task of articulating and differentiating the feelings.”

Sally Jenkinson

There is no coincidence here that the same word is used in our language for defining both the sense of feeling, touch and to be moved by emotion or touched. It is not only the sense of touch but all the senses that feed and enrich our emotions. And it is this remarkable combination that triggers and enhances memory. Perhaps no coincidence either that sense, the word that defines the way we experience the world, also means to have knowingness or wisdom, as in good sense.

Educators such as Pestalozzi, Steiner and Montessori, stress the importance of the senses as learning tools. Research on the use of sensory experiences suggests significant and long-lasting learning that contributes also to changes in children’s feelings that lead to positive attitudes and behavior towards nature and the environment.

So, how do we engage the senses in new, surprising and captivating ways? Sensory experiences can be gentle, subtle, funny, surprising, forceful or powerful. Try ‘Cheeks and Tummies’. Meet trees and their amazing surfaces, textures, temperatures, smells by placing cheeks and tummies against them. Children cannot help but communicate what they feel, they enjoy a sudden freedom in their responses to plants, and therefore a heightened sensitivity and playfulness. They interpret for themselves. They delight in their own interpretations and share them with others. Adults and children alike begin to laugh and smile, eyes reflect emotion. The emotional connection between people and plants is opened, renewed, rejuvenated, by this simple gesture; and importantly, also the connection between group members.

All emotions?

Obviously fear can be immobilising, can cause helplessness, apathy and inaction. Without disregarding fear entirely as a useful emotion, let us consider the fear we can use to become stronger, braver and test ourselves.

Every child enjoys the fun of the fear associated with playing in the dark with others. In plant landscapes there is potential for scary games, exploring the Wildwood, the scary forest where monsters lurk, where you can lose yourself. The archetypal wildwood, can symbolise the journey’s obstacle, a place of danger and the unexpected, but also a place of growth. No wonder that in the IPFCG the most satisfying squeals emerge from the Bamboo Wildwood! No wonder either that the most popular play spaces in the IPFCG are wild places, where children from about 7 years of age head instinctively to challenge themselves. Children who are lucky enough to carry these landscapes in their imagination, either from being read to or from time spent playing in wild spaces, carry these emotions with them, inspiring further risk-taking and learning, and inspiring rich imaginative play. It is a reminder to us all that we need the unexpected to grow.

Is there a connection between the sense of fear managed and another significant emotion in discussions about the natural world, awe? Standing under the tree the children call Lady Loch (‘she’ is an Algerian oak planted by a Lady Loch 116 years ago) is certainly awe-inspiring. Her branches and ‘fingers’ touch the earth and sweep her giant leaves about, she encloses you in her vast circus tent or a green cathedral, her trunk is vast; being under her is transforming.

Transformation in this context is through sensory immersion, related emotion and heightened awareness to a new place, a new way of thinking feeling and seeing. These are the moments that form us as individuals. Revisiting these places or memories is energising and renews and rejuvenates our connections to place.

Does Chawla refer to these moments when she speaks of our ‘deepest levels of connection with the natural world.’ One approach to deepening levels of connection might be to slow down the learning experience, as so many learning experiences seems to be driven by a sense of urgency to have them completed. I liken ‘slow learning’ to the ‘slow food’ movement and it might also be termed deep learning, deep looking, deep thinking, deep growth.

The emotions and interpretation

So, as learning facilitators, when comes the point when we are diminishing the experience through over-interpreting, over-teaching, over-designing? When we are giving information rather than sharing experience? Perhaps some anarchy is required rather than order (Hart, 2003) and the buzz of the unpredictable?

Do we remember the power of the unexpected, the thrill of the mystery of our own play in rich, wild spaces? Other questions we can continue to ask ourselves as we design learning places and experiences might include;

Do we trust that visitors are able to direct their own discovery? Are learning experiences personal and open rather than directed or closed? How do we avoid over-controlling the experience with our own interpretations? Do we acknowledge that discovery can be emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual? How do we retain a compelling sense of mystery? And what is the relationship between mystery, discovery and transformation?

Agency, identity, and belonging

Important as knowledge, reasoning, and attitudes are as children seek to understand the world and their place within it, they do not form our deepest levels of connection with the natural world. The qualities of our attention and movement through the sensory world, our sense of agency and identity and the play of emotions they engender are at least equally important. (Chawla)

How do we encourage a sense of *agency and identity* they are vital to the learning experience? If a sense of agency and identity engenders a ‘play of emotions’, then what is our role in designing learning experiences that facilitate this? Brainstorming the meaning of Chawla’s terms can lead to the development of a set of questions relevant to an interpretive organization and might include;

- Can our visitors contribute to change? (e.g. through real gardening experiences)
- Can our visitors contribute to decision-making processes? (e.g. round-table decision-making)
- Do we engender a sense of belonging to place through learning experiences?
- How do we recognise/measure a sense of belonging?

People passion

‘People Passion’ is one of the key design elements for learning experiences at the IPFCG. It acknowledges our connection to others and their interests through their enthusiasm, as powerful

motivating tool. Lifelong and life-wide interests (such as gardening) are often triggered by engaging with people who are passionate about what they do.

Research shows that adults who are actively engaged with and committed to caring for the environment have two main sources for their enthusiasm; positive experiences in rich natural environments as children, and family role models (or other significant adults) who demonstrated their respect for the environment (Chawla, 1999).

We planned so that ‘people passion’ would be an active player in communicating delight (and therefore care and respect) in the plant landscapes and also in allied programming. Gathering ‘nodes’ and the inclusion of staff and other inspired people in programs are strategies for working with *people passion*.

Sense of wonder

What is the connection between the sense of wonder and the perception of mystery? Einstein writes that ‘The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.’

Is feeling a sense of wonder to also be driven by emotion to question and to understand something new, but perhaps not always to know all? To also delight in the mystery?

In regards to the landscapes and experiences we provide for our children to play and learn in, shouldn’t they be joyful, playful, and allow for the contribution of the imagination, the creation of stories, stories that connect us to people and place, ones that we carry away with us not just in our heads but in our hearts? They remind us, as educators, that the Delight Factor is the most powerful of teaching tool of all.

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Biography

Christine Joy, one of the 6 designers of the award-winning Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden in Melbourne, Victoria has been Education Coordinator at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne since 2000. She has used the environment as teacher in both Australia and Spain. Inspired by the role of plant landscape in children's play she examines the 'Delight Factor' and the role of the emotions in 'deep learning' and transformation.

'Children use landscape, its plants, animals, shapes, dark, light, its loose material to create stories through play. In fact the creation of great stories comes from an intimate and emotional relationship with landscape. Time spent playing, time spent thinking and feeling. I want to explore the role outdoor spaces, their people and programs can play in engaging and immersing the heart and mind.'

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