Spring 2017

Program Development at the Outback: Exploring Place-Based, Experiential Education through a Campus Farm.

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Program Development at the Outback
Exploring Place-Based, Experiential Education through a Campus Farm.

Paul Kearsley
in partial completion of the
Masters in Environmental Education

w/ Dr. Nick Stanger
Huxley College
Western Washington University
Spring 2017
Section 0.1 Acknowledgments

Learning is a collaborative process.

This particular process was also a bit protracted, labor-intensive, logistically challenging, ephemeral, bureaucratic, dirty, smelly, questionably legal and consistently overwhelming.

Needless to say, I could not have done it alone. Following people were instrumental in this effort and should this project bear fruit, they will be the first to try it out.


Tommy Thompson, Albert Strasser, Della Mueller, Max Parsons, David Stein, Maddie Price, Tyler Mead, Zach Martin, Rose DeLorie, Tim Keal, Jacob Gerstner, Olas Perpich, Megan Johnson, Alyona Gudima, Julian Tennyson, & Jud Daffern.

Thank you to my Family and Friends. Sorry I have been so busy these past three years. I hope these 30 pages make some sort of sense for my absence.

Special Thanks to Dr. Nick Stanger- Thank you for your guidance, support, ideas, humor, practicality and willingness to bend the system into something like a panarchic potato chip.

And finally, I would like to dedicate these past three years of work to my beautiful wife, Jane Campbell. Throughout this whole process we built a home, found a farm, broke a back, had a wedding, ate breakfast and lived every day together. Thank you for understanding, challenging & inspiring me.
Section 1.1 Introduction

When teaching about systems thinking, the first idea I present is that everything is a system. When teaching about design, the first idea I present is that everything has been designed. I have been pleased to find that environmental design also embodies this ubiquitous perspective.

Context

This project began nearly five years ago. While working as an entrepreneur, landscape designer, and educator I grew very comfortable in a range of different disciplines. My work was practical, engaging, and valued by many different audiences. While considering my future career, and the potential to expand my reach, I began to look for a more refined niche. Ideally, this position would have a strong relationship with a piece of land, a consistent stream of eager and interested students, and a degree of creative freedom through which we could explore, learn and teach.

In time, my searching led me to the Outback Experiential Learning Program (The OELP or The Outback) at Western Washington University (WWU). The Outback has been an element of the WWU campus since the 1970’s. The space is a student-led farm, which provides opportunities for learning about sustainable living, and agriculture. The Outback has been considering a strategic transition for a number of years, moving from the current status as an exclusively student-run program, towards the integration of a non-student staff position to foster long-term growth and development of the program. This paper represents a strong promotion for the programmatic offerings and develop the educational site to its fullest potential.

I was introduced to the field of Sustainable Design as an undergraduate at WWU. While studying Industrial Design, I was compelled by the application of my newly learned design skills to fundamental problems regarding the human experience. The Sustainable Design Minor was an excellent introduction to the foundational ideas and theories of contemporary sustainability.

Immediately following my undergraduate studies, I spent two years in an intensive place-based apprenticeship program. The site was the Bullocks Homestead on Orcas Island, WA, and the curriculum focused on off-grid homesteading and sustainable design. This education showed me the invaluable lessons of working with your mind and body while applying theory to bio physical, technical and social systems.

After two years on the homestead, I founded and managed an edible landscape contracting business in Bellingham, WA, with two of my fellow apprentices: Homestead Habitats LLC. I was introduced to the field of Sustainable Design as an undergraduate at WWU. While studying Industrial Design, I was compelled by the application of my newly learned design skills to fundamental problems regarding the human experience. This was an engaging and important component of our practice that differentiated us from many other companies. It was also very challenging and equally rewarding.

Since 2009, these professional experiences have shown me the need for more designers, entrepreneurs and practitioners who can apply sustainability theories as valuable and marketable services to meet real world needs.

With this in mind, I have focused my graduate studies intensively on place-based, experiential education in sustainable design and urban ecology for college students and young adults. Developing and achieving a long-term staff position in the OELP offers the highest potential and capacity for a pedagogy of this nature.

1.2 Definitions

Throughout my education and professional career I have seen a wide range of terms emerge, evolve and disappear. My definitions have also changed as my understanding of and relationship to these ideas has matured. To be clear, the following definitions represent my perspective at this time regarding these most relevant topics.

Environment:

The dominant American perception of the “Environment” presents a world out past the edges of the man-made urban and suburban construct. Embedded within this definition is the notion that humans and their creations are distinctly separate from the “Environment”. The words “nature” and “wilderness” both suffer a similar treatment. William Cronon addresses this issue in his notorious writing “The Trouble with Wilderness”:

“One of my own most important environmental ethics is that people should always strive to be conscious that they are part of the natural world, inextricably tied to the ecological systems that sustain their lives. Any way of looking at nature that encourages us to believe we are separate from nature-as wilderness tends to do-is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior.”

Though it has at times proved contentious, my preferred definition of “environment” comes from the visionary designer Buckminster Fuller. In his writings Bucky defines the universe as everything, and the environment as everything other than the self.

By this definition and in the context of this writing, every pixel of space, page, the author and the reader are all a part of nature, each individual existing within its own unique environment.

Environmental Education:

As I perceive it, Environmental Studies addresses the relationship between human cultures and their environmental conditions. Teaching within vague parameters such as these turns Environmental Education (EE) into a malleable perspective through which one can address a wide range of topics. It can encompass hard science and the STEM agenda, systems thinking, place-based or experiential education, and it can provide profound lessons in philosophy, community and oneness.

Understanding EE as a perspective instead of a prescription creates a flexible and versatile educational toolkit that crosses a broad range of disciplines and possesses a profound potential for depth.

In respect to the ubiquitous nature of EE, it is important to note that teaching our children how to treat their environment is a foundational component of all cultures. Ancient mythology was imbued with lessons of the seasons and the stars. Recycling programs and phone apps for identifying bird calls both demonstrate the cultural significance of our relationship to our environment. Likewise, by not addressing our cultural relationship to our immediate ecology, we demonstrate a societal disregard for these systems, which is a lesson in and of itself.

Ecological Design:

The seminal book Cradle to Cradle critiques the modern fixation on sustainability and “Eco-Efficiency”.

“(Eco-Efficiency) …works within the same system that caused the problem in the first place, merely slowing it down with moral prescriptions and punitive measures. It presents little more than an illusion of change.”

Indeed, modifying our consumption and disposal are necessary steps towards a better cultural relationship with nature; it is important to be “less bad”. However, this strategy falls short of doing actual good.

Environmental discourse rarely transcends the line between humans as destructive consumers and humans as creative producers. It is not widely acknowledged that humans can rebuild topsoil, improve biodiversity and regenerate healthy watersheds. In fact, people have been doing these tasks across cultures, through generations and over centuries.

Since it fits the current cultural context of my work the term sustainability will be used throughout this document. However my specific goal as it relates to Ecological Design is to move beyond the ideas of “less bad” and cross over into discussion of regeneration, co-creation and having mutually beneficial relationships with our environment. This is synonymous with the term “Permaculture”.

1.3 Additional Terms:

Environmental Design:

The lower-case d is intentional. It represents my effort to make design a more accessible practice.

I have been teaching design through WWU since 2013 and find that many people believe that only designers design. To begin my courses I often solicit a definition of design from my design students. Their responses are generally vague explanations regarding problem-solving, aesthetics and the Adobe Suite.

We work through the various applications of the term and end up with a definition both definite and ambiguous: Design is the organization of parts into a whole. Design-based learning is an integral component of my teaching philosophy and the democratic, inclusive, all-encompassing definition is the basis for that pedagogy.

The Outback Experiential Learning Program

Photo Credit: BingMaps.com
1.3 Educational Philosophy

Our education is an ongoing and ever changing process that begins at birth and only resolves when we pass away. As a lifelong student, my educational philosophy is subject to this same relentless revision and hopefully refinement.

Praxis

My teaching practice reflects my own learning process. For many reasons, I have grown accustomed to learning through a very tactful, hands-on approach centered on intentional critique and personal reflection. Drawing, design school, apprenticeships, entrepreneurship, etc. have all reinforced this process. It is not always pretty, but it makes for strong connections and meaningful lessons.

As an instructor, I have had great opportunities to teach in the way that I learn. Most of my courses are hands-on and skill-based. Subjects of this nature (such as drawing) offer immediate feedback, which provides opportunities for correction and calibration during the learning process. This feedback allows for intentional, meta-cognitive reflection from the learner and through my experience, can yield remarkable results.

It is understood that this type of learning is ill-fit for conventional academic discourse. So often, higher education is little more than a process of transmitting information. Students develop familiarity and eventually mastery of a subject by reading, understanding and interpreting the works of other masters. Eventually, their work is referenced by the next generation of students and the cycle continues.

Personal narratives are too subjective to withstand the rigors of conventional academic scrutiny. But space exists for a less conventional and more personal approach. Many educators are advocating for a process of learning through experiential application and personal reflection. The value that personal experience can bring to research based fields is poignantly presented in Cynthia Chambers’ “Path with Heart.”

"Narratives are crucibles that hold the events, as well as the pathos, logos and ethos of each story. Through stories teachers/researchers record significant events, and the pathos, logos and ethos at work in each story. Through these stories we are able to come to an understanding of the learning that has taken place. But these stories also provide the raw ingredients for future learning and habit formation. As we create, collect and share stories, we also create a collective memory for our communities. This is the value of stories – they feed one another.

The Swale Trail:

I have been organizing large group work projects for nearly a decade. These involve between 10-50 participants all collaborating on the same common tasks. This work has been conducted in private workshops, community gardens and within the GELP. I am also a strong advocate for the value of visual communication and use this language intuitively.

While preparing for the first day of my Ecological Design I course, I found myself wanting a more concrete visual explanation of our tasks, work flow and group dynamics. After a quick conceptual sketch, I created the project plan. It is a concise explanation of how 30 students will all co-create a 50ft causeway through a muddy abandoned roadway. Please review the plan for the details of the day.

Prior to class I worked with 6-8 students to go over the specific tasks, location of tools and materials and general work flow. This plan was copied and handed out to 30 new students to be completed as their first lab session. We covered the basic process, then broke into teams and conducted the work. With the help of my volunteer leaders, we were able to accomplish all of this in the scheduled class time and demonstrated to the group their collective potential as a creative force of nature.

In terms of Sauvés Praxic Current, two different levels are at play. First, the experience of the students. This is the first lab session. We simply placed into a collective experience where each one did the best they could. We reflected on the process at the end of the session and returned to space next week for a similar installation.

Second, I have never used a document of this nature during a group work project. I simply thought it might help. The final result was an incredibly effective group process which now serves as a benchmark in my EE career. I am working to integrate this type of planning into all of my future collaborations and hope to normalize the plans as effective educational tools.
We are part of the environment.

“The Death of Environmentalism” describes the separation of humans and nature as a foundational concept which undermines the goals of the environmental movement. “…As a community, environmentalists suffer from a bad case of group think, starting with shared assumptions about what we mean by “the environment” — a category that reinforces the notions that a) the environment is a separate “thing” and b) human beings are separate from and superior to the “natural world.”

Modern environmental discourse continues to enforce this separation, advocating for the study, preservation and protection of a separate “thing”. Standard practices in environmental education are also complicit. These activities often involve taking children and young adults to the remote wilderness to show them an “environment” fundamentally different than the one they live in every day. The intention is to create a meaningful connection to nature, thereby producing an ecologically conscious citizen. The unintended consequence may be that revealing the contrast between our urban or suburban existence and an unmolested ecosystem undermines the goals of the environmental movement.

Our cultural narrative rarely empowers us with options to participate in the ecosystem. Stories of mutually beneficial relationships between people and their landscapes are not widely known. Research into the subject quickly yields diverse accounts which are positive, practical and encouraging.

Farmers of Forty Centuries, by Hiram King 1 is an agronomist’s record of Chinese agriculture in the early twentieth century. His interests were in the cultural practices that have sustained the world’s largest populations since nearly 2000 BC. Their economy and prudent resourcefulness are humbling and inspiring.

Our Relationships can be Mutually Beneficial.

This separation ideology is supported by a cultural dearth of productive and healthy human-nature connections. Many typical suggestions for good environmental stewardship amount to little more than consumer choices. Buying organic, buying local, buying Fair Trade, buying compact-fluorescent bulbs, buying hybrid cars, and buying recycled products are the premiere recommendations for lowering one’s carbon footprint. Likewise, conserving water and saving energy are mere derivatives of buying and consuming less. On the other side of the exchange is how we dispose of consumed goods. Beyond conventional garbage services, alternative choices for waste disposal are generally limited to recycling when appropriate, composting if it is available, no-flush urinals and low-flow toilets. Table 1.4 provides additional examples.

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Section 2.1 Methods

I remember crossing paths with Seth Vidaña during my undergraduate studies. He was a graduate student, working to create an Office of Sustainability for WWU. He intensively developed the concept throughout his studies and following his graduation, was hired into the newly formed position of Campus Sustainability Manager. It struck me as a practical use of the graduate program and I set out to emulate his process.

Integration

My master plan is and has been the formation of a non- student, staff position at the Outback Farm. It is the sole reason I entered this masters program. Every course, every project and every assignment would be in service of that ultimate goal. The process of integrating all of my work was relatively straightforward. Every assignment, regardless of if it’s parameters had a predetermined focus and additional constraints. No course work was seen as separate from the larger mission and upon reflection the sum total of these projects is an impressive body of work. I am not sure if this list is impressive enough or if it is worth noting that every single credit I earned in my graduate studies has been integrated into my culminating project.

ENVS 587 Fall 2014

Conservation Psychology-
I conducted a series of interviews with all thirteen of the previous AS Outback Student Coordinators. These discussions focused on the pros and cons of student leadership, from their first-hand experience. We also discussed the Outback’s contributions to student well-being and personal development. This research provided valuable insights into the history of the space and it’s associated programs which certainly informed future conceptual development.

ENVS 582 Winter 2015

Curriculum in Ecological Design-
This course provided an opportunity to design and develop a 10-week curriculum for a course I titled Ecological Design I. The facilitated development allowed me to integrate my foundations, as well as previous professional work into a unique teaching and learning experience. The curriculum focused on systems thinking, design process, sustainability concepts and basic hands-on techniques and practices in ecological design.

ENVS 500 Winter 2015

Assessing the Outback-
This self-directed independent study provided a platform for researching the long and interesting history of the Outback. I also continued my investigations into current programming associated with the OELP. This was the first instance that I used the independent study option to further develop my master plan. The flexibility of this masters program was a big part of its appeal.

ENVS 500 Spring 2015

Human Ecology Practicum-
This was the initial trial of the curriculum developed in ENVS 582. While I was completing the curriculum course, I began the administrative process necessary to pilot the class. In collaboration with John Tuxill of Fairhaven College, we successfully ran a 10-week course with over 25 students. This was the initial instance of my praxis approach to both learning and teaching and this course gave me a brief glimpse into the potential I was working towards.

ENVS 595 Summer 2015

Teaching Practicum-
I had co-facilitated a 2-week, 72-hour Permaculture Design Course (PDC) with instructor Dave Boehnlein and Alderleaf Wilderness College. We had 22 students from all over North America.

Though I had much experience working in the context of a PDC, this course took on a life of its own as an integrated element of my masters studies into an already familiar format. The result was a successful milestone in my teaching career.

ENVS 500 Fall 2016

Urban Agriculture Workshop Facilitation-
For this independent study, I designed and ran a three-part “Introduction to Permaculture” workshop series through the Outback. Much of this material was familiar, though it was a good exercise in course administration and the resources and processes available at the university. A secondary goal of this course was to generate interest in the second offering of Ecological Design I to be held in the spring of 2016.

ENVS 595 Spring 2016

Ecological Design I-
I ran the second version of the curriculum developed in ENVS 582. This course was hosted by Huxley College and listed as ENVS 397K, which is an experimental designation. Running a course a second time is a great opportunity to refine the individual lessons, the 10-week arc and the intensive logistics associated with hands-on experiential education. The refinements proved successful and we have continued to work with students from this class.

ENVS 501 Fall 2016

Research and Projects in Environmental Studies-
Though intended as an early course to help students guide their studies, I did not run this class as a traditional PDC. Rather, this course developed into a capstone experience for students who had already chosen to go deeper with their research. This course was designed to allow students to develop a thesis project through a focused, in-depth exploration of their individual interests.

ENVS 588 Fall 2016

Assessment, Evaluation & Research in Environmental Education-
I designed and conducted an assessment of administrative personnel with long-term relationships to the OELP. Their feedback was coded and quantified into a series of collective community goals for the space and program. This project informed the concept and content of the 501 materials, which were being created simultaneously.

AHE 578 Winter 2017

Program Development in Adult & Higher Education-
This course provided a platform for the development of an Extended Education program to be run through the Outback. Though not directly related to the Outback Manager Position, the Extended Education program could provide an alternative method for utilizing the space as a supplement to the master plan. This is what I like to think of as “Plan B.”

ENVS 690 Spring 2017

Environmental Education Field Project-
My field project has focused on two primary routes for the formation of an Outback Manager Position. Currently both proposals are in the application process and appear to be well received. The culmination of three years of work and over 45 credits of study is daunting, relieving and fulfilling all at once.

2.2 The Beginning

During the first year of my studies the primary goal was orientation and assessment. As with any design process, I began with an open mind, flexibility and a curious process. His first principle states; “All education is environmental education”, which parallels my preference for holistic perspectives. His other principle states; “The means for learning are as important as the content.” Sauvé’s Praxis Current embodies this principle as well and both of these permeate my learning process and teaching practice.

The culmination of my first year was the implementation of the curriculum I designed in ENVS 582 via Fairhaven College. As a final step in my orientation, I applied these newly learned theories in the context of higher education which solidified the value of my unique perspective.
Contextualization

A small group meeting during the fall of 2015 loosely resembled the Outback Governing Council, which serves as an advisory board for the OELP. The initiative was both the Associated Student Outreach Coordinators, two college Dean’s and an Outback alum/potential community partner. In advance of this meeting I developed a “decision package” as a concise budgetary proposal for the position. The meeting confirmed that everyone at the table saw a position as a critical step for moving forward. This felt like progress, however the institutional context was about to come clear. Following this initial collaboration... nothing happened. The group was unable to schedule another meeting for weeks and then months. People were busy and though this position seemed like a good idea, it could not be prioritized. I pursued individual conversations with the college deans in an effort to better understand the impedances. As with most projects, the issues were administrative and financial.

The Outreach serves a wide audience and is integrated into a number of different programs in the University. Details of these relationships are outlined in section 5.3. During my second year, a number of things became clear regarding management of the site and program. First, decision making responsibilities are diffused across a broad range of stakeholders. Second, all of these stakeholders are concerned about other responsibilities, making the OELP a small fraction of their scope of work. Third, the rapid turnover of the primary stakeholders, the AS Student Coordinators, is out of sync with the working time frame of the institution. This was my first-hand experience with the problem I had come to address. Without a consistent point-person primarily responsible for the representation of the OELP within the University, there was no clear channel for programmatic development. The proposed position addresses all three of these issues, however its absence serves as the primary impediment to its inception; a chicken and an egg.

Though the Outreach is a long-standing element of the WWU campus, it’s programmatic structure is hindering its own maturation and my personal project may be instrumental in the transition to a more effective educational resource.

Workshop Series at the Outback Farm
Thursday Feb. 19th FREE Introduction to Urban Ag. 7-9 pm Saturday Feb. 20th Key Concepts & Skills Part I 10a-5p, $25 per course Student Discount $15 per course General Admission $25 per course General Admission
Bring a Sack Lunch Pay Cash at the Door Dress for Work & Weather

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... student farms seem frequently to have gotten started thanks in large part to the persistent efforts of a single, dynamic individual with a vision of how a student farm could fit into their campus community." Though the Outreach is a long-standing element of the WWU campus, it’s programmatic structure is hindering its own maturation and my personal project may be instrumental in the transition to a more effective educational resource.

Development

During the fall of 2016 I was enrolled in both ENVS 501 Research and Projects in Environmental Studies and ENVS 588 Assessment Evaluation & Research in Environmental Education. Each course focused on a primary project and I integrated them both into my larger master plan.

The 501 project has been designed to facilitate the thesis development process for masters candidates in the environmental studies program. My work was in the “project” category and the course facilitated my formalization of the Outback Manager Position proposal.

The previous years administrative issues only reinforced the need for such a position. However the financial impediments remain. Given the disparate stakeholders in the OELP, no one group would benefit directly enough to warrant the expense of a new position. The AS already supports three student coordinators. Fairhaven is providing an operating budget and capital for large site developments. The limited involvement of all the other stake holders is not promising for substantial financial support.

Another key funding issue is a well-known programmatic trap associated with developing new positions. Grant-based funding is an obvious resource, however using grant funding to pay salaries is a major red-flag. Proposals without long-term funding models included are less-attractive because of the potential dependence upon on-going grant support to maintain key personnel.

With this in mind, I used the 501 project to develop a distributed support system which would generate a vested interest in a range of stakeholders. This strategy involves dividing costs via a tiered sponsorship structure for primary, secondary and tertiary OELP stakeholders. At the time, this represented a potential and practical long-term funding model. Outlining this structure and finding conditional support from primary stakeholders became a primary focus.

For my 588 project, I conducted a more refined assessment of the Outreach and its associated programming. This was represented as a Logic Model, which is often a graphic representation of a programs context, inputs and outputs. Logic models are a tool used by funders, managers, and evaluators to assess the effectiveness of a program. The Outreach Logic Model can be seen in section 5.3.

Following the development of the Logic model I conducted a series of loosely structured narrative interviews with administrative personnel who have had long-term relationships with the OELP. The major takeaways from this assessment were the collective perceptions of the Outreach as a singular and unique experiential learning space; as a resource to the Bellingham community and the distinct need for clear programmatic goals, organizational structure and staff support.

Implementation

The simultaneous creation of these two projects facilitated a direct integration of their concepts and content. Using this combined project as a praxic step for moving forward the third year was characterized by efforts towards implementation. Again, this has been a praxic process, "learning in action, by action and for the ongoing improvement of action."
Section 3.1 The Outback

After years of experience in similar educational spaces, I have a strong emotional reaction to the layers of student projects that cover the 5-acre Outback Farm. The great sense of hope and wonder is met with an equal sensation of anxiety and sadness. The untapped lessons of this educational landscape can be deafening at times.

History

The landscape of the Outback Garden embodies a rich history, dating back far beyond colonization. The land itself is within the territory of the Straits Salish Peoples, specifically the Lummi and/or Nooksack Nations. Following the displacement of the Indigenous people, the landscape was logged a number of times throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1850’s it was the initial mining site for the Bellingham Bay Coal Company. June and Farrar Burns homesteaded on the site in 1922 and into the Sehome Arboretum in 1967. The expanding campus of Western Washington University ultimately encompassed the land, and in 1972 the Outback Farm began.

Since its inception the Outback has been a primarily student-led experiential learning site, focused on agriculture, human ecology and sustainability. It has included pigs, goats, ponds, a barn, and various alternative energy systems.

In recent years, the Outback has been adopted by the Associated Students of WWU. Since 2007, the AS has supported a half-time student coordinator to manage the various responsibilities of the landscape and associated programs. In that time the site has seen considerable development including the formation of a Community Garden, a Market Garden, a Forest Garden and various ethnobotanical plantings. Construction projects have included an amphitheater, a substantial greenhouse and a beautiful outdoor classroom. These most recent developments seem to have coincided with a recent resurgence of interest in sustainable agriculture.

The “Good Food Movement”, to borrow a term from the famous urban farmer, Will Allen, is thriving today in the form of young farmers, local markets and school gardens. Food is an obvious bridge into human relationships with the environment and growing food may serve as a simple accessible means of engaging citizens in environmental stewardship. As an interactive garden/park the Outback functions as a bridge between the natural and managed world. It is an urban agricultural laboratory where motivated students can explore their connection to the environment, personally design a small piece of earth and ultimately develop long lasting perspectives that support whole healthy persons.

Campus Farms

Published in 2011, Fields of Learning offers an effort to contextualize the Student Farm movement in American Higher Education. The collection represents evaluations of 15 campus farms from across North America. The Outback Farm fits into this movement of ~100 unique student farms in higher-ed institutions and is indeed mentioned in the book. These farms represent an invaluable resource for profound, place-based, interdisciplinary education.

In their assessment of campus farms, Sayre and Clark outline a range of themes that provide both challenges and opportunities to programs of this nature. A primary concern is the difference between student versus faculty/staff management. A common pattern in the development of these sites and programs is the transition from chaotic student-led development period into a mature, fixed form of staff management. The OELP has been in this liminal space for nearly ten years. Students and administration alike have made a range of efforts to transition from a student-led program. The TAP analysis conducted by the AS in 2010, an appeal to the AS by the Outback Coordinator in 2012, a SPAC assessment by the AS in 2014 have all surmised that the most critical need for the OELP is long-term staff involvement.

Fields of Learning offers a range of anecdotal insights regarding the development and management of place-based, experiential learning programs. The conclusion of the book provides a set of 10 steps for the development of a robust and meaningful academic resource. These ten steps have been a valuable example for the methods of this paper. Some of them have already been accomplished (Step 3. “Hunt for Land”, Step 4. “Know the Context”). Others are explicitly addressed (Step 2. “Identity Allen”, Step 5. “Seek Funding”, Step 11. “Cultivate partners and supporters beyond campus”).

3.2 Site Assessment

As a landscape designer, I spend a lot of time assessing land for its growing potential. I survey sites, produce maps and write reports for both domestic and international clients. In my professional opinion, the Outback is an outstanding piece of real-estate. It is an elevated, sheltered, south-facing valley with a perennial stream, city water, a healthy ecology, and unlimited project potential.

Design Projects:

Initially, I wrestled with the notion of using my professional design experience to create an official master plan for the Outback Experimental Learning Program. Though alluring at first, I decided against it for a handful of reasons. If I designed it, the plan would be perceived as mine. There is a deep rooted sense of communal ownership in the Outback landscape and the prospect of some know-how grad student, hi-jacking the space seemed like a threat to the legacy of the program. Likewise, just because a plan has been made, does not mean it will be created. Had I spent a year or two developing an in-depth master plan with detailed explanations of the site and systems, there is no guarantee that it would ever manifest. Indeed, without a staff position to guide the project through the years, it would likely suffer the fate of so many other well intentioned student contributions.

Instead, the order of operations became: make a position to facilitate development across multiple years. Then use that long-term planning capacity to co-create a master plan in collaboration with all of the various stakeholders. Through this process, many folks would feel ownership over the vision and with the help of a consistent Outback Manager could participate in it’s implementation through a diversity of channels. Without a comprehensive master plan for a site, excessive development runs the risk of precluding future opportunities. With that in mind, I have worked with students to develop some simple improvements to the overall landscape.

An early project was improving access to the Forest Garden. This space was developed as a perennial polyculture by Karl Wolschlager and Nick Spring in 2008. It was planted with fruit trees, berry bushes and a collection of edible species. It has looked beautiful in spite of the windy, narrow, uneven pathway in. My students created a ~150’ walkway over a mucky pathway in. My students created a ~150’ walkway over a mucky
3.3 The Base Map

This map was produced in collaboration with a student who was interested in cartographic skills. It was printed and laminated and has served as a handy tool for orienting students within the educational landscape.
Section 4.1 Teaching

The Outback Management concept is explicitly and intentionally not a faculty position. Even still, teaching is and has always been the primary goal. Throughout my masters program, I was employed as an instructor at WWU and as a student, created further opportunities for teaching the material I am so interested and passionate about.

Enabling Autodidactic Designers

As an instructor, my primary goal is to no longer be needed by my students. I can clearly remember one of my best days as a teacher. I was able to note my students’ skills on account of the space-time vortex at the hardware store. The class was already buzzing with activity when I arrived at the Outback Farm. Students were building gates, planting shrubs, preparing gardens and indigo dyeing. It was the first iteration of the Ecological Design I course that I taught through Fairhaven and Huxley College. After checking in with each student team and answering a few small questions I realized that my students no longer needed my guidance and they were now comfortable working and learning on their own. Without the need for my facilitation, I simply grabbed a wheelbarrow and started working alongside them. To me, this memory is an excellent example of students actively applying the basic concepts of sustainability through tangible and meaningful, student-centered projects.

Learning how to teach myself was the most prominent lesson from my apprenticeship at the Bullocks Homestead. We were constantly encouraged to engage with a variety of media. There was an extensive library filled with books on resources and no shortage of projects. Plants needed care. Machines needed repair. And improvements to existing systems were always being studied. This is a typical guide of the constructionist learning model which advocates student centered, discovery learning. During these processes students use existing mental models and understanding to acquire more knowledge. Place-based, design-focused experiential learning offers a lot of potential for facilitating these connections. The existing mental models are often as simple as looking at some plants, or handling a simple tool. The landscape of the Outback embodies many key concepts such as watersheds, microclimates and biomes. Facilitated participation in these systems via simple tasks such as digging, weeding and planting provides easily accessible points of connection between existing mental framework, the physical environment and novel theories and concepts. Nestling all of this inside of a transparent educational model encourages self-aware, self-motivated integration of theory and practice via direct participation in our shared environment.

Over the years, my students have enjoyed a hands-on, boots-on, interdisciplinary approach to understanding their personal role inside of their local ecosystem. I have watched this pedagogy reveal empowering new perspectives of key issues regarding social and environmental justice. The focus of my teaching is to ground my students’ conceptual understanding into real world systems; teach them the skills necessary to think critically, to develop the sense of agency that is needed to become an active, innovative citizen with a healthy relationship to their culture and environment.

Ecological Design I

In line with my strategy for integrating projects across my masters program, I developed an opportunity to teach the curriculum I had designed in ENVS 582. Implementing the curriculum dramatically increased the value of an otherwise theoretical exercise. The first iteration of Ecological Design I was through an administrative hand-off that I orchestrated with Dr. John Turoll of Fairhaven College. The course was well received by the 25 enrolled students whose end-of-quarter feedback consistently referenced expanded skills and improved confidence. The second iteration was refined in a few ways; I had included four teachers assistants who I worked with prior to class to prep for projects. The second iteration did not have this cohort of support. I was able to create a similar community within the student group, but it was much more effective to integrate it from the start. Refinements to the narrative also changed the course. These were minor additions including new readings and presentations. I have learned over the years that small seeds planted in the beginning of a course can have a marked impact on student perceptions 6 weeks later. This course was also deemed successful and has continued, a small group of students took on the development of a student club in order to maintain a practical learning community the course had generated.

The third iteration is still in progress. Remarkable support from two co-teachers has made this experience dramatically a better than the previous two. The course is also much larger, ~40 students, which certainly affects both the student and teacher experience, in this case not favorably. The narrative has also been refined and is taking form as a salient and empowering message for young adults. The experimental status allows for a third iteration of 397K. My hope is to polish this into a meaningful learning experience for which the faculty of Huxley College deem valuable enough to continue offering.
Section 5.1 Administration

The administrative assessment of the Outback that I conducted during the fall of 2016 provided a number of valuable insights. Two particular issues embodied self-perpetuating circular logic; first, the vague goals were too easily met, which qualified the program as a perpetual underachieving success; and second, the lack of structured management was impeding the formation of structured management.

Context

Administrative tasks are often labeled a necessary evil. I approached this project with that typical mindset, yet over the past three years I have learned that these can be a creative process like any other. And, as with most skill sets, it gets easier with practice.

The unique nature of the Outback makes the administrative work particularly crucial as well as challenging. Laura Sayre explains this relationship well during her intro to Fields of Learning:

“[Student Farms] are absolutely unique: liminal spaces on the border between community and market that are relatively insulated from the market, powered by the energy and enthusiasm of twenty-somethings, and enriched by the intellectual resources of academe.”

The Outback embodies all of this. The Community Garden offers plots to over 30 neighborhood residents who are seeking a place to cultivate. The Educational Garden provides students the space and resources to learn through hands-on agricultural processes. Their produce is not sold, but often shared with the Bellingham Food Bank. Skill-based workshops are frequently hosted and open to both students and the public. Students and instructors alike acknowledge the unique potential of the space, though only a small population generally lasts for one or two years. Interviews I conducted with the former AS Coordinators thematically claimed that administrative work was overwhelming and keeping them from the hands-on experiences in the landscape, which was often the reason they applied in the first place. These themes also showed up during the interviews I conducted with key Outback administrators.

Pursuing the formation of an Outback Specialist has certainly involved nearly three years of administrative problem solving. It began with semi-formal appeals to two different colleges. Each of these models has required a fair degree of legwork, generally lasts for one or two years. Interviews I conducted over the past three years I have learned that these can be a creative process like any other. And, as with most skill sets, it gets easier with practice.

Changes within an institutional scale take far longer than the duration of typical student involvement which generally lasts for one or two years. Interviews I conducted with the former AS Coordinators thematically claimed that administrative work was overwhelming and keeping them from the hands-on experiences in the landscape, which was often the reason they applied in the first place. These themes also showed up during the interviews I conducted with key Outback administrators.

During my integration of learning and teaching, I found myself doing a large volume of administrative work. I organized, publicized, and registered students for my first two iterations of Ecological Design I. Each of the three classes has involved students the space and resources to learn through hands-on agricultural processes. Their produce is not sold, but often shared with the Bellingham Food Bank. Skill-based workshops are frequently hosted and open to both students and the public. Students and instructors alike acknowledge the unique potential of the space, though only a small population generally lasts for one or two years. Interviews I conducted with the former AS Coordinators thematically claimed that administrative work was overwhelming and keeping them from the hands-on experiences in the landscape, which was often the reason they applied in the first place. These themes also showed up during the interviews I conducted with key Outback administrators.

A major responsibility of the Outback Specialist position will likely involve this administrative work. Budget access has always been a challenge for student coordinators. A small discretionary budget for the position will streamline the wide range of small purchases necessary for a site of this nature. As I mentioned before, this all gets easier with practice. A long-term staff position will have the scope necessary for developing additional administrative tools for tracking purchases, student use of the space, for collaborating with community partners and facilitating academic involvement. Ideally, this role provides surplus hands-on student employees, so that they might learn within an existing framework, instead of continually reinventing/discovering these processes. And, if it is well facilitated, they may even come to enjoy this necessary evil.

The production of the Logic Model, presented in section 5.3, provided a macro-view of the Outback as a system. The context, inputs, outputs and goals were all clearly displayed in relation to each other. A small bit of research revealed an aggregate program budget of nearly $50,000 per annum. This analysis addressed three different time-frames for the anticipated outcomes; quarterly, year-to-year and multi-year. When viewed from the quarter-to-quarter short-term perspective, the OELP provides a range of learning opportunities. It continually attracts a community of students interested and involved in the site and programming. Likewise, from the long-term perspective, the OELP continues to operate and develop, and to create student run programs. The yearly budget term goals present a different picture. A negative feedback loop severely limits programmatic development. A distinct lack of institutional memory as well as accessible administrative resources and the public. Students and instructors alike acknowledge the unique potential of the space, though only a small population generally lasts for one or two years. Interviews I conducted with the former AS Coordinators thematically claimed that administrative work was overwhelming and keeping them from the hands-on experiences in the landscape, which was often the reason they applied in the first place. These themes also showed up during the interviews I conducted with key Outback administrators.

Resourceful Design:

Throughout my work in the Outback, I strove to embody a resourceful perspective. Though the Outback has a small operating budget, I worked very hard to accomplish projects without accessing the limited resources of the student program. Likewise, finding alternative mechanisms for financial support involved extensive institutional paperwork so the financial strategy became, “make do with what we have”. This type of limitation can be restrictive, or it can be an earnest example of real-world problem solving. During my administrative interviews, John Tuftil offered a really compelling perception of the Outback Farmer:

“The rest of the University is largely planned and reflects a large bureaucratic institution. The Outback is different. It is organic, a bit ramshackle. It runs on a tight budget. But those are limitations that many people experience in their daily lives, and that are not reflected in the rest of the University.”

I appreciated this perspective and it strongly reflected my experience working within the space. During my first large group project, outlined in section 1.4, we created over 50 linear feet of improved trail, three ephemeral ponds, improved access to the forest gardens, provided hands-on student learning experiences for ~25 students, planted locally appropriate species and spent less than $10 on a single 16 foot length of drain-pipe.

There exists a vast resource network in and around Bellingham. With the stupendous generosity of Richard Neyer, we borrowed a truck from the WWU Recycling Center to collect materials from the abundance of the urban waste stream. Student projects have incorporated dozens of yards of free manure (fertility), free wood chips, truckloads of cardboard (biodegradable weed barrier), free seeds (Bellingham Food Bank), free starts (Joe’s Garden, free plant material (WWU Gardeners), mushroom spawn, lumber, large woody debris, tools, gray water infiltrators, rain water collection tanks, bike powered pumps and more.

Programmatic development certainly requires financial capital. The attached tool list was a collaboration with Lily Morgan, the 2016 Student Coordinator and was fulfilled using the Outback’s budget to improve the Outback’s capacity. However, many of the most authentic examples of appropriate technology are simple systems that are intrinsically low budget. Exposure to these types of solutions provide students with practical examples which may be adapted to their own lives or scaled up into future professional projects.

5.2 Budgeting

There is a persistent perception in our culture that ecologically responsible choices are luxury only accessible to populations with the necessary means. This perspective is disenfranchising and counter productive. Instead of solutions that few people can do with thousands of dollars, I prefer solutions that thousands of people can achieve with just a few dollars.

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<th>Ideal Cost</th>
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Total Estimate* $1,118.26
### 5.3 The Logic Model

The logic model was one of many different programmatic assessment templates available. It is a practical format and its creation yielded a number of insights. Specifically, the extent of the budget, which amounts to approximately $50,000 per annum.

#### OUTBACK EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAM (OELP) LOGIC MODEL

**CONTEXT:**
The Outback Experiential Learning Program is a student run 5-acre farm on the campus of Western Washington University. The site and associated programming provides learning opportunities in sustainable land-care for Western students and the wider community.

This model represents an effort to better understand the effectiveness of the OELP Program.

**SITUATION:**
- Founded in 1970’s as student led organic farm.
- Operates as such for ~25 years.
- Threatened by development in early 2000s.
- Protected designated as Educational Space in WWU Master Plan. (Incorporated into Associated Students Programming; To sustain, need Student Staff Position, aka the Recycle Center)

**PRIORITIES:**
- Student Run/Student Centered.
- Providing experiential learning opportunities for students.
- Students learn about, develop and implement sustainable land-use practices.
- The OELP also provides job-related skill building and community networking opportunities for students.

### OUTBACK EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAM (OELP) LOGIC MODEL

#### INPUTS:
**SOFT ASSETS:**

**PROGRAMMING:**
- 3.5 FTE AS Student Staff Positions
- Fairhaven Faculty Advisor
- AS Program Advisor
- 5-10 Work Study Students
- Outreach
- Media & PR (Posters, Website, AS Publications)

**BUDGET:**
- $5600 Fairhaven Annual Budget
- $9260 AS Outback Manager Salary
- $8614 AS Assistant Manager Salary
- $6801 AS Forest Garden Manager Salary
- $2850 Work Study Students
- $8 Positions

**WATER:**
- Stream (storms water/ Burns Creek Flow)
- Irrigation (~35,000 Gallons per Month)

**INFRASTRUCTURE & ACCESS:**
- 5 Acres of WWU Campus Real Estate
- Classroom
- Tool Shed & Tools
- Community Garden Beds
- Green Houses
- Amphitheater
- Fencing
- Burns Laben (Historical Building)

**PLANTS:**
- Seeds & Starts
- Manures
- Consumables (Row cover, straw, etc.)

**PLANTS:**
- Educational Garden Produce (1500 Lbs/year)
- Community Garden Produce (~50 Plots)

**HARD ASSETS:**

**STRENGTHS:**
- Student programming
- Educational Space
- Operators as such for ~25 years.

**CHALLENGES:**
- Threatened by development in early 2000s
- Limited Institutional Memory
- Development of the site and program are severely limited by the lack of Institutional Memory, Strategic Plan and long-term non-student staff position of Outback Manager.

**CONCLUSION:**
- The OELP is currently meeting its stated goals.
- From the quarter-to-quarter perspective, the OELP provides a range of learning opportunities. The Outback continually attracts a community of students interested and involved in the site and programming.

From the multi-year Long-Term perspective, the OELP continues to operate and develop according to student determined needs and capacities.

The year-to-year Mid-Term goals are impeded by a Negative Feedback Loop. The quick turn-over of the primary program coordinator (AS Position) is a well recognized limit on year-to-year continuity and the development of the site and programming.

Financially, the OELP is not designed to produce earnings. The annual budget of ~$50,000 per year represents a minor expense in the scope of WWU. The AS and Fairhaven College. However, the quick turn-over of the primary program coordinator (AS Position) is a well recognized limit on year-to-year continuity and the development of the site and programming.

Development of the site and program are severely limited by the lack of Institutional Memory, Strategic Plan and long-term non-student staff position of Outback Manager.
Section 6.1 The Position

The formation of this position was the original intent of my entire masters pursuit. During the beginning of this endeavor, I struggled a lot with the concept of the means and the ends. Reflecting on the means thus far, I have indeed learned far more than I had anticipated. And I feel confident that I will walkaway with some element of my original vision in the end.

Purpose

Based on the recommendations presented in previous assessments of the Outback, as well as the observed success of other university farms, this work is advocating for the creation of a non-student Specialist position for the Outback Experiential Learning Program.

The specialist designation is in anticipation of a diverse and unique set of responsibilities, including but not limited to repairing irrigation systems, diagnosing plant pathologies, collaborating with faculty and community partners and working with a team of 8-12 student employees.

The half-time designation reflects an economy of scale. A skilled specialist providing effective facilitation and technical support could streamline the existing student staff and budget to meet the demands of the 5-acre landscape and programs. Beyond the focused administrative and technical responsibilities, the most effective additional work would be building capacity as an instructor by recruiting and training future student employees via a ~25 student course comparable to the mid- and long-term development of the Outback into an invaluable resource for Western Washington University.

Adding additional student positions increases capacity, to a degree, but does not contribute to long-term continuity in program and site development.

With programs of this nature, there comes a point in development when the need for organizational maturation supplants the intrinsic value of student direction. The OELP 5, 20, 21, 22 has reached this point. Indeed, the formation of a non-student program specialist has been on the table for nearly 10 years 13, 14, 15, 16. These opportunities would reach many students as well as the broader university community. These opportunities would reach many students as well as the broader university community.

Emerging with the AS, the OELP has undergone two major assessments, occurring in 2010 and 2014. These processes analyzed the goals of the OELP, and the efficacy of its existing programming. One recommendation in particular arose from both assessments: the need to implement a non-student supervisor position that will oversee and support existing student employees.

Now, the OELP is presented with a unique opportunity. In 2007, the program was adopted by the Associated Students and has seen significant development for the site and program.

Along with growing societal interests in sustainable food production, students are increasingly interested in hands-on experiential education as it relates to human-scale sustainable systems 5, 19. In addition, interdisciplinary studies and systems thinking are emerging as key components of sustainability studies 10.

Piloting the initial 3-year trial is a practical investment for a number of reasons. The OELP is a small-scale demonstration site and with professional facilitation it could host a variety of sustainability projects both large and small. These opportunities would reach many students as well as the Bellingham community. This non-student position will dramatically improve the performance of an existing campus sustainability resource, providing a broader reach for the OELP as well as deeper, more sophisticated connections between students and the space.

Following the initial 3-year pilot position, the ultimate goal will be long-term (7-12 year) performance-based, institutional, financial support for a non-student staff position of Outback Program Specialist.

The proposed Program Specialist position will facilitate the mid- and long-term development of the Outback into an invaluable resource for Western Washington University.

Long-term continuity is a crucial component for any campus garden 5, 20, 21, 22. Programs designed as exclusively student-run are severely limited by the rapid turnover of key personnel.

Adding additional student positions increases capacity, to a degree, but does not contribute to long-term continuity in program and site development.

With programs of this nature, there comes a point in development when the need for organizational maturation supplants the intrinsic value of student direction. The OELP 5, 20, 21, 22 has reached this point. Indeed, the formation of a non-student program specialist has been on the table for nearly 10 years 13, 14, 15, 16. These opportunities would reach many students as well as the broader university community. These opportunities would reach many students as well as the broader university community.

These three groups would contribute $3,000 each towards the cost of the position to improve the site and programming as it relates to their existing responsibilities. Their collective contribution would be ~$9,000, nearly 30% of the annual salary (minus payroll burden).

The Second Tier (~$3,000 per year)

• University Residences- (Outback is surrounded by 1360 dorm students)
• Student Employment Office-
  (Supports ~8 work-study positions)
• Dining Services- (Promotion of Real Food Challenge on campus and in the residence halls)

These groups would contribute $3,000 each towards the cost of the position to improve the site and programming as it relates to their existing responsibilities. Their collective contribution would be ~$9,000, nearly 30% of the annual salary (minus payroll burden).

6.2 The Potential

Throughout this process, I explored the various mechanisms within Western Washington Universities institutional machine. Again, learning through doing led me to the results presented below. It is understood that this is an unconventional funding structure. But if it weren’t a scrappy and unique student-led effort, it wouldn’t really fit the Outback.

Support

After clarifying the need and outlining the goals and responsibilities of the position, securing financial support will be the next critical step. The Sustainable Action Fund application, and the one-time budget request are designed to cover a 2-3 year pilot. Developing structure for on-going support would be a primary goal of the position if the position proves valuable.

Similar positions on campus, such as program specialists and instructional/classroom support technicians, generally receive an annual salary of ~$50,000 14. As stated in section 6.1, the specific strategy at the Outback is not for a full time employee (FTE). Given the nature of the site and the associated programming a half time employee (.5FTE) would be the most effective staffing arrangement. Beyond half time, an NTT instructor contract would facilitate larger scale student training and thereby build programmatic capacity.

The manager would be providing administrative and technical support for the extant student positions. Faculty would facilitate any additional academic development and reach out to the campus for the use of the site. Therefore a 2-3 year pilot of .5FTE for a professional or classified staff position as OELP Manager would cost ~$36,000 per year, for 3 years, or ~$109,000. This includes a conservative addition of a 30% payroll burden.

Over the past 3 years, traditional sources for funding have been thoroughly explored. Members of Fairhaven’s faculty and administration developed a budget proposal and presented it to the state legislature, where it was denied. A Capital Improvement proposal was developed and presented as an emergent budgetary item for WWU provost’s office, where it was also denied. A primary goal throughout my process has been developing and securing long-term (7-12 year) performance-based, institutional, financial support for an Outback Manager.

The following strategies represent less conventional funding options, but given the unique nature of the site and program, they seem like practical routes forward.

• Distributing the cost via a tiered sponsorship structure for primary and secondary OELP stakeholders;
• Applying for an Sustainable Action Fund Grant (currently underway);
• Appealing directly to the President and seeking funding off-campus.
Section 7.1 Reflection (continued)

In my pursuit of teaching environmental ed, my path was divided and I have followed both routes in parallel. One focus has been the development of a long-term staff position within the OELP. The other has been the development of a unique Ecological Design curriculum. Both have provided valuable professional experience and my aim now is to unify the two into a synergistic whole.

Challenges

Obviously challenges were expected in this process. They are an integral part of the educational process. As such it becomes difficult to separate the individual struggles from their associated successes and accomplishments.

Some of my challenges had to do with my unique relationship with the entire program. I entered the campus-based track on a three-year trajectory. This kept me outside of the three separate student cohorts by virtue of my studies and led to some feelings of isolation. Though I had many fine peers, it was difficult to integrate into an on-going learning community. That said, I believe that peers are a great platform for exploring course material outside of the facilitated classroom context. I wanted to continue compelling discussions beyond our scheduled time, but given our different and very busy schedules, these were often left unresolved.

Layering in my unique edible landscaping approach also contributed to a self-blamed schizoid identity. Though my peers and instructors valued this perspective, few had fully internalized many of the ideas. I spend a lot of time describing the context of permaculture courses and permaculture communities (This formed the Teaching Foundations I outlined in section 1.5). Indeed, much of that material was distilled from my permaculture teaching experience. Conversations in that context are all building upon a mutual understanding which did not have a strong presence in the in the campus setting. I often felt compelled to adopt my teacher role during class conversations, but resisted the impulse the best I could.

This led to another type of frustration throughout my studies. I often felt that the conversation was not being facilitated to the best. I felt singular in my belief that we needed a different language of interpretations. The majority of our required readings material was distilled from my permaculture teaching experience. Conversations in that context are all building upon a mutual understanding which did not have a strong presence in the in the campus setting. I often felt compelled to adopt my teacher role during class conversations, but resisted the impulse the best I could.

Another frustration was my relationship to my students and my facilitation of their learning experiences. There has been a lot of substantive feedback from my own students, many of whom have been studying within Huxley College for 2-4 years, frequently returning in 6 weeks and feeding the results into a productive compost pile, feeling it heat-up over the course of a week to an untouchable temperature of 150 degrees Fahrenheit, then replanting it into another productive garden. A meaningful educational experience that provides a deep connection to and reverence for the natural world.

In addition, the very actions that demonstrate these relationships are in and of themselves, improving the local environment in meaningful and measurable ways. Students composting excess animal manures, invasive weeds and shredded paper to create healthy usable topsoil, are reclaiming waste resources—sequences carbon and creating habitat. The landscape itself directly reflects the mutually beneficial potential. Personal participation in the environment, to improve the environment can create meaningful changes within and connection to the environment.

I have used my masters project as well as the Outback Environmental Ed curriculum as a platform for engaging research experiences for Western students and the Bellingham Community. And I will continue with this educational practice long-after the completion of my masters degree.

Meaning

One of my primary goals as an educator is to make meaningful learning experiences. There has been a lot of substantive work over the past three years which has provided me with genuine lessons regarding my relationship to my environment, my relationship to my students and my facilitation of their relationship to their own environments. But what does that mean in a bigger context? How does this work contribute to the greater good? Ecological Design differs from other design practices on account of its ethical foundations. These reflect the most common ethical concepts used in contemporary sustainability statements and as many of whom have come up a broad and contentious field. The ethical frame work I teach consists of:

• Care of the Planet
• Care of People and;
• A Careful Process.

Care of the Planet

This ethic obviously underlies the entirety of environmental education. Even still, there is room for a range of interpretations. The majority of our required readings material was distilled from my permaculture teaching experience. Conversations in that context are all building upon a mutual understanding which did not have a strong presence in the in the campus setting. I often felt compelled to adopt my teacher role during class conversations, but resisted the impulse the best I could.

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Care of People

Environmental and Social Justice are inextricably linked. Over exploitation of natural resources is often contingent upon the oppression of marginalized communities. Working with privileged populations of American college students may not seem like typical social justice work, but the place-based, experiential context offers great potential for culturally subversive education.

Oppressive structures operate via the exploitation of cultural differences in race, ethnicity, gender, class, able-ness and education. I understand that my work has not explicitly addressed social and racial oppression. As outlined above, the Outback and associated programming have incredible potential as educational and cultural resources and could provide unique opportunities to underrepresented populations. I have not had the capacity to integrate racial justice into my work, though it is a compelling aspect that I hope to address in the future.

The hands-on experiential work does implicitly address a range of other cultural power structures. These include societal expectations regarding education, labor, gender roles and class. The following topics are easily integrated into the hands-on place-based educational work I have been focusing on.

Developing the intellect is a primary focus of academic epistemology. There is an effort to expand this scope for the inclusion of other ways of knowing. It was a prominent theme throughout the EE program and the landscape of educational philosophy, converging with the development of experiential educational philosophy. The hands-on experiential work does implicitly address a range of other cultural power structures. These include societal expectations regarding education, labor, gender roles and class. The following topics are easily integrated into the hands-on place-based educational work I have been focusing on.

It is practically appropriate to learn other ways of knowing through place-based experiential education. Indeed, it becomes an implicit part of each lesson. Describing to a student the nuances involved in different land-management tasks is a valuable primer. However, the same conversation after an afternoons worth of work takes on a different character and depth of understanding. We can discuss the unique resistance each particular weed species expresses in opposition to being pulled. We can discuss how to listen to a screw gun and why gloves might be better than a broom for cleaning out the bed of a truck. These types of knowledge may not be explicitly valued in the academic context, however they represent a valuable learning process and depth of knowledge that can transcend disciplines and professions.
These particular examples also address pervasive cultural relationships to physical labor. Our current culture has a pattern of undervaluing and even deriding occupations that work with their hands. Having experienced a student a shovelful as part of their upper-quarter coursework invites conversations regarding other ways of knowing, as well as social expectations regarding education, class and livelihoods. This generation and my being environmental, college students is not often taught the basic means of production and many of my students show great humility regarding their practical ineptitudes. Teaching students through the use of hands-on, body-skill building, and encouraging them to go into the value of other ways of knowing. The Outback is a platform for many different systems and their associated trades. Garden carpentry has proven to be a rich learning experience for many students. Plumbing irrigation systems appears simple at first, but requires nuanced technical know-how and skill. Stone-work, nursery-work and electrical-work are also potential platforms for introducing students to timeless bodies of knowledge and applied systems theory. Brief experiences with these various trades show students the depth of skill associated with each and gives them a first-hand understanding of, and respect for, the merits of non-academic careers. Gender stereotypes are also prevalent during work of this nature. Young men and women are all subject to the pervasive narratives of appropriate or attraction gendered behavior. Land-care, in its various techniques can flip these expectations in subtle yet meaningful ways. Discussing the nuances of various ornamental flowers with a group of young men and building a lumber rack with a team of young women are genuine examples of such instances. The Outback provides a meaningful context for addressing economic status as a cultural assumption that ecologically responsible behavior is a luxury. Many of the consumer choices associated with sustainability (Table 1.4) are inaccessible. Organic, local foods, American-made electric vehicles, and wine grown and bottled in small lots on the property are all accessible. In parallel to this narrative I present a practical and transparent demonstration of their potential. I show my students the basic means of production and the way that they can participate in the local, human-scale systems. As young adults they can confidently learn and work within local, human-scale systems. Ecological, technological and social constructs are all immediately accessible and transitioning between disciplines can be fluid and practical approach. By building competency in various fields they can gain confidence necessary to develop or reclaim their sense of agency. Exposing them to the collective potential through collaborative group projects builds a sense of community. Many student comments acknowledge the remarkable sense of community that consistently forms within the context of the Ecological Design courses.

This is the context within which we are weeding, digging and learning. In parallel to this narrative I present a practical and transparent demonstration of their potential. I show my students that they are indeed highly capable interdisciplinary systems designers. As young adults they can confidently learn and work within local, human-scale systems. Ecological, technological and social constructs are all immediately accessible and transitioning between disciplines can be fluid and practical approach. By building competency in various fields they can gain confidence necessary to develop or reclaim their sense of agency. Exposing them to the collective potential through collaborative group projects builds a sense of community. Many student comments acknowledge the remarkable sense of community that consistently forms within the context of the Ecological Design courses.

Showing these young adults that they are capable learners who can acquire new skills through their own self-directed and systematic learning is an empowering cultural process.
Section 8.1 Conclusion

A summative assessment of my own learning would reveal a (trans)formative process. The change was not a remarkable discovery, nor a shift in direction. It has been a systemic maturation. Beliefs I’ve held dear have been reinforced and hardened. Connectivity has increased across my conceptual framework and the result is a refined and more resilient educational philosophy.

As these lessons and topics overlap, I believe they gain the confidence necessary to participate in the various systems that compose their environment; that is they expand their sense of agency.

Working with students in this space has provided valuable insights regarding my teaching practice. I am drawn towards a longer-term relationship than the typical college course provides. Through an ongoing staff position, or even consistent courses held in the Outback, there is potential to shift from a professor to a mentor. This is a class of teaching that deeply interests me and will likely shape the next phase of my professional career.

This project has shown me that there exists a great enthusiasm and desire for my particular teaching practice. It is my intention to do the best I can to provide students with these learning experiences. And it is my hope that they will use these experiences, skills and values to further propagate the same. And in time, we will have a more resilient and healthy community.

Section 9.1 Bibliography

Section 1
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Section 2

Section 3

Section 4

Section 6

Section 7

Section 8