

Imaginative Ecological Education (IEE)

10 Frequently Asked Questions

1. *Is it possible to do ecological education of any kind in an urban or suburban environment? Can I do IEE if I don't have access to "nature" where I teach?*

- Yes. One premise of IEE is that we don't need wilderness—what might be described as untouched nature—nor do we need to be in rural areas to educate ecologically. IEE focuses on engaging our bodies in the natural world that surrounds us in all contexts. We want to draw attention to the wildness that surrounds us everywhere—Did you know that there is as much diversity of living things in one square foot of the soil surrounding a tree (even a city planted tree) as there is in an entire school? IEE is about increasing students' awareness of the life around them and engaging them emotionally in their local natural and cultural contexts. As students learn the mandated curriculum, IEE helps them draw attention to their body's engagement in the living world, regardless of the context (urban, suburban or rural).

2. *Is IEE an addition to the curriculum?*

- No. IEE is not a new curriculum: it is an approach to teaching any curriculum—and any age of student—in a way that engages the body, emotion and imagination in the process. Basically, all teaching requires planning. How we plan has a lot to do with how we understand children, the mind, and learning. Unlike most objectives-based approaches to planning IEE recognizes children as emotional and imaginative beings and, thus, supports planning in ways that engage emotion and imagination with knowledge.

3. *What support is there for me if I want to try this approach in my teaching?*

- The IEE website offers free support to teachers in the form of planning templates, brainstorming charts and elaborated examples. It also provides information on the basic premises and principles of IEE and offers links to additional publications that discuss IEE. The IEE team is also available to support more directed, on-site or on-line professional development. Teachers may also gain the support of other IEE teachers by joining our network and sharing their own resources. Visit: www.iereg.net/iee

4. *Does IEE require extra resources?*

- Well, it depends on how one defines "resources". Extra money, fancy technology or texts are not required. What is? If a teacher is willing to think deeply about topics so as to identify the emotional core, to consider ways for students to use their bodies in learning the topic, and to afford students opportunities to learn topics in the local natural and cultural contexts in which they live—that is, to get outside more often—then one can do IEE. Resources of time—to learn about and implement an IEE approach—as well as a supportive administration and parent body are also helpful.

5. Is IEE preparation very time-consuming?

- As we like to say, it takes just as much time to be boring as it does to be imaginatively engaging ☺. Based on what we know from teachers doing this in their classrooms, once one gets the hang of IEE it takes no more time than any other preparation.

6. Can I get through my curriculum if I employ an IEE approach?

- Yes. In IEE, pedagogical activities designed to engage emotion replace activities that are primarily objectives-driven. Rather than let the objective drive what students do, the objectives provide fodder for emotional engagement—it is the emotional significance of whatever knowledge or skill that is being learned that drives what students do. In the long run this actually saves time for the teacher and the students. Why? Because when students learn through an IEE approach the knowledge they gain is tied up with emotion and they are more likely to remember it. It becomes more meaningful for them because they feel something about it. Indeed, through an IEE approach teachers will get through the regular curriculum and more. In the context of IEE cross-disciplinary connections develop that can mean students are fulfilling multiple curricular outcomes simultaneously.

7. Do I need training to be an IEE teacher?

- It is advisable to learn as much about IEE as you can—this is a different approach to teaching. That said, one can learn a significant amount about it through use of this website and its resources and through connecting with other IEE teachers on the IEE teacher network. Teachers may also find the information and resources available for free on the Imaginative Education Research Group (IERG) website very helpful (www.ierg.net). That said, the IEE team offers on-line and on-site training for teachers if this is desired.

. Is it worth my time to do IEE? Why bother?

- What does it feel like to teach when one's students are totally "into it"? What does it feel like to hear your students talking about what they are learning about long after the class is over? IEE is worth trying out because, first, it supports good teaching. All students stand to benefit. Second, it's enjoyable for you as a teacher. Your imagination is engaged in the teaching process as you design opportunities for imaginative engagement for your students. Third, and most important for those who have come to this site because you are concerned with ecological issues, IEE can develop and nurture students' ecological understanding. Facts alone won't support students in living sustainably and making life decisions that reflect concern for the natural world. When students come to feel something for the world they live in, the local natural and cultural contexts they call home, and when they become aware of the embodied nature of their world, then they may cultivate different relationships with the Earth. For teachers concerned about how humankind lives in this world, this makes IEE worthwhile.

9. Is IEE suitable for teaching Math or other non-arts or non-ecological topics?

- IEE is a cross-curricular approach—check out some of the unit overviews on this site. It is suitable for teaching all subject matter areas and all ages of students. As Orr so

famously said, all education is environmental education. In the context of IEE what this means is that all learning provides an opportunity to connect with place and to develop our body's awareness in the world. Visit our website for examples: www.ierg.net/iee

10. How do we assess learning in the context of IEE?

- Because IEE supports the teaching and learning of the regular curriculum, one can always assess knowledge in standard ways. That said, teachers know the limitations of assessment methods for ascertaining the breadth and depth of what students understand. IEE supports participatory and collaborative forms of student assessment that engage students actively in the process of their own assessment for learning. IEE teachers will be thoughtful of ways to use assessment that support collaboration and partnerships as opposed to competition in the classroom. They will strive to assess how effectively they are engaging their students' emotions and imaginations and will afford students opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that allow for diverse expression of understanding.

9 Infrequently Asked Questions (IAQs)

1. What is Ecological Education?

- Educational programs interested in planetary wellbeing come under many headings including Ecological Education, Environmental Education, Environmental Learning, Bioregional Education, Nature Education, Place-Based Education, Education for Sustainability, and Education for Sustainable Living. All of these pedagogies share an axiological stance characterized by interest in the health of the Earth and all its inhabitants. However, close reading of the Ecological Education literature indicates that using these terms interchangeably ignores subtle but important differences between them. What sets Ecological Education apart from other approaches—and why we use the term as part of IEE—is its relational and contextual dimensions. More than simply a relational pedagogy Ecological Education focuses on the relationships between humankind and the Earth. The term ecological, stemming from ecology (the study of the Earth's household or oikos), reveals Ecological Education's interest in Earth-centered kinds of relationships.

2. How does sense of place develop for me and for my students?

- This is not a question that is easily answered. The how, as far as we know, develops over time, as one learns more about a place and has an opportunity to develop emotional associations. So, through increased familiarity and ongoing experiences in our natural and cultural contexts they come to mean something to us. We not only know about them but we also feel something. It is the combination of knowing deeply and feeling that constitutes the sense of place and, from this, the sense of care or concern this can support.

3. Is it possible to develop ecological understanding through “regular” schooling?

- IEE is a departure from what we tend to see happening in schools. Cultivating the heart of ecological understanding informs all teaching. IEE aims to situate all curricula in Place, to allow teaching to be informed by Place, to nurture immersive bodily experiences. Through IEE practice we have hours, days, months and years when we can work to cultivate students’ sense of connection to a living world. So, we believe it IS possible and necessary to develop ecological understanding over time and with increased teacher support through an IEE approach in all schools. This isn’t a quick fix but, rather, a remedy that can slowly lead to a healthy human-world relationship.

4. How suitable is a marriage of Imaginative Education (IE) and Ecological Education?

- As you may have realized, IE and Ecological Education reflect very different perspectives on the relationship between humankind and nature. IE is a human-centred framework—how suitable is this for developing ecological understanding? Ecological Education may counter-balance the human-centredness of the Imaginative Education framework by bringing into focus the ways in which human beings and nature are interdependent, and the ways in which nature is intrinsically valuable. Ecological Education tries to shift the focus away from human beings as the measure of all things toward an understanding of how human beings are embedded within the context of natural systems. Nature is intrinsically valuable. Imaginative Ecological Education may support, thus, a more embedded view of human beings in nature. It is important to acknowledge tensions between these two fields. Attention to possible incompatibilities, and what they may imply, is a part of reflective practice.

5. Is everything wonderful?

- The IEE team would say YES. But if you don’t believe that the world is infused with wonder—that there infinitely more to know about it than we can ever know and that each and everything in the world is emotionally significant—then you might have a hard time thinking along IEE lines. The kind of emotional engagement required for IEE teaching is, indeed, based on the premise that everything we teach—yes, EVERYTHING—has a “story”. That is to say, there is something emotionally significant about everything we teach. Punctuation. Fractions. Soil. Non-Locomotor Movement. Simple Machines. Everything has something about it that engages your emotion as a teacher—everything is wonderful. When you know what that significance is you have your “story” and the emotional and imaginative engagement of your students can begin.

6. What does “Place” mean? Why is it capitalized? Why is it important?

- Place refers here to the local natural and cultural context. Our interest in IEE is to explore the implications for planning if we take the local natural and cultural context in which we are teaching not simply as the location for learning, but, more profoundly as co-teacher. Hence, why Place is capitalized—just as one would capitalize the name of the human teacher, so too we identify this natural or non-human teacher. The lessons we shape are co-developed, the collaborative work of the human teacher and Place, each influencing what and how students learn. There is an increasingly broad base of

literature indicating the theoretical importance of Place for cultivating ecological understanding and practical means for doing so. Place-Based Education (PBE), like other nature-focused programs, aims to afford students opportunities to develop deep knowledge of their context and form emotional attachments to it.

7. What does it mean to co-teach with Place?

- Our assertion that we might collaboratively teach with Place will sound quite odd to the traditionally-trained teacher's ear. We may collaborate, yes, but we do so with other human beings. What does it mean to assert that place can be co-teacher? What is required of the teacher? Time, activeness, and humility.
- Time.—IEE is “slow” pedagogy; sense of place can only develop over time.
- Activeness.—Acknowledging Place as teacher requires a kind of openness that one might refer to as “mindfulness”. To “co-teach” with and in Place requires a teacher to be aware of his or her own embeddedness in a living world. This is an awareness that is experienced somatically. We come to relate to the natural world in a way that brings to light for us our connectedness. It is from this kind of immersive relationship—what Naess refers to as Activeness—that we may develop the ability to see, feel, touch, taste, hear what nature has to teach. We might imagine that Place represents an ongoing kind of conversation—can we feel it? Can we hear it? Can we listen in? If we can, through increasing knowledge of Place, enter into this conversation, becoming increasingly aware of the inhabitants/process of Place, then Place can truly become co-teacher.
- Humility. Acknowledging Place as teacher requires humility—we relinquish our well-earned titles as “experts” as we recognize our own ever-present ability to learn from the world around us.

8. Is IEE anti-intellectual?

- No. IEE requires students to be engaged in rigorous study. Remember: IEE is an approach to teaching all topics in the curriculum. In IEE students will learn a lot about the world around them as they simultaneously learn the content of the prescribed curriculum. What they will learn, indeed, is how the two—the “stuff” of the curriculum and the world around them—are not so easily separated. It is an unfortunate belief in our “schooling-happens-inside” culture that learning outside classroom walls is, somehow, less rigorous or less content-focused.

9. What's wrong with the way we do Ecological Education now?

- Despite what may on the surface appear like a different way of teaching—kids are outside! Kids are collecting soil samples and restoring riverbeds!—Ecological Education programs lack a theoretical framework and pedagogy for centralizing emotional and imaginative engagement in learning. So what this means is that under the surface of experiential and highly “hands-on” types of activities lies what might best be described as a mechanistic model for teaching. As a result typical Ecological Education programs are ill-equipped for cultivating ecological understanding. Their means and ends are misaligned. IEE takes the experiential, participatory, collaborative and unique features

of Ecological Education programs and frames them within a comprehensive pedagogical approach.

What questions are we missing? Want to discuss any of these questions or pose others? Please contact Gillian Judson at gcyj@sfu.ca.