

WINTER SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE+LITERACY



Preface: Literacy.

As you open up to yourself and the world, you collect more knowledge and literacy. Literacy is a skill that makes it easier to flow - through social structures, feelings, and boundaries. To be literate is to be adept at keeping balance in a mysterious and fluctuating existence.

Introduction: We Are All Stars

We are all stars. We all are intelligent beings: capable of questioning, reflecting, and adapting from our experiences. "Knowledge is formed by acting upon the world through experience and the experiences of the world acting upon the mind" (Paulo Freire). In other words: we live and we learn; we give and we take. It's a common bond of life that presumes equality and expects diversity.

We each have a different way of perceiving the world, different ways of knowing it. So to benefit from this immense collective intelligence is to seek another's knowledge, and in turn, to develop pride in our own.

Ways of Knowing

"Everywhere there are starting points, intersections and junctions that enable us to learn something new" (Jacques Rancière). Knowledge is like a rhizome (Gilles Deleuze) where nothing is isolated, it's all interconnected. Naturally symbiotic, a rhizome is a way to appreciate the paradox of difference within our common vitality. Original and creative, it is always unfolding - searching for new paths.

How we know, what we know is uniquely woven and full of possibility. We gain knowledge through personal experience: we play and take risks. We make mistakes and make discoveries. Knowledge is also transmitted through our society: like our families, governments and language.

Indigenous cultural knowledge is centered around a holistic understanding of the rhythms and interconnections within the universe. Around the globe, cultural literacy has been taught using the world around us as the curriculum. Plants and trees teach us that to be healthy (or literate in survival), is to thrive in cooperation over competition, and to embrace your own individuality without blocking the light for others.

A lesson in cooperation can be found in the tradition of interplanting corn, beans and squash, known as the Three Sisters. The parable of the Three Sisters demonstrates the value of reciprocity: the balance between give and take. The corn sprouts up first, setting a template for the bean to grow up around it. The squash is busy extending

low over the ground, sheltering the soil to keep the moisture in and the weeds out. Unseen are the beans' gift of nitrogen, a crucial element for growth that is hard to find on your own. The story underscores the benefit of diversity: how to complement differences, not dominate or assimilate.

With a strong attachment to place and skilled in observation, first nations embrace the cyclical rhythm of nature. In pre-colonial life, time was not marked by precise linear fragments. Even today, time can be marked through literacy of the skies. The rosy moon in June is also known as the Strawberry Moon when the berries are ripe, and the Hunger Moon comes at the end of winter, when fresh food is most scarce. The first thunderstorm on The Prairie announces the renewal of life. The return of Geese signal that it's time to plant crops. And Constellations, like Brown Bear (or Virgo) show when it's time to harvest.

Although it defies our conventional notions of keeping time, reading the sky demonstrates multiple ways of knowing – a virtue that suggests knowledge is not just a progressive acquisition of facts that lead to an ultimate destination. Rather, like a rhizome, development is a holistic combination of capacities like intellect, senses, intuition and emotion that are ever emerging. Intelligence is all around us and within us.

One Room Schoolhouse

The ancient themes of interconnection and rhythmic flow can be found in natural laws as well as in schools. It is highlighted in the poetry of Walt Whitman, one of the most celebrated American voices. As a promoter of democracy he explores the worth of diversity and the importance of relationship... to self [I am larger, better than I thought, I did not know I held so much goodness], relationship each other [To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough] and relationship to nature [logic and sermons never convince, the damp of night drives deeper into my soul]. In defiance to the rigid arrogance his era, Whitman maintained that in knowledge there are few certainties and that it is constantly unfolding.

As the immature American government began its intrusion into the Great Plains, it plowed the way for new cultural values. These immigrants brought their own stories and myths and ways of knowing them. And they shared many of the same desires as their indigenous neighbors: to explain the mystery behind creation, pass down traditions, and to find a sense of belonging.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Great Plains were divided into individual plots of private property and schools became the central place where a culture would pass down their knowledge. One room schoolhouses were more than just a place to absorb lessons but a prideful symbol of shared life. A lively place to dance, exchange poetry, cast ballots and eat pie. Also known as 'country schools', they were a common site and popped up all over the land.

Country schools were small, attended by a handful of nearby families. Children of all ages sat in one class together, often learning from each other. Students progressed at their own pace, flexible to individual needs and family circumstances. “In the face of few resources and limited schooling among themselves, rural parents showed a tremendous commitment to establish formal education” (Goldie Piper Daniels). And despite many obstacles, people flocked to schools looking for greater freedom and opportunity.

School-based literacy relied on fluency in reading and writing, a key to opportunity in the dominant society. Learning to read and write was a serious and laborious process: repetition and rote memorization was the main pedagogy. Students were expected to sit with respectable posture, speak with proper elocution and write with precise penmanship. There was a standardized way toward literacy. Knowledge it seemed was static, individual and something that was transmitted from authority.

In early public schooling, curriculum was simple and focused on the 3Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic. The main source of knowledge was in “the primer”. This collection of fables, poems and speeches introduced kids to worlds outside of their own. It introduced them to a common literary tradition and a sanctioned historical narrative. Schools were determined to mold the youth in a specific way, a desire demonstrated by the most common primer, The McGuffey Reader.

Rev. William McGuffey, had a passion for education and preaching the Bible. In response to the growing number of schools he compiled a more eclectic curriculum reflecting the curt, puritanical beliefs of his family and of the dominant society. It became immensely popular and it was said that “The Midwestern mind was the McGuffey mind.”

Curriculum - both explicit and hidden - has an incredible power to simultaneously expand and narrow a worldview. Through exclusions and emphases, it can legitimize a certain way of being while marginalizing an Other.

Explicit training in religious and patriotic values faded into the backdrop as the values of industrialism began to permeate schooling. With urbanization and further development of the land, rural schools were under pressure to consolidate into an even more standardized, centralized, and accountable system. Administrators were fascinated by the economy of factories, and the once venerated agrarian lifestyle became an Other. “The only way I see to better the condition of the country schools is to take just as much of the control out of the hands of the people as possible” (Wayne Fuller).

With a new pace of life the push for consolidation into graded schools continued, and one room schools disappeared after WWII. No doubt there were modern benefits to the new system, but something unmeasurable was missed. One advocate said “The relationships of the schools to the natural community...are of first-rate educational significance and are not to be sacrificed in the interest of efficiency” (Andrew Guilford).

Yearning for a responsive relationship between school and community hints at the dynamic nature of knowledge: that what happens in a child’s world cannot be separated from the classroom - it’s complementary. So when we are expected to only absorb knowledge (and not to express it) an authoritative, monolithic system denies our unique literacies. But if asked to develop capacities unseen we can expand our boundaries of observation and connection.

So soft upon the Scene

The Act of evening fell

We felt how neighborly a Thing

Was the Invisible

-Emily Dickinson

Land of Plenty: Beyond Right and Wrong

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe is as good as dead, his eyes are closed.” (Albert Einstein)

Although we crave clear cut answers, mystery and change abound. To be vital is to be in motion.

“People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them” (Ralph Waldo Emerson). The myths of certainty and control can yield to the ability to navigate ambiguity, vulnerability and doubt. Dropping the myth of supremacy welcomes the ancient philosophy of interdependence.

Acknowledging our interdependence would negate our cultural habit to Other, so we could refocus on our natural “inclination to seek relationships...see the threads that connect the world, that join and not divide” (Robin Wall Kimmerer).

Despite modern epidemics our ability to navigate them lies within our collective intelligence. But we must commit to the idea of knowledge as dynamic & reciprocal.

There is plenty of room in schools to inspire by affirmation rather than negation.

“I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing, than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance” (ee cummings).

We are all teachers. We are all-stars!

Winter School 2002
Knowledge + Literacy
winterschool70@gmail.com
Thank You.