

An Outdoor Classroom proposal for Royal Roads University

BACKGROUND

Early in 2014, Geoffrey Bird, Hilary Leighton, Rick Kool and Pedro Marquez, developed a “Conceptual proposal for a classroom in the forest”, and submitted the proposal to Lynn Joly and Paul Corns. As a result, a diverse group of staff and faculty were brought together in May, 2014 to discuss the concept of outdoor learning, and in particular the concept of an outdoor classroom at Royal Roads University. One of the action items resulting from that session was the need for a student project to be completed to provide information on the concept of a “sense of place” being embedded in the learning and teaching model at Royal Roads, and an outdoor classroom.

Under the sponsorship of Lynn Joly, directed through Nancy Wilkin, and the academic advisor, Mickie Noble, a project under the Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science was completed in July 2015. This project researched the concepts of outdoor learning, and produced a visually appealing and highly factual guidebook focused on 6 outdoor walks on campus. The intention for the guidebook was to provide faculty with information on the ecological and cultural aspects of campus, and thereby encouraging them to take their students outside. The students also undertook a survey of Royal Road’s core faculty, which determined that: “88% of respondents indicated they would consider making use of an outdoor physical classroom; however, we require further research to understand the conditions and amenities their curriculum would require from the outdoor classroom.” The following section will highlight some of the reasons for an outdoor classroom, and the benefits derived from learning in nature.

THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING IN NATURE

Following their 8 month study, the RRU students concluded in their project that: “by enabling outdoor learning an increase in health, ability to learn, and a sense of responsibility for the environment make for a better community.” Some of the highlights from their research indicated:

1. “Apart from fostering a sense of place and its associated positive benefits, students also benefit from increased self-esteem, improved social skills, improved motivation and concentration, as well as broadened perspectives.”(O'Brien, 2009)
2. “Students who spend time learning outdoors have also been shown to be more aware of the environment around them, and more concerned about the protection of the environment.” (Lawrence, 2012)
3. In her research on using the outdoors as a learning tool, Wendy Yeadon (1994) stresses the fact that in order to be effective, the chosen activity and location must be specifically suited to the objective. Using the outdoors for a learning experience not only has intrinsic value, but it can also enhance the effectiveness of the students’ education by delivering the message in a practical and tangible way. A formal outdoor classroom would make use of this concept by allowing students to experience first-hand what makes the campus unique and important.
4. Yeadon (1994) suggests in a university setting, outdoor learning can be used to place emphasis on personal development and awareness in order to prepare students for the transition from university to the workforce. Learning outdoors can provide versatility in the student's learning experience, allowing them to be better prepared for a work environment which may require them to adapt to changing conditions to complete tasks. By using a practical, outdoor approach as a teaching method, the educational content can be delivered to students in a more sensory stimulating environment which can have a

benefit, both immediately and by forming long-term connections with their learning environment.

5. The location(s) chosen for outdoor learning must be of ecological, historical and/or cultural importance in order to enhance the student learning experience.

In addition to the student research on the topic of learning outdoors and the benefits of an outdoor classroom, RRU faculty were asked “why” they put forward the idea of an outdoor classroom.

Dr. Geoff Bird:

1. *To recognize the importance of place in the RRU “on campus” learning experience. The physical setting for learning is an important element in creating a positive, even transformative, learning environment. We often hear from students attending their residencies that the beauty of the campus offers a sense of separation from the ‘outside world’, a place where students can focus on their learning and personal development and find inspiration.*
2. *To open up the connection to our environment to everyone. Essentially, connections to the physical space of the campus are left with a certain few programs initiated by students and faculty who can access and are comfortable with spaces that are ‘off the beaten track’. The intention of having an outdoor classroom is to take fuller advantage of our natural setting. All schools could then be encouraged to engage in learning that would benefit from the peace and tranquility of the forest. For example, courses such as leadership and other subjects associated with more personal reflection and growth, come to mind. Enabling innovation, fostering greater emotional intelligence and responding to issues associated with climate change are just a few areas where an outdoor setting more offer inspiration to students, faculty and staff. This is also a great opportunity to ‘ground’ international students as well as domestic ‘urban’ students in a natural setting.*
3. *Having one or more outdoor classrooms on campus would profile what makes RRU different from other learning experiences, it would exemplify the RRU brand and challenge all of us to connect with our physical, natural setting.*

Dr. Hilary Leighton:

1. *Every human being has a unique relationship with the natural world (the system of which we are a part of), and belongs in a certain way. The conscious discovery and cultivation of that relationship (called our ecological identity) is core to human maturation and to uncovering what each person’s ‘place’ or contribution to the whole system is. However, we are in terms of our history, in a kind of systemic separation from our original intimacy with the natural world, hence suffering a disconnection too from our true natures (psyche or soul). Through divergent nature-based practices (such as walking and sitting in nature), instruction from the natural world can help alleviate the dualism of being split off from our true natures by facilitating a wider discourse with all living organisms.*
2. *These practices can literally bring us back to our senses by: offering direct experience in the environment, evoking a sense of place and wonder, and helping develop responsible*

environmental behaviours that build the capacity to implement meaningful environmental actions and help resolve environmental problems and issues. Immersion provides the best learning context to foster a demonstrated degree of ecological intelligence and to help mend the divisions between mind and body, humans and earth.

- 3. Further, current socio-ecological health research considers the interdependence between people and their health with their work, study and living environments on a scale of human development that questions whether or not we are may be thwarting our own evolutionary process by spending too much time indoors under artificial stimulation (Maller, et al, 2005; Kickbusch,1989). Such linkages also include: disengagement, exhaustion, obesity, loss of vitality and in some cases, depression. As individuals, as community members and as a culture, we have benefited on the one hand from the rapid changes that technology provides us with in terms of capacity building but on the other hand industrialization has taken us far from our earthy roots and we suffer for it. “People with access to nearby nature settings have been found to be healthier overall than other individuals. The longer-term indirect impacts (of ‘nearby nature’) also include levels of satisfaction with one’s home, one’s job and with life in general” (Kaplan &Kaplan, 1989). Beyond that, being in nature has been found to “help strengthen activities of the right hemispheres of the brain, and restore harmony to the function of the brain as a whole” (Furnass, 1979). In lay terms this is akin to” clearing one’s head”, as nature settings work in a restorative manner to foster recovery from fatigue and overwhelm. Ideal for students in residence! By taking ourselves out to a natural classroom we help to extend our understanding beyond data and discussions as we get the sense of being part of a larger whole and in effect, reactivate a natural sense of well-being, evoke fascination and curiosity. Quite literally, as we move to out onto the broader landscape, our mindscapes responsively broaden to what is possible.*

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN OUTDOOR CLASSROOM AT RRU

Royal Roads University sits upon the ancestral lands of the Coast Salish peoples. RRU leases the lands for the campus from the Department of National Defence, and the lands are designated a National Historic Site by the Government of Canada. Any development on campus must be considered in that context, as well as the existing campus plans and the commemorative statement. The actual location of an outdoor classroom would require full consultations with all parties, including staff, faculty and students, and the eventual approvals may require a federal environmental assessment.

In early discussions about an outdoor classroom, the size should accommodate a “cohort” of students – up to a maximum of 50 students, it must be barrier free, and constructed with natural materials such as cedar. The location should include a forested area with a view of the lagoon and mountains, and be built on a previously disturbed site, as allowed for in the commemorative statement. The pathway to the outdoor classroom would be considered an important element of the learning experience, creating the need for the classroom to be built away from the core of campus, but close enough to enable access to services. An area on campus which potentially meets these requirements would be the area south of the MEWS conference centre, within the mixed alder forested area. The classroom would be booked under the RRU EMS system, and open year round, although busiest during spring, summer and fall. To date there has been no discussion about the actual design or shape of the outdoor classroom and therefore the following section is

conceptual in nature. Existing classrooms and a conceptual design for an outdoor classroom are provided to stimulate ideas about what would be most suitable for the university and the surrounding ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

The addition of an outdoor classroom to the teaching facilities at Royal Roads University will enable all programs at the university, as well as the community, to have access to an outdoor classroom, immersed in the natural beauty of the Hatley Park National Historic site. The actual consultation process, classroom design, materials and location still need to be determined, but with a few examples, and cost estimates ranging from \$50,000 to \$150,000, a sense of what is possible is starting to emerge. This project will truly reflect the uniqueness of the learning opportunity at Royal Roads University and create a legacy for decades to come.

ATTACHMENT #1

ADDITIONAL REFERENCE MATERIAL ON THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING IN NATURE AND OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS

1. Michael Ignatieff is quoted in the *Globe and Mail*, (October 6, 2012) as he focuses on the necessity for reinventing higher education and he noted that with regard to post-secondary learning in Canada, “being the most educated, it turns out, may not be the same as being the *best* educated.” (Globe Focus, section F, p.1). This editorial offered that being “less bound to lecture halls”, and bringing “more innovative curriculum” (p.1) could radically reshape outcomes that include the ability to adapt, make decisions and problem-solve, relate to self and others well, bear confidence and social and emotional intelligence, and not least of all, think divergently. The article supports the argument that the way into the future of education may in fact be through human maturation and relationships, and through, no less, the visionary calling of the human heart out beyond classroom walls!
2. In *The Living Classroom: Teaching and Collective Consciousness* (2008), Christopher Brache knows that when real breakthroughs occur they can bring a class alive if students are bringing their full selves (good mental and physical energy *and* emotional psychic energy) and are willing to fully engage. The outdoor classroom, I have found, is the best context for this to occur where there is so often, a felt sense that—*something just happened here*. Brache further states, “nature is always the better classroom” (p. 158) because it would be strange to teach about things “out there” without the critical engagement of actually going “out there”.
3. “Nature (including our own deeper nature, soul) has always provided and still provides the best template for human maturation.” (Plotkin, 2003).
4. Richard Louv, author of *The Last Child in the Woods* (2005), writes that when we spend time outside and better understand the natural world, we’re more likely to care for it and in so doing create the possibility of a more sustainable future.

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