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# Not My Story: Honoring diversity through multicultural environmental education

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## **Not My Story: Honoring diversity through multicultural environmental education**

*Kelly M. Sleight, Western Washington University*

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### **Abstract**

*Kelly Marie Sleight's presentation had us participants sitting at tables filled with crafting supplies. While some of us started to paint, knit and mold Kelly explained that Multicultural Environmental Education seeks to make an atmosphere where every student can succeed. One of her largest challenges in class is the need for constant hand movement. Without that, she cannot focus. Her personal solution is to knit. Kelly sees the marriage between multicultural and environmental education having students of various backgrounds engaged in many different and unique ways.*

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### **Keywords: multicultural environmental education, creativity, diversity**

You may have noticed that you are sitting at tables with art supplies! As my teachers and friends know, I enjoy crafting. The act of doing something with my hands while I listen is very satisfying to me. During our time together tonight, I want to give you all the opportunity to create something. There are some straightforward activities and some that allow for a bit more creativity. Throughout the presentation I may ask you to represent something; a term or an idea; with your art, and this will help facilitate conversation throughout the evening. But all of this is "challenge by choice" so don't be afraid to be abstract and creative with all of these activities! Also, please feel free to change locations every once in a while. I will not be offended or distracted if I see some of you moving around as I speak.

Now, despite the title of this presentation, I would first like to share a poem about where I find my own identity, where my story resides.

I am from Maine and mountains. I am from my mother and father, who are strong enough to raise their only daughter to be free spirited and independent, and who are brave enough to let that daughter run around the world. I am from the color of snowdrifts under the full moon. I am from four New England seasons and the smell of red, brown, and yellow leaves in the fall. I am from the rush of cold air in the lungs as skis of wood and metal cut through snow on steep slopes. I am from the frozen tundra and ice skating on rivers. I am from painted yellow lines on a long road to anywhere. I am from the small oval window on a plane that is hope and adventure. I am from the heat and dust of El Salvador. I am from mangoes that you eat straight off the tree. I am from the thumping of reggaeton and dancing feet on the muddy red roads in the center of town. I am from the kindness of strangers who took a white girl into their home and fed her and taught her a language



and culture that was foreign. I am from Mama Glaydis, Nina Norma, Iris, y los demas de mi querida familia Salvadorena. I am from love and understanding that finds the commonality and celebrates the difference. I am from dressing like a Latina but looking like a gringa. I am from waiting in the bus station and using tarot cards to plan a journey. I am from the old and tired earth of La Mancha. I am from Spanish wine and siestas from 3-5. I am from honoring those who came before us and those who will follow later. I am from the bench in the park where a little old man can talk to me for a half hour in Basque until we realize we speak different languages. I am from making it up as I go. I am from the hidden café around the corner from the center of town where they make los albondigas que mandaba dios: *the meatballs that god sent*; named this, because they are. I am from returning to homelands where nothing has changed yet everything is different. I am from being foreign to my own culture. I am from the Atlantic Ocean. I am from horseshoe crabs that run under my paddleboard. I am from breakfast at diners with the best chorizo in the world. I am from searching for community. I am from anger and hope, inspiration and passion. I am from rocky mountains that rise impossibly fast. I am from ecosystems and cycles that flow and connect. I am from soft cedar bark and eating Douglas-fir tips. I am from salmon running up the Skagit for their children and feeding everything around them. I am from the first long whistle of varied thrush and the chittering noise of eagles that reminds me of sky dolphins. I am from mysterious cougar tracks and joyful snowshoe hare tracks. I am from howling wolves under the full moon in the snow. I am from rivers and roads, highways and planes, mountains and mystery, music and poetry. I am from many places I have never been. I am from a girl lost in cultures that she loves and stories that need to be told.

Thank you. I have been fortunate to experience a variety of what this world has to offer. As I have travelled and learned, and travelled again, I have encountered many different people who are working to solve the world's problems. Each person is passionate about what they do. They dedicate their entire lives toward making a change in the world for the better. Whenever I think about the world's problems and what role I can play, I always come back to education. I owe much of the success in my life to my ability to access education. I believe that if we educate this world through a form of education that can reach out and inspire each individual student, we can save it from ourselves.

I believe in education that is accessible. Education that can challenge each student. Education that is relevant and inclusive. Education that is adaptable and can instill a sense of endless wonder that fuels the life long learner in each of us. These goals of mine seemed like reasonable paths that the education system should be taking to make education better. Yet, as I learned more about education as a system, I also began to learn about key components within the system that are less talked about; the things that lie below the surface. Opportunity, privilege, injustice, race, and culture all became evident to me as part of the education system. How could we educate students in an inclusive and accessible way when the system I saw was built on pillars of injustice?

Let me back up for a second. Tonight, I'm going to say lots of words. And we're all adults who have had a variety of life experiences. With this in mind, I would like to talk about what some of these words mean to me and find out what they mean to you.

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**Lesson: Multicultural education – define through art activity**

**Lesson Description:** What is multicultural education? We will spend a few moments expressing what this means and discussing it at our tables.

**Materials Needed:** All art supplies

**Time:** 15 minutes

Content/Time	Session details
Introduction and Group Agreement 1 minute	In this activity we will be using the materials at your table to create a representation of a term or word. I would like to first establish this as what we call a "safe enough space," where people can be free to express their personal truths and other people are able to practice pluralism by accepting the differences in opinion that might exist.
Art Activity 4 minutes	What does multicultural education look like to you? What does it mean? Take a few moments to illustrate or create a representation of this using the materials at your table
Share in your group 3 minutes	Even if you aren't done, find someone at your table to share your creation with.
Share out 7 minutes	Would anyone be brave enough to share with the group something that you created or something that you talked about?

If you recall, the term or word that I asked you to represent was multicultural education. And yet many people have also included the environment in their work. Over the past few months I have been grappling with this term multicultural environmental education. I've been reading inspiring teachers such as Running Grass and bell hooks, but also feel very lost in what it all means. How can we begin to approach the problems with the environment when issues such as racism and white privilege still rule our system of education? When does it stop being environmental education and become about justice, equality, and respect?

But there it is in your work. The environment is our world; and the lens through which we experience it shows up everywhere. It never stops being about environmental education; it becomes *good* environmental education. Justice and equality teach us to love and cherish the commonalities and the differences, and through this accept a world full of many truths instead of just one. I believe that it is our duty as educators to teach students to open their minds to these many truths and honor the stories we have been given, whether these stories are from Time Immemorial or Harlem, each has an important message to give.

In order for any change to happen we must first look deeply into education and see the structures of power and injustice that have become overlooked. Education should be sanctuary and empowerment. It should be a space of acceptance, growth, and transcendence. Our current system of education has been established through many years of white privilege. It is crucial that we acknowledge this so that we can begin to challenge the inherent injustices in education.

The cultural lenses through which we experience the world are preventing the systemic change that could revolutionize the education system and provide space for meeting the needs of a wide range of students. I believe that multicultural environmental education has the ability and adaptability to meet the needs of a variety of students.

Running Grass is a renowned teacher of multicultural environmental education. His definition of the field is one that really resonates with me. He states that multicultural environmental education is: "an educational process that helps individuals become aware of, understand, accept, and celebrate other cultures and their environmental traditions. It affirms the central idea that all cultures have a relationship with the natural world which they and all others can draw upon for understanding and inspiration." This celebration of other cultures, and the acknowledgement that we each bring our own cultural and traditional lenses to an educational space, is exactly why I believe in multicultural environmental education.

As a Caucasian person navigating this rich cultural history in education, one of my biggest questions is: how do I tell these stories that are not mine? How can white people let go of control of the narrative, and honor a story and the culture it comes from?

People have been fighting against injustice since time immemorial. But to begin, let us think about the past few hundred years. About four hundred years ago, in 1619, the first African slaves arrived in Virginia, beginning *officially*, the suppression of minority or underrepresented communities by white people in America. It took two hundred and fifty years for slavery to be banned in the constitution. However, race laws were enacted that drastically restricted civil rights for slaves and blacks. Over the next hundred years, communities of color struggled through injustices like: Indian Boarding Schools, the Trail of Tears, segregation, racism, and an overwhelming number of other crimes against humanity, while whites were building a system that would keep the poorest poor and the richest rich.

After the Civil Rights movement, equality and equity are still but a dream. As minority populations moved into neighborhoods with good schools, whites moved out, and school funding moved with them. White people in power would withdraw funding for certain schools in certain neighborhoods, connected to a long history of racist acts. The community would then begin to fall into poverty and crime that led to racial profiling and create a disadvantage for anyone coming out of minority populations.

The gentrification of cities all over the United States from after the Civil War, and sadly up to the present day, has made the idea of whiteness synonymous with societal, cultural, and material privilege. Over time this has created structural domination by whiteness. As depicted in a video released by the African American Policy Forum, whites have built a culture of financial and systematic discrimination that put racial minorities on hold for hundreds of years in the opportunity race. In today's society the pressure and desire for diversity in education is in itself an example of white privilege. As stated in an article by Rose and Paisley: "simply encouraging more racially diverse participant groups amounts to a benevolent invitation for 'others' to take part in processes and institutions already well under way without them."

By acknowledging white privilege, making active attempts to look at the lens of privilege, and beginning conversations about whiteness and the inherent systemic benefits of whiteness, we are allowing people to challenge and consider changing the omnipresent systems that have promoted racism and oppression.

Okay so bear with me again. I want to acknowledge this history as we navigate this presentation together.

**Lesson: Growth versus fixed: where did you sit and why activity**

**Lesson Description:** What is a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset? We will spend a few moments framing this based on where people chose to sit at their tables.

**Time:** 10 minutes

Content/Time	Session details
Introduction 1 minute	Why did you choose to sit where you did?
Ask people why 5 minutes	Categorize answers into 'fixed' and 'growth' sides on the board. Growth mindset: Someone might say, 'because I wanted to do something new' or 'because there was space.' Fixed mindset: 'because I'm good at (x) activity' 'my friends (sometimes)' ect.
5 minutes	Introduce fixed and growth mindsets. Our minds can naturally fall into these patterns because we have grown up in a system that pushes one of two mindsets.

Asking ourselves tough questions and challenging ourselves to look deeper into our minds helps us to understand how we process the world. Acknowledging our mindset is an important factor in understanding our lenses through which we see the world.

Stanford Professor of Psychology, Carol Dweck, is the author of the book "Mindset." This book introduces the simple concept of a 'mindset' and highlights two types of them: fixed and growth mindset. Now, some of you might be thinking... "whoa, wait! Binary alert! Don't categorize me into these sections!" Well I can't, and no one should. The reason I introduce this seemingly binary concept is because there is also a truth of plurality within these categories, though there is a risk of binaries. No one person is only fixed or only growth; we are products of our environment and these two truths can exist within one person, or even within one system. So never fear; even if I put your comment into a fixed or growth category, this is not indicative of whom you are; this comment is simply more one than the other.

Carol Dweck defines the mindsets as sets of beliefs; beliefs about yourself and your capabilities. People with fixed mindset, for example, believe that people have a certain amount of intelligence, and nothing can change that. People with growth mindset see intelligence as something that can be grown and cultivated depending on their dedication and effort.

Fixed mindset is the state of mind that paralyzes us in fear. Students who have fixed mindsets are afraid to try because they are afraid to look dumb. They need to look smart at all times, at all costs, and show as little effort as possible because they have been “gifted” with ability.

Growth mindset students think that many things can be achieved through hard work and mentorship. They don't think everyone is the same or that anyone can be a genius, but they know that they won't be able to achieve anything without help. These students have the goal of learning at all times and at all costs.

One excellent illustration of the difference between the growth and fixed mindsets are the tests administered by Carol Dweck during her research to better understand the two. In a study with hundreds of students, Dweck and her colleagues gave each student ten fairly challenging problems from a test. When returning the results the test administrators offered two types of praise: Some students were told, “Wow, you got (x) score. That's a really good score. You must be really smart at this.” For other students, they were told “Wow, you got (x) score. That's a really good score. You must have worked really hard.” Essentially, some students were praised for ability and other for effort.

Unsurprisingly, the ability praise pushed students into the fixed mindset, and when given the choice, these students rejected a challenging new task because they didn't want to do anything that could expose their flaws or question their talent. On the other hand, when students were praised for effort, 90% of them wanted a new challenging task to learn from. When the students were then given a more challenging set of questions, the ability-praised students thought they weren't so gifted and the effort-praised students saw it as an indication to put more effort in.

Now, let's go back and take these two concepts of growth and fixed mindsets that we have been applied on a personal level and expand it out to our system. As discussed earlier we have this system that has been built on racial and economic injustices that underlies the current system of education and power in American culture. After all, our education system was designed during the enlightenment and the industrial revolution. The system created a story that anyone who went to school would get a job. However, the story isn't true any more. The system has continuously been keeping a separation of power that was created by white privilege, and so the current system continues to marginalize students who cannot tell the story of whiteness and who are not represented in the education system at all. The system itself is fixed. It has us paralyzed in fear.

When I say: “telling the story”, I mean: personally, culturally, and systemically. Think back on your own education for a moment. I wonder how many people in this audience can say with confidence that they read a book in high school by a Hispanic author, an African-American author, a Native American author, or by anybody besides an old white guy! When were we taught about how to make space for other cultures’ stories?

I remember Spanish class in rural Maine, where cultural days involved eating Tex-Mex food and giving ourselves “Spanish” names. Forgive me for being so critical, Señora Brooks, but when we teach Spanish class we should be honoring the deep, rich, and complex cultural histories that Spanish speaking countries have. After all, there is far more to culture than food and history. In fact, in the multicultural education world, that is barely the tip of the iceberg.

The metaphorical cultural iceberg is a common way to explain culture to people. When you look at an iceberg, only one-eighth of it is visible above water, the rest is below. Culture manifests in a similar way. It has some aspects that are visible and many others that can only be suspected or learned as understanding of a particular culture develops. There are many pieces of this complex cultural system that we cannot bring into the classroom, however, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge its presence and give it the opportunity to educate us.

Opening our eyes, hearts, and minds to the multiple realities and perspectives in the world, gives us the space for growth mindset to enter our fixed system. By allowing for mistakes to be learning opportunities, and weaknesses as areas that can be strengthened, we can begin to view the world from a lens that accepts pluralism. Through growth mindset in our system, there can be multiple truths, with each as equally important.

We have quite literally been taught to see the world through a single lens that prevents growth. Yet, as educators and citizens of a global world, it is crucially important to acknowledge these lenses, patterns, inequalities, and systems in order to fully understand how to enact change. By widening our perspective and letting go of assumptions are we able to release the concept of the binary and make way for pluralistic thinking.

English as a Second Language teacher, Sandy Campbell, suggests that one of the main challenges for educators is: “not to understand other cultures, but to understand ourselves.” How can we begin to understand and accept multiple cultural stories and appreciate their value if we don’t understand our own to begin with? If we are all walking around stuck in our fixed mindsets, in a fixed system, how can we learn and grow from our mistakes? Teaching with a knowledge of self, and cultivating a growth mindset in ourselves and our students, can create the space for all students to grow and appreciate their own inherent value and work toward systemic change.

The cultural lens through which we experience the world has prevented unification and systemic change that could revolutionize the education system and provide space for meeting the needs of a wide range of students. Multicultural environmental education has the ability and adaptability to meet the needs of a variety of students.

What does multicultural environmental education mean to you? What can our education system look like when incorporating multicultural environmental education?

To me, multicultural environmental education looks like *all* education. Multicultural environmental education is good education. And isn't that the kind of education we want for the world?

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, stylized font. The signature is written in black ink on a light blue, diamond-shaped background that is slightly tilted.

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