

Unsettling Environmental Studies: An introduction

Thomashow, Cynthia

Antioch University, Professor and Director of the Environmental Education Masters

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Abstract: What does it mean to “Unsettle” Environmental Studies? In this issue of *Contingencies*, educators and researchers introduce creative and provocative pedagogical approaches, research projects, practical and theoretical models for curriculum, instruction and interdisciplinarity approaches to environmental studies. My own academic experiments with Urban Environmental Education brought a new light to my understanding of inclusive educational approaches with a focus on environmental justice. Working with community organizations and schools, practitioners and academic researchers, I found that the urban environment added a new set of elements, including urban forests, high-density residential and commercial infrastructure, power and management, transformed waterways and paved surfaces. Responses to the call for papers for this ‘Contingencies’ issue, gathers together new perspectives and possibilities, as well as, inclusive approaches to research and pedagogy in environmental studies.

Keywords: To Unsettle, Environmental Justice, Urban, Inclusive Research, Educational Dissonance

I spent 35 years of my career discovering and implementing educational approaches that engage people in environmental studies. I had success challenging my students to ‘think outside the box’ and find new and powerful ways to reach the hearts and minds of their audiences. The NYU *Contingencies* Journal challenged a wide audience of faculty and researchers to share their approaches to unsettling environmental studies.

Running Grass and I penned the call to action below. Our goal was to encourage creative and provocative approaches of engagement in environmental studies...and to open our understanding of the interface between social justice and environmental studies.

Calling all Educators...please join us by submitting a paper that describes your efforts to Unsettle Environmental Studies! To UNSETTLE is an active verb. It calls for disquiet and dissonance. It seeks to upend the predictable and to throw open concepts of where and when and how we engage in the environment, learn from it and expand our understanding. It pushes us to invite different perspectives and cultures, modes of learning, and ways of being in the world...to better understand our planetary ecosystem and its dynamic intersection with the built infrastructure and the people who live there.

The purpose of this special issue is to provide space for new pedagogical approaches, research projects, practical and theoretical models for curriculum, instruction and interdisciplinarity approaches to environmental studies. The ten papers in this issue attempt to break open traditional methods and open up possibilities for innovative and provocative research and pedagogy.

My professional career was certainly shaped by ‘unsettling’ environmental education. From 1984 to 2007, I directed the Environmental Education Masters program at Antioch University’s New England campus. The academic field was new...we were inventing it and felt unfettered in approach but driven by concern over planetary survival. I was encouraged to be innovative and to experiment with pedagogy, research, partnerships and educational venues. We worked out new interdisciplinary designs. We took ourselves into new landscapes – urban, suburban, rural and international. Having the freedom and support to explore new approaches lit an intellectual fire in me that has never waned. With the authority, time and resources to explore and ‘unsettle’ ideas came exciting new adventures and initiatives within and outside of traditional academic boundaries.

Eventually the program led me to design and launch a new Urban Environmental Education Masters at Antioch University in Seattle. Running Grass joined as an important faculty member. The invitation to design a new approach to environmental education had its roots in a personal “unsettling” that occurred in the 1990s. I was invited to work with Steve Curwood and the National Public Radio show “Living on Earth” to uncover and explore environmental concerns and environmental justice with urban youth.

I enlisted Antioch students as program interns to listen to and record the experiences of young urban dwellers in five cities across the country. NPR staff taught inner city teachers and our students to record and edit radio production. We found ourselves deep in urban communities of NY City, Chicago, Boston, Camden and Los Angeles. Our goal was to learn about and to share the environmental perspectives of young city dwellers to the NPR audience. We spent 5 years listening to urban students and teachers, all struggling to find solutions to critical urban environmental issues that impacted their lives every day.

The experience revitalized and strengthened the possibilities for environmental learning providing a foundation for the Urban Environmental Education Masters program at Antioch Seattle in 2014. Most approaches to urban environmental education tended to scoop up urban youth and take them away from their communities in order to experience Nature. The UEE program focused on life within diverse communities. Working with community organizations and schools, practitioners and academic researchers, we found that the urban environment added a new set of elements, including urban forests, high-density residential and commercial infrastructure, power and management, transformed waterways and paved surfaces.

The UEE experiment brought a new light to my understanding of inclusive education with a focus on environmental justice. Motivation to focus on inner city landscapes and diverse communities was supported by the prediction that 80% of the U.S. population will live in cities by 2050 and that the population demographic will be more than 50 percent people of color. (Taylor, D.E.) The UEE faculty was intentionally created to reflect that future, with up of 75% BIPOC educators, researchers and practitioners. By our third year, the student body was 80% BIPOC. With a focus on year-long field-based research projects, the UEE students immersed themselves in community issues and environmental challenges. It took courage and insight to experiment with and ‘unsettle’ the traditional approach to environmental education. And, it was worth it!

In designing this issue of the Contingencies Journal, my colleague Running Grass and I crafted this call to action with the Contingencies journal. We’ve had great success attracting ideas, research and practices that challenge and unsettle traditional environmental studies. Here are the titles of the papers chosen for publication:

1. Why, When, and How to “Unsettle”
2. Unsettling Environmental Studies: An introduction
3. Unsettling the Status Quo: Embedding Environmental Justice in Tech-Centered Environmental Education
4. The Seven-S Model for Developing Environmental Leaders: Harmonizing Indigenous and Integral Approaches in Environmental & Sustainability Education

5. Climate Fiction and Social Change
6. Embodiment of Other-Than-Human Beings in Adult Environmental Education:
Transforming Relationships in Times of Climate Crisis
7. Bridging the Disciplinary Divide: Promoting the Interdisciplinarity of Environmental
Literacy in Teacher Education
8. Pedagogies of Black Feminist and Coalitional Ecological Praxis
9. Lessons Learned: Using Socioscientific Issues and Social Justice to Unsettle
Environmental Science
10. Making Relatives as Pedagogy: Unsettling Universities Towards Human Maturation

Cynthia Tomashow is a retired Professor and Director of the Environmental Education Masters at Antioch University New England and Director of the Urban Environmental Education Masters at Antioch University Seattle.