So . . . We're Going for a Walk: A Placed-Based Outdoor Art Experiential Learning Experience

Priscilla Anne Stewart
Brigham Young University

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So . . . We’re Going for a Walk:
A Placed-Based Outdoor Art Experiential Learning Experience

Priscilla Anne Stewart

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Mark Allen Graham, Chair
Daniel T. Barney
Brian D. Christensen

Department of Art
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

So . . . We’re Going for a Walk:
A Placed-Based Outdoor Art Experiential Learning Experience

Priscilla Anne Stewart
Department of Art, BYU
Master of Arts

Schools in the United States often emphasize making children competitive in a global economy while neglecting the importance of developing citizens who are ecologically responsible. Problems of climate change, loss of biodiversity, mass extinctions and degradation of the natural environment, are often ignored. Some researchers have suggested that children lack unstructured play time in nature, have an increased amount of screen time, lack mindfulness, and are insulated from the natural world. Many children rarely have significant experience with nature’s wildness. It is common for people to experience a sense of placelessness in the hyper-mobility of present times where “globalizing” agendas limit a sense of place or community. Teachers can also feel constrained by the physical confines of school and the intellectual confines of ordinary school curriculum. As a response to my students’ lack of significant experiences with nature, my own dissatisfaction with ordinary teaching, and my sense that school curricula neglect ecological issues and restricts teaching innovation, I created a summer mountain wilderness art workshop designed to give 6th, 7th and 8th grade students an immersive alternative art education experience. This study explored the affordances and limitations of an alternative classroom focused on outdoor experiences, walking, art/ecological studies, and my own experiences in attempting to change the conditions of teaching and learning. This research uses qualitative methodologies including action-based research, elements of a/r/tography, arts-based research, and an ecological arts-based inquiry that involves questions about ecology, community, and artistic heritage.

Keywords: place-based education, nature, wilderness, curriculum theory, walking
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This thesis is not mine alone. It was a team effort.

I would like to thank my two intelligent, wise and loving parents who raised me. I am the last of seven children to get a higher education degree. They have always emphasized the importance of learning and supported my brothers and me throughout.

Whether we are in Nepal, India, Amsterdam, New York, Ecuador, France, Iceland, Scotland or Big Cottonwood Canyon, Dr. Mark Graham has been a patient, kind, knowledgeable friend and mentor. He has taught me that the walk is worth the walk but also that it is good to have goals. I cannot express enough thanks for the influence he has been and will continue to be in my life.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: Review of Literature</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Response</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Inattentiveness of American Schooling Toward Ecological Issues</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are missing nature</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place-based Education</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical place-based education</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place-based education and the cultivation of stewardship and identity</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Education</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature, Wilderness, and Education</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Intelligences and Literacies</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic Education</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Well-Being</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Narratives About Nature</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nature and walking ................................................................. 43
Curriculum Design and Representing Curriculum ......................... 46
Rationale .................................................................................. 46
Curriculum and Learning Objectives ............................................. 48
Big Ideas in Curriculum Design ................................................... 49
Contemporary Artists and Critical Pedagogy ................................. 50
  Richard Long ........................................................................ 52
  Fancis Alys .......................................................................... 53
  Mark Dion ........................................................................... 53
  Agnes Denes ....................................................................... 54
CHAPTER 5: Results .................................................................... 55
  Overview of Wild Art School Activities ................................. 55
  Student Experiences ............................................................. 57
    Drawing and experience .................................................... 57
    Art and being there .......................................................... 60
    Walking ............................................................................. 61
    Camping ............................................................................ 62
  Student Artwork ................................................................. 63
    Collages ........................................................................... 64
    Drawing from the cabin porch .......................................... 65
    Drawing from Alta in Little Cottonwood Canyon ................. 70
    Drawing from Ensign Peak ............................................... 70
    Drawings from migratory bird refuge ............................... 72
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Student drawing: View from Ensign Peak</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Student drawings: Waterfall at Red Butte Gardens</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Drawing done by student at Red Butte Gardens</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Photo of students' boats</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Photo of student's boat</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Students' collages based on 19th century American landscape paintings</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Student collages based on 19th century American landscape paintings</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Student plein air oil pastel drawings</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Student plein air oil pastel drawings</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Student plein air oil pastel drawings</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Student plein air oil pastel drawing</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>Student drawing: Little Cottonwood Canyon from Alta</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13</td>
<td>Student drawings: Ensign Peak</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14</td>
<td>Student drawing: Ensign Peak</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15</td>
<td>Student drawing: Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 16</td>
<td>Student drawings in the Natural History Museum</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 17</td>
<td>Student drawings: Natural History Museum</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 18</td>
<td>Student drawings. Red Butte Gardens</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 19</td>
<td>Student drawings: Red Butte Gardens</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 20</td>
<td>Student drawings: Red Butte Gardens</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 21</td>
<td>Student drawing: Silver Lake</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 22</td>
<td>Student drawings: Silver lake</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 23. Student drawings: Silver Lake................................................................. 80
Figure 24. Student drawings: Tents. ................................................................. 81
Figure 25. Student drawings: Tents. ................................................................. 82
Figure 26. Student drawing: Ensign Peak.......................................................... 86
Figure 27. Birch Bark Reliquary................................................................. 92
Figure 28. Tent oil painting................................................................. 93
Figure 29. Path to Mount Mun Thanka painting.............................................. 94
Figure 30. Tent paintings................................................................. 96
CHAPTER 1: Introduction

“...Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.”

Wendell Berry

The Problem: American schools often neglect vital ecological issues, children’s experience with nature, their local environment, while school curriculum and teaching expectations often limit experimentation and personal growth of teachers. Teachers are stuck inside a box throughout the school day.

This thesis describes my ongoing investigation of art, nature, ecology, and walking as both a pedagogical methodology and metaphor for curriculum. It includes my tentative exploration of alternative approaches to thinking about curriculum, curricular ideas, and my own experiments with immersive learning experiments and wilderness adventures that examine nature, culture, and art.

In my experience, American school systems emphasize efficiency, measurable outcomes, structure, academics, and core subjects taught in a way that is removed from student experience. Scholars of education have observed that local environmental or ecological relationships are frequently ignored in order to concentrate on decontextualized discussions of distant and abstract topics. Students often lack knowledge or experience with nature, their local environment, or vital ecological issues close to their communities (Graham, 2017; Gruenwald & Smith 2008; Smith, 2008). As a consequence, many students remain uninformed and uninvolved with the problems of climate change, extinction, loss of biodiversity, and environmental degradation that is threatening the quality of life on earth. Within the current focus on math and literacy, high-stakes testing policies appear to be
changing the emphasis of school learning from investigation and inquiry to memorization of facts. Exploratory, open ended activities that help enrich students’ lives and encourage inquiry are disappearing (Brock & Crowther, 2013).

Some researchers have suggested that children lack unstructured play-time in nature, which has resulted in a lack of mindfulness and insulation from the natural world (Hanh, 2011; Louv, 2007). Many children lack significant experience with nature’s wildness. People may experience a sense of placelessness in the hyper-mobility of modernity where globalizing agendas can limit a sense of responsibility or belonging to a place or community (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). American schools, in general, emphasize reading, mathematics, and sitting still, which creates a kind of mono-instructional environment that works well with some students but neglects many other kinds of literacy. The emphasis in United States’ schools is making children competitive in a global economy rather than becoming citizens who are ecologically responsible (Graham, 2007, 2013; Gruenwald, 2008).

I have noticed that my own students are well versed in the latest YouTube sensation and know where their favorite fast food restaurant is, yet they struggle to point out the direction of the Wasatch or Oquirrh mountains and seem uninformed about local environmental issues. I find this disconcerting because students need to be aware and have concern about both local and global environmental problems. Normal school routines and curriculum often do not engage them with these issues, have limited notions of literacy, and don’t instill a sense of wonder within our students. This is a problem because connections to local communities and natural environments are vital for the health of individuals and communities. This is a problem because issues of climate change, environmental devastation, and mass extinction threaten our lives and the lives of our children. This is a problem for
teachers because school can become an oppressive place, lacking connections to both the outdoors, teachers’ growth, and connections to teachers’ interests.

As a response to these problems, I developed an art based curricular and teaching experience that gave my students opportunities to have significant experiences within local, natural places and allowed me to better understand my students’ relationships with the natural local places in their lives. I was also interested in how a summer intensive curriculum that was based on experiential learning might influence my own teaching and my relationships with students. I wanted to explore the teaching opportunities or challenges this type of program might create. As a result, I created a new approach to curriculum, which I call Going for a Walk. This curriculum be described in more detail in chapter four of my thesis.

The summer Wild Art School took place during two, one-week sessions involving 6th, 7th and 8th grade students during the summer. This project explored how the students might respond to an experiential, nature focused approach to learning and how it might inform my own teaching. My question was: what if we just go for walks in art class, emulating the example of artist Richard Long whose seminal work, A Line Made by Walking (1967) consisted of a photograph of a line he made by walking up and down in a straight line in an empty field. I wanted to put into practice the notion of curriculum as an embodied action, rather than a script to achieve pre-determined outcomes. I wanted to create a curriculum as an ecological text that included rich encounters with the natural world that had unpredictable outcomes.

I designed the curriculum to address the sense of placelessness my students often exhibit. I wanted to take my students outside the confines of the ordinary classroom and not
have such a structured routine and schedule. I wanted to experiment with curriculum and teaching in ways that nurtured my own creative needs. This curriculum was informed by place-based education, which draws upon ideas from environmental, experiential, outdoor, and holistic learning that are not typically found in mainstream American schools. Place-based or place-conscious education introduces children and youth to the skills and disposition needed to regenerate and sustain communities. “It achieves this end by drawing on local phenomena as the source of children’s learning experiences, helping them to understand the processes that underlie the health of natural and social systems essential to human welfare” (Gruenwald & Smith, 2008, p.xvi).

An important element in this curriculum is critical pedagogy, which I approached primarily through the study of contemporary art and artists. Critical pedagogy challenges the norms of the dominant culture by questioning why we do what we do in the ways that we do it (Burbule & Berk, 1999). This is often the approach taken by contemporary artists, particularly those who are concerned with ecological issues such as Mark Dion, Agnes Denis, and Richard Long. I questioned traditional approaches to teaching and learning within my own curriculum. The element of critical pedagogy was especially apparent in our studies of contemporary artists who question accepted assumptions about how knowledge is represented and seek to provoke viewers to re-examine their own assumptions. In chapter five of this thesis I will talk more about how my students studied their local human and environmental communities through a critical lens by critically-examining taken for granted assumptions about nature and our relationships with nature. Issues of politics, privilege, and power were incorporated into their study. Critical place-based education seeks to combine
the social awareness of critical theory with the emphasis on local places and nature that is part of place-based education (Graham, 2007, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003).

This project is informed by qualitative research methods including arts-based ecological inquiry, a/r/tography, autoenthnography, and case study research, which will be discussed in chapter three. A/r/tography is a qualitative methodology that enables artists, researchers, and teachers to investigate their overlapping identities and questions their personal practices, while simultaneously collecting and generating data (Bickel 2008; de Cosson 2005; Irwin 2004). For me, it was a way to explore my own identity as a teacher and researcher while constructing new conditions for teaching and learning. Arts based ecological research contemplates a partnership and relationship between nonhuman communities and human culture. It recognizes that learning is a complex set of interactions and relationships with both human and beyond human elements. This methodology explores ways of living and our relationships with the existing world around us. Ecological art inquiries can counterbalance disconnection from the natural world with a paradigm of ecological complexity and respect for the non-human world (Graham, 2015).

The curriculum, which will be discussed in chapter four, included experiences in the mountains, wilderness, local places, art and natural history museums. Activities included camping, hiking, and visits from artists and scientists. The curriculum also included studies of artists who work with nature, ecology and scientific processes. Students created art using investigation, inquiry, writing, drawing, collecting, sound recordings, and natural ephemeral pieces similar to the work of Richard Long or Andy Goldsworthy. I also considered how a typical art education teacher might go about recreating parts or all of this curriculum in their
teaching. I studied how this type of curriculum could affect how a student thinks about the character of art, the potential of art, and the social impact of art.

I was particularly interested in the idea of curriculum as currere, as an action, like taking a walk, rather than a course of study through a set of known facts (Slattery, 2013, 2017). I will discuss currere further in chapter four. Currere is also a good way to describe my research methodology, which evolved and emerged throughout this teaching experiment. When I take my students for a walk in the mountains, it is a teaching gesture that acknowledges the importance of complex interactions with the place, among students and between student and teacher. The infinite complexities of being outside make the unexpected inevitable. I tried to frame these experiences within a critical study of art, artists, and artistic possibilities as well as ideas about nature and ongoing political and social issues about the natural world.

**Research Questions**

I was interested in what personal insights about teaching and learning I might gain from designing and implementing immersive outdoor learning experiences based on the study of art and nature. Based on this general, exploratory line of inquiry, I focused on two research questions:

1. How might a curriculum based on an artistic inquiry about place, ecology, and outdoor experiences influence student learning, interactions, mindfulness, attitudes toward learning, sense of place, ecological literacy, and art making?

2. What are the affordances and limitations of constructing and implementing a curriculum as currere, based on immersive, outdoor, art experiences, on my own teaching and on student and teacher relationships.
CHAPTER 2: Review of Literature

My thesis is based on a curricular and teaching response to both the content and methods of traditional schooling. Many scholars concerned with ecology and place have observed that schools in the United States neglect the study of local ecological issues in favor of preparing students to become employed within a global economy, rather than preparing them to become citizens who are actively engaged in addressing important ecological, social, and community challenges (Bowers, 2012; Graham, 2007, 2017; Gruenwald & Smith 2008; Gruenwald, 2008). In my experiences as a teacher and student, schools typically confine teachers and students within easily controlled environments that may not be effective learning sites for all students and often turn teaching into a routine. My response was to design and implement an art-based curriculum that critically explores issues of place, ecology and the role of the teacher. The review of literature examines ecological education in United States schools, place-based education and the premises and rationale for place-based, outdoor, and environmental education. These approaches are supported by holistic education and concepts of multiple intelligences, which will also be described. In chapter four, I will locate my project, the Wild Art School, within current discussions about curriculum and teaching.

My Response

One response to these issues is to focus on place-based education, outdoor education, and environmental education. This response includes the idea of holistic education and the reframing of school to include the idea of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983, 2011). My premise is that an art curriculum founded on investigation of place, ecology and outdoor experiences will increase students’ desire to learn, help them enjoy discovery, and make
connections with the natural world and the places where they live. A particularly generative way to frame this approach is through the study and making of art. This learning experience was designed to investigate both my own teaching practice and its influence on student learning.

**The Inattentiveness of American Schooling Toward Ecological Issues**

The well-known place-based education scholar David Gruenewald (2003, 2008) stated that modern civilization has created troubled environmental conditions including pollution, depletion of natural resources, threatened biodiversity, diminishing wilderness, and climate change. American mainstream education reform ignores these conditions and is primarily committed to improving education through standards and a testing culture that tends to disregard place. Local communities and natural places are not usually important parts of school curriculum. David Gruenewald changed his name to David Greenwood and continues to explore issues of place-based education. He believes that the formal process of education often obscures and distorts our relationships to place, especially with respect to the land (Greenwood, 2012).

United States schools often emphasize making children competitive in a global economy rather than becoming citizens who are ecologically responsible. Local human and natural communities are not usually important parts of the school curriculum (Graham, 2007, 2013; Gruenewald, 2008; jazodinski, 2012). For many educational leaders, testing and teacher accountability are often seen as the primary ways to improve educational outcomes.

Maurice Holt, a proponent of the Slow School Movement, argued that the drive toward standards-based schooling has forced education into a “curriculum strait jacket” (2002, p.1). Students today have pressure to proceed from one targeted standard to another as
fast as possible and to absorb and demonstrate specified knowledge with conveyor belt precision. Parents are encouraged to focus on achievement, not the self-realization of their children (Holt, 2002). But this approach ignores other important issues in our society, including diminished global resources and loss of bio-diversity. According to the World Wildlife Foundation (2014):

Young people are growing up in a society faced by increasing environmental concerns. Globally, resources are being used up at an escalating rate. Habitats are changing, rainforests diminishing, deserts expanding, tens of species are lost each day, while the human population increases by more than a million each week. A far-reaching report on the state of the world's wildlife states that the Living Planet Index, which measures more than 10,000 representatives’ populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish, has declined by 52 per cent since 1970. (p. 398)

**Children are missing nature.** According to dance educator Celeste Snowber, “A major mistake of schooling is the one that equates paying attention to sitting still” (2016, p. 7). American schools emphasize reading and sitting still, which creates a kind of mono-instructional environment that works well with some students but neglects other kinds of literacy. Some children do not learn well in schools that privilege reading and sitting still. Students may experience a sense of placelessness in the hyper-mobility of present times where globalizing agendas limit a sense of place or community (Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

Children often lack knowledge or experience with nature, their local environment, or vital ecological issues close to their communities, which contributes to a sense of placelessness and lack of concern for ecological issues. Some researchers, including nature
studies proponent Richard Louv, have suggested that children lack unstructured play time in nature, have an increased amount of screen time, lack mindfulness, and are insulated from the natural world (2007). “Today, technological advancements and social changes have separated children from nature's wealth of sensory experiences by bringing children of the 21st century inside” (Louv, 2007 p.87). Many children rarely have significant experience with nature’s wildness.

Richard Louv has studied the effects of children’s lack of experience with the natural world and claimed that excessive time spent indoors has been detrimental to children's well-being (2007). According to Louv, unstructured time spent in nature calms anxiety while reducing childhood depression and obesity. Children and nature can have a mutually beneficial relationship. When children stay inside, they lack informed empathy for the natural world. They will be less likely to develop habits of stewardship towards the earth (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2011; Louv, 2007; Waite, 2011). The problems of the disassociation of my own students from their local community and apathy toward their natural environment created a rationale for the curricular experiments described in this thesis.

**Place-based Education**

Place-based education provides a remedy for educational practices that overemphasize general, abstract concepts and content that are removed from the experiences of students. This thesis explored the idea that an art curriculum based on investigation of local places, ecology and outdoor experiences will increase students desire to learn and help them enjoy discovery. In David Sobel's book, *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (2005), Roger Hart argues that place-base education is essential in the exploration of environmental education:
Environmental education must be radically reconceived in order to be seen as fundamental to the residents of communities from all social classes in all countries. We need programs based on the identification and investigation of problems by residents themselves, with “action research” as the dominant methodology. There is of course a central place for the teaching of environmental science—“ecology” as it is often called—but this should at first be directly related to the local environment. Environmental education from this perspective is intrinsically tied to community development in general. (p.14)

According to place-based educator and scholar David Sobel:

Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in any school subjects. It emphasizes hands-on, real-world learning experiences. This approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. (p.11)

Place-based pedagogy can help students develop a connection to the place they live which often leads to a greater variety of artwork and more significant meaning with the artwork the student creates (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Cowan & Dolgoy, 1984; Kauppinen, 1990; Neperud, 1973; Purser, 1978; Song, 2010; Tatarchuk & Eick, 2011). The ideas of place-based education can be traced to David Thoreau’s reflections on place described in his book Walden. Many scholars of place-based approaches draw their inspiration from Thoreau, including the influential environmentalist advocate David Orr who notes that:
Walden is an antidote to the idea that education is a passive, indoor activity occurring between the ages of six and twenty-one. For Thoreau, Walden was more than his location. It was a laboratory for observation and experimentation; a library of data about geology, history, flora and fauna; a source of inspiration and renewal; and a testing ground for the man. Walden is a dialogue between a man and a place. In a sense, Walden wrote Thoreau, his genius, I think, was to allow himself to be shaped by his place, to allow it to speak with his voice. (1994, p.85)

Orr is a well-known environmentalist and critic of education who claims that typical college programs do not include courses dealing with ecology, hydrology, geology, the economics and politics of energy use, food policy, waste disposal, and architecture of the campus or it's community. Nor are you likely to find many courses offering advice to modern scholars in the art of living well in a place. The importance of place in education has been overlooked for a variety of reasons. Often place is irrelevant because we are typically a displaced people who don’t use our immediate places for a food source (Orr, 1994).

Place in education is important because it requires the combination of intellect with experience. The study of place is relevant to the problems of overspecialization since a place cannot be understood from the vantage point of a single discipline or specialization. Place is best understood as a complex mosaic of phenomena and problems. Knowledge of a place—where you are and where you come from—is intertwined with knowledge of who you are. Landscape, in other words, shapes mindscape (Orr, 1994). When David Gruenwald proposed the idea of critical place-based education, he was responding to critics who suggested that a study of the local might be parochial and narrowing. However, if place as seen as one of the many layers of experience, our study of place can also be wide-ranging and cosmopolitan.
The idea of a critical place-based education was proposed as a remedy for an unreflective curriculum with a too simplistic or narrow focus on the local (Graham, 2007; Gruenewald, 2008).

**Critical place-based education.** Critical place-based education seeks to combine the social awareness of critical theory with the emphasis on local places and nature that is part of place-based education (Graham, 2007, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003;). According to David Greenwood (2012),

Developing a critical pedagogy of place means challenging each other to read the texts of our own lives and to ask constantly what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved. In short, it means making a place for the cultural, political, economic and ecological dynamics of places whenever we talk about the purpose and practice of learning. (p.10-11)

Critical place-based education seeks to confront social, historical, and ideological forces that influence how we understand nature and culture.

Contemporary artists often make criticality an important part of their methodology when they make art about nature. For example, Mark Dion’s work often uses a quasi-scientific methodology to explore our relationships with the natural world. Even though his work asks questions about ecological issues, he says “my work is not about nature, it is about ideas about nature” (Gordon, 2017, p. 148). He sees his work as a critical foil to our taken-for-granted notions of nature and knowledge. Nevertheless, his work often has strong connections to the culture and natural histories of particular places. I want my own middle school students to be able to step back and think about ideas about nature through the work of contemporary artists. “Art education informed by a critical place-based pedagogy
emphasizes the activist, restorative possibilities of art making and affirms the need for students to become involved in learning outside the school” (Graham, 2007, p 47).

Critical place-based education provided a theoretical background and rationale for my curriculum and teaching experiment. Being outside is important to me as an educator, and I believe it has many benefits for my school. Critical place-based education provided a framework to move my own teaching beyond traditional nature studies toward something that engaged with culturally constructed ideas about nature and critical pedagogy through the work of contemporary artists.

**Place-based education and the cultivation of stewardship and identity.**

Australian educator Briah Wattchow has studied the effects of children’s interactions with place and the outdoors. His research suggests that:

> Children who play on playgrounds with more diverse flora may develop a better knowledge of plants. Taking pride in one's place can also lead to a desire to take responsibility for that place, which is after all, the crux of citizenship. Place develops by way of reciprocal relation between inhabitants who dwell there and the characteristics of local country including landforms, life forms, seasons, etc. Place and knowing is deeply linked with storying. (Brown & Wattchow, 2016, p 437)

Molly Neves and Mark Graham have studied these same ideas in Utah schools. They suggested that a pedagogy of place can create possibilities for both students and teachers to develop deeper understanding of the creative process and its connections to the natural world, as well as their sense of personal identity (2018). Place-based educators emphasize content that has reference to the contexts of community life and local ecology (Demos, 2016;
A connection to place can be an important influence on our sense of self.

Place-based approaches deepen our knowledge and feelings for environment and community and help us develop values that are sensitive and caring. A critical approach to place encourages us to ask; Who makes the decisions that affect landscape, nature and housing? Many people, particularly those living in anonymous, run-down urban areas with high unemployment, may not have a strong affinity to place. But, how has this loss of relationship between people and place arisen? These questions inevitably lead to bigger questions of ownership, control and social justice. (Cooper, 2016, p.399-409)

**Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning**

There is a significant body of literature about outdoor education and experiential learning that has many connections to my own study. Outdoor educators including Richard Louv and David Waite have observed that children and nature have a mutually beneficial relationship. When children spend an excessive amount of time indoors, it can be detrimental to their well-being (Louv, 2007; Waite, 2011). I want my students to understand connections between culture, politics, and the environment. But I also want them to have immersive and transformative experiences outside. I want them to construct knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences. According to the Association of Experiential Education (AEE, 2002, p.5), experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis. The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning. Opportunities are nurtured for learners and educators to explore and examine their own values. In the United States, learning through
sensory experience was promoted by the educational philosophers Edward A. Sheldon in the 19th century and John Dewey early in the 20th century (Chambers, 2011; Dewey, 1934).

There are several new movements for young children built around nature and outdoor education. In Germany, for example, there are over 1000 Wald Schule or Forest Kindergartens. Instead of spending 5 ½ hours a day inside, students spend their entire day outside. These schools have no indoor facilities; instead they have tents, yurts or some other type of shelter for protection from the elements. Research from these schools shows that children who attend are healthier, more confident and have better physical and language development than their mostly indoor peers (Sobel, 2017).

Melanie Bradshaw (2018) was looking for examples of where play was encouraged, and where kids were tinkering and experimenting with materials or engaging in other hands-on, experiential learning opportunities. She was led to forest schools. Forest schools are emerging as an alternative form of early childhood education that utilizes free play, exploration, and experience to inspire an unstructured curriculum. She found that “there are many connections between learning found in forest schools and the practices and possibilities that exist in art education” (p. 18).

Technological advancements and social changes have separated children from nature. But, being outside provides a wealth of sensory experiences that children are missing out on by staying indoors (Louv, 2007). It has been suggested that when children only stay inside, they lack informed empathy for the natural world and are less likely to develop habits of stewardship towards the earth (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2011; Louv 2007; Waite, 2011).

Education in the outdoors can work as an antidote to what some have described as a sense of displacement (Orr, 1994). Across all disciplines and across theory and practice,
place has emerged in recent years as a core concern according to outdoor educators Greg Mannion and Jonathan Lynch (2016). Outdoor education advocate Geoff Cooper has studied the effects of outdoor education on other subjects and notes that:

Outdoor education can be a powerful force for change. It can involve active learning in real-world situations outside the confines of the classroom. Outdoor education can incorporate the arts, sciences, social sciences and physical education. It cuts across subject disciplines and involves the cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains. It does not have the constraints of timetables and curricula, and this greater flexibility and emphasis on active, hands-on learning provides the opportunity to question the dominant structure and values held in society. But in a neo-liberal society there are pressures from the marketplace for outdoor education to succumb to commercial values. (Cooper 2016, p. 399)

Direct experiences in the outdoors are great motivators; they can unlock talents that remain hidden in the more formal situations. I have experienced this in my own life. As I’ve gotten older, I have discovered new talents, including rock climbing, remembering paths, weaving, and tying knots. These are talents I would have loved to develop as a child. They can provoke a sense of awe and wonder and develop imagination and creativity. Artists and writers have often approached the environment as a source of inspiration.

Outdoor studies have long been regarded as an important tool for public environmental concern (Prince, & Henderson, 2016). In the last decade several studies have been conducted on the relationship between outdoor experiences and environmentalism, with an emphasis on the effect that participation in outdoor education has on environmental knowledge, pro-environmental attitudes and behavior (Ohman & Sandell, 2016). Within the
field of outdoor studies, scholars such as Johan Ohman and Klas Sandell have noted the value of nature as a teacher, and have noted its roots in Rousseau, Thoreau, and Leopold: Outdoor studies have been one of the major themes in the very rich pedagogic tradition of using nature as a fosterer. Outdoor studies can be said to form part of the experience-based and action-oriented tradition that has its philosophical roots in Aristotle’s empiricism and ideas about experience as the basis for learning…Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s formative ideas of natural learning through direct physical experience has been a particularly important source of inspiration, as have other thinkers, such as Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold. (Ohman & Sandell, 2016, p. 30-40)

**Environmental Education**

Environmental education has been seen as a means to address environmental issues worldwide, as is described by outdoor environmental advocate Mike Brown (2014). According to Brown, environmental education should be a lifelong education that is responsive to changes in a rapidly changing world. The goal of environmental education is to develop citizens who are concerned about the environment and have the knowledge, skills, motivation, and commitment to work toward solutions of current problems and the prevention of new ones. David Sobel, has noted that some educators believe environmental education is too narrow and carries too much baggage because of its emphasis on impending environmental catastrophes such as rainforest destruction, ozone depletion, toxic waste and endangered species (2005). He believes the emphasis should be on getting children outside to develop relationships with the natural worlds that are close by in order to develop a personal concern for environmental issues. This idea is also brought up in Richard Louv’s research:
Much of environmental education today has taken on a museum mentality, where nature is a composed exhibit on the other side of the glass. Children can look at it and study it, but they can't do anything with it. The message is: Nature is fragile. Look, but don't touch. Ironically, this “take only photographs, leave only footprints” mindset crops up in the policies and programs of many organizations trying to preserve the natural world and cultivate children's relationships to it. (2007, p.81)

Environmental education is embedded within our culture’s history and ideas about nature, including ideas about wilderness and the preservation of nature.

**Nature, Wilderness, and Education**

Current discussion and discourse about nature and education is framed within our cultures’ ideas about nature, which continue to evolve (Graham, 2017). The stories we tell ourselves about nature deeply influence how we attempt to preserve, use, or restore nature as well as practices of art and art education that are concerned with ecological issues, as is noted by environmental historian and scholar William Cronon (1996). He, along with Simon Schama, observes that landscapes are culture before they are nature (Schama, 1996). Yet, our ideas about wilderness, nature, landscape, and sustainability are fraught with paradox and debate. Cronon (1996) states that what we describe as wilderness is complicated by culture, history, politics, and story. What we now describe as a wilderness that needs to be preserved, was once described as a deserted, savage, desolate and barren waste.

Biblical descriptions often associate wilderness with moral confusion and despair. Moses wandered the wilderness for forty years. The children of Israel in Exodus “are entangled in the land, the wilderness hath shut them in” (Exodus 4:3). The wilderness is where Christ was tempted by the Devil. Adam and Eve were sent out of the Garden of Eden
into the wilderness. 250 years ago, wilderness seemed have little worth and was a place that civilized men and women avoided. This view of the wilderness started to change in the 18th and 19th nineteenth centuries. Henry David Thoreau and John Muir changed the description of wilderness to something that is restorative and healing. Thoreau emphasized closeness to nature as an antidote to society’s materialism. Wilderness in America came to be described as being Eden or heaven or the sublime. National parks were set apart as nature preserves. Wilderness became sacred and was seen as a cathedral for those who wished to worship.

William Cronan (2011), the environmental historian, points out the ironies of wilderness designation by describing how Native Americans were removed from virgin wilderness to make a national park. “The removal of Indians to create an “uninhabited wilderness” --uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place---reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is” (p.79). In my own curriculum, I wanted to critically examine these culturally accepted ideas about nature, wilderness, and our relationships with the natural world.

Gary Nabhan (1994), an agrarian activist and ethnobiologist, believes that most children have a predilection for playing in nest-like refuges or microhabitats. He gave his children permission to go explore outside of their desert home. He expected the children to walk far away for view of vistas and landscapes to which we as adults are drawn. Instead his children stayed close by and spent their time building a camouflaged fort. Nabhan also described how his son views as wilderness. His seven-year-old son said that wilderness is full of plants and animals and rocks. Wilderness is where there are no roads. It is not caged in. It is not surrounded by chicken wire. Wilderness, as Nabhan describes it, is not some scenic
backdrop to gaze at; “it is responsive to our exploratory urges. It is where you can play. In a word, playfulness may be the essence of wilderness experience” (p13).

Many researchers cite connections between nature and wilderness experiences and a sense of reverence. Robert Johnson, an influential Jungian psychologist, cited his own experiences: “All my experience as a psychologist leads me to the conclusion that a sense of reverence is necessary for psychological health” (as quoted in Gablik, 1991, p. 76). According to art critic Susan Gablik, our culture often does not see the earth as a source of spiritual renewal, instead, we see it as a stockpile of raw materials to be exploited and consumed. “If a person has no sense of reverence, no feeling that there is anyone or anything that inspires awe, it cuts the conscious personality off completely from the nourishing springs of the unconscious” (Gablik, 1991, p.76). According to Gablik, “Artistic projects can offer tools for reflection, discussion, awareness and action that lead to new ways of thinking about and of being in the world” (Gablik, 1991, p.169). Within the history of art, nature and place have always been recurring themes from early cave paintings to the mountain landscapes of Albert Bierstadt.

**Multiple Intelligences and Literacies**

Students have different kinds of literacies or ways to understand or represent knowledge (Barney, 2015). Texts include written explanations, poetry, images and even the natural world. Each text involves its own form of literacy. One of my goals was to help my students become more literate in reading the natural world through the language of art making. An important part of my art education curriculum was to find multiple ways for my students to represent their learning within situations that were mostly based on non-traditional kinds of experiences. This approach has its roots in the work of cognitive scientist
Howard Gardner who studied the role of art, literacy and cognition for many years and formulated the theory of multiple intelligences (1983, 2005).

Gardner stated that because of their biological and cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and idiosyncratic experiences, students do not arrive in school as blank slates, nor as individuals who can be aligned along a single axis of intellectual accomplishment. They possess different kinds of minds, with different strengths, interests, and modes of processing information. Gardner describes different intelligences as different ways of learning about or understanding the world. According to Gardner, teaching that uses the ideas multiple intelligence explicitly call upon a range of ways to represent knowledge, skills, and interests (Illeris, 2009).

Place-based education and ecological based education that emphasizes outside, experiential learning speak to multiple ways of learning, thinking and representing knowledge in order to reach many types of learners. Interdisciplinary, or integrated art instruction within my curriculum provided ways to enhance understanding and introduce connections between subjects while targeting varying types of intelligences. Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences proposes that there are eight intelligences. In subsequent research, he added the Naturalist (nature smart) intelligence, which is particularly relevant to my study. Other intelligences described by Gardner include: Musical (sound smart), Logical-mathematical (number/reasoning smart), Existential (life smart), Interpersonal (people smart), Bodily-kinesthetic (body smart), Linguistic (word smart), Intra-personal (self-smart), Spatial (picture smart). Gardner believed that these intelligences are ways for people to interact with the world and that every human has a configuration of all of them in different degrees. He stated, “Only if we expand and reformulate our views of what
counts as human intellect will we be able to devise more appropriate ways of assessing it and more effective ways of educating it” (p.4).

In art education a strong relationship to multiple intelligences is evident in the idea of arts integration as is described by Meryl Goldberg, a well-known advocate for arts integration (2012). According to Goldberg, Gardner’s theory is useful to art educators who are seeking to broaden their notions of literacy. Goldberg states that arts integration “broadens the definition of the role of the arts in learning to include their (the arts’) use as a medium or language to translate, reflect on, and work with ideas and concepts” (p.6). As students engage in making art linked with place, ecology and nature, they may make new discoveries and connections with the natural world.

**Holistic Education**

Holistic education emphasizes teaching and learning that includes the whole child, not just their intellectual abilities and has many connections to experiential learning and theories of multiple intelligences. Holistic education often includes the spiritual dimensions of education as a balance for courses of study based entirely on objective factual information. Educating the whole child is endorsed by the Waldorf Schools. The first Waldorf School was developed by Rudolf Steiner in 1991. The educational philosophy was intended to address holistic potential of each child including their physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual possibilities. Some educators have suggested that these needs may be met through art integration and by spending a significant amount of time outside exploring, playing and learning (Nordland, 2013).
Teacher Well-Being

One challenge for teachers and students is that schools often enforce a testing culture that results in the narrowing of school curriculum. In some schools, there is no art, recess, theater, dance, or social studies, and shortened PE. A narrowed curriculum can have a negative impact on teacher motivation. “When teachers' motivation is consistently frustrated and when they are discouraged from doing what they think is right and best for the children, teachers sometimes burn out and quit the classroom” (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2018, p.15). Bullough and Hall-Kenyon, two well-known scholars of teacher education, believe we should be deeply concerned that teachers are happy, engaged, and highly committed to their work. Schools need to be interesting places for teachers and need to be attentive to their professional and personal growth. “John Goodlad once remarked that the best indication of the quality of a school is that children are happy when they are there. Because teaching is a relationship, flourishing teachers are required for children to flourish’” (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2018, p.19). This study was particularly concerned with the effect that designing and implementing my curriculum had my own teaching and attitudes toward teaching. Although I was very interested in how my students responded, I was equally interested in figuring out how to make my work as a teacher more interesting and fulfilling.

Other Narratives About Nature

An important aspect of my study is getting students outside and working through ideas about nature. Our understandings about nature and how we interact with the non-human world are influenced by culture and ways of knowing. By applying a critical pedagogy and critical place-based methodology to curriculum and teaching, I hoped to examine romanticized or taken for granted assumptions about nature, wilderness, and
outdoor education. As noted earlier, our culture’s ideas about nature and wilderness have evolved and continue to evolve.

According to visual art and media education critic and scholar Jan Jagodzinski, spiritual conceptions of Nature strive to reconnect humans with their transcendental conceptions of Nature and return us to “an Eden-ic time when body and mind were in harmony together in/with Nature” (2013, p. 278). Jagodzinski’s critical reminder is that Nature, or the “open space of radical otherness and alterity” (p. 279) is not something for us to control or predict. He reminds us that Nature can be horrifying and entirely ambivalent about humans. The beauty and horror of Nature are intertwined and interdependent. Just as Thoreau and John Muir described the beauty of and harmony of nature, Herman Melville describes the terrors of nature. Perhaps we have never been in harmony with Nature, and our hunger for harmony is a fantastical delusion. Jagodzinski (2013) writes,

> [t]he enchantment of Nature is both magical and uncanny; it is the magical side of the re-enchantment that the art education literature continues to forward, repressing its monstrosity—its uncanniness…Thus, while we may strive to use the arts as a vehicle to (re)turn to Nature, Nature, with its chaos, complexity, ambivalence, violence, and absolute unpredictability, will not (re)turn to us. It will continue to work and enjoy itself “in its own meaningless way. (p. 279)

He writes that our symbolic and superficial turns toward Nature are perhaps manifestations of our “fetishistic disavowal” (p. 279) of an ecological crisis that is already here.

**Summary**

The literature surrounding ecological and place-based education overlaps with ideas about outdoor education, environmental education, critical place-based pedagogy, theories of
intelligence, notions of literacy, and holistic education. Each of these areas include substantial research and commentary. I have included only a brief overview of these topics in order to give my study a sense of context and relevance.
CHAPTER 3: Research Methodology

This study explored the possibilities of teaching and learning within an immersive, experiential curriculum designed to get students involved with important questions about nature and their relationship with local places and ecological questions. I was interested both in how these experiences influenced student learning and how they influenced my own teaching and my relationships with students. Hence, the study has an important self-reflective element. My research was informed by qualitative case study approaches as well as action research, and what I am calling art based ecological inquiry, which created in practice a kind of hybrid research methodology that evolved as I studied my own responses and my students’ responses.

Research Questions

I sought personal insights about teaching and learning from designing and implementing learning experiences based on an immersive outdoor art curriculum. I focused on two research questions:

1. How might a curriculum based on an investigation and artistic inquiry of place, ecology, and outdoor experiences influence student learning, mindfulness, attitudes toward learning, sense of place, ecological literacy and art making?

2. What are the affordances and limitations of constructing and implementing a curriculum as currere, based on immersive, outdoor art experiences, on my own teaching and on student and teacher relationships?

This project took place outside of my normal classroom using various sites within the local environment close to where the student participants live. The program I designed was called Wild Art School. Wild Art School was a cross-disciplinary week-long summer
program for students 12-14 years designed as an immersive, experiential approach to creating and learning about art. Our studies included artists whose work deals with issues of nature and ecology. During the program, students hiked, camped, and experienced the Utah mountains. Students studied ecology, learned wilderness survival skills, and visited natural sites throughout the Salt Lake Valley.

**Research Methodology**

My research methodology was informed by several overlapping approaches to research. These include arts-based ecological inquiry, a/r/tography, case study and action research methodologies. Ultimately, it was a qualitative case study of a particular educational experiment that included my own autobiographical musings about place, art, wildness, adventure, and education. I will describe these various methodologies as a prelude to a description of how I conducted my own research. Although I did not fully engage in any of these methodologies, my approach to research attempted to incorporate important ideas from each of them. A full description of the curriculum and my approach to curriculum theory is described in chapter four.

**A/r/tography**

A/r/tography is a relatively new, but globally active, practice-based methodology that emphasizes the practices of artists, researchers, and teachers. A/r/tography is a qualitative methodology that enables artists, researchers, and teachers to investigate their overlapping identities and question their personal practices, while simultaneously collecting and generating data (Bickel 2008; de Cosson et al. 2005; Irwin et al. 2006). The methodology is largely autobiographical in its approach and uses descriptions of particular situations that allow for subjective interpretations.
A/r/tography is a relational form of inquiry that pursues meaning making, understanding, and the creation of knowledge that is embodied and situational. Again, the goal of this research was not to produce objective, generalizable truths, but rather to enlarge my personal understandings about a phenomenon, and in turn, enlarge the interpretive frames of my identities as artist, researcher, and teacher. Arts based research includes the idea that artistic artifacts can be utilized as data and the artistic inquiry process itself is a form of both data and data analysis. Irwin (2017) affirmed that a/r/tographers “pay attention to the evolution of inquiry-led questions. It is here that the a/r/toographic project often becomes a transformative act of inquiry” (p. 104). In my research, I adopted the overlapping roles of teacher, artist and researcher that were connected to the study. I also embraced the autobiographical character of a/r/tography and its goal to transform the researcher as well as to describe what was going on.

**Arts-Based Ecological Inquiry**

An arts-based ecological art inquiry is a research methodology that contemplates a partnership and relationship between nonhuman communities and the human culture (Graham, 2015). The study of place and community are used in this methodology to explore ways of living and having a relationship with the existing world around us. Ecological art inquiries can also counterbalance the disconnection from the natural world with a paradigm of ecological complexity and respect for the non-human world. This type of methodology recognizes the entanglements between researcher, participants, and the surrounding environment.

This type of research emphasizes a caring, relational view of life bound to specific places and communities. Connections in communities are valued. Non-human communities
are given voice alongside their human counterparts. This provokes a holistic, learner
centered, domain specific, context sensitive, and transformative approach to research. The
researcher does not attempt to be an objective outsider but is collaborating, participating, and
interacting in the research (Graham, 2015). In this study, I am interested in the interactions
and relationships of students, their own artistic inquiries, the natural world, the teacher, and
the content of the project. This type of research can be comparable to a social justice research
methodology in that the researcher is advocating for the marginalized non-human
communities. Not only were we working outside, we were attempting to understand some of
the issues surrounding nature.

**Case Study Research**

Case study methodology also informed my research. Case study methodology allows
researchers to examine an individual, a group, a variable, an episode, or a series of episodes
to gain insights into phenomena or issues or to identify new areas for inquiry (Crowe,
Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery, & Sheikh, 2011). I studied two groups of students in a
non-traditional learning environment in order to gain insights into my own teaching,
curriculum, and the ecology of learning. It was a qualitative study focusing on rich
descriptions without expected outcomes of concrete facts and figures. Case studies allow for
open-endedness and creative applications. Case studies can be used as a way to evaluate
programs (Quinn & Kahn, 2001), can help develop or test hypotheses (Tollefson-Hall, 2009)
and can involve action research (Chung, 2009; Zimmerman, 1992). A case study can allow
for insights into the nuances of art education practices that might be missed by other types of
research. Ultimately, my study was a rich qualitative description of students and my own
teaching within a particular context.
Action Research

Action research is a methodology in which the practitioner seeks to improve her own practice. It has a significant self-reflective element. Generally, once a situation is studied and evaluated, the practitioner will adjust and hopefully improve their practice (McNiff, 2013). Action research is a relatively new form of research that is well suited to art educators. The systematic, cyclical design of action research has been adapted by many public-school districts for professional development and is commonly referred to as reflective practice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). Simply put, action research in education involves recognizing the need to change something in the teaching practice, creating a plan towards that change, taking action and collecting data based on the plan, analyzing the data from the action, reviewing or reflecting upon those results, modifying the plan as need be, and implementing it (taking action) again (Adams, 2006; Ferrance, 2000; Painter, 2009).

I did not embrace a full action research mode of research; however, I was influenced by the ideas of an iterative reflection designed to improve my own practice. Hence, I conducted two consecutive iterations of the Wild Art School in an attempt to get better at it.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative Inquiry is a qualitative research methodology focused on stories of experience. Narrative and autobiographical methods fall under the broader category of qualitative inquiry (Chase, 2005), and are particularly well-suited to uncovering the nuances of human experience through story. “Issues of complexity and human centeredness” are the focus of a narrative inquiry study (Webster & Mertove, 2007, p.3). I wanted to gather my own stories and the stories of my students as part of my study. Stories are a different way of
representing knowledge that often have the power to evoke the reality of the situation in a more effective way than a factual description.

**Autobiographical or Autoethnographic Research**

Autobiographical inquiry research aims to increase understanding of experience through comparing past, present and future actions and behaviors. We look at past experiences through our present-day lens. By doing this we can become more aware of how we have constructed our sense of self through the many facets of our life. These include media, memory, practices, institutions, ideologies, and power relations. From reflecting on past experiences, we can direct future actions. A reader of our research can get a sense of our lives and how our own life was woven into our narrative (Kalin, 2013, p.235).

Self-study and autobiographical research draw on one's life experiences and gives particular thought to connections from those experiences to one's teaching practice. Hamilton and Pinnegar (2004) proposed that self-study draws on more than the elements of one's life. “Self-study also involves a thoughtful look at text read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered. These are investigated for their connections with and relationships to practice as a teacher educator” (p.236). A key part of my methodology was my study of my own life as a teacher. I conducted an autobiographical study centered on my practice both within the confines of my classroom environment and outside those classroom walls.

**Going for a Walk: A Research Methodology**

My research explored two interrelated questions: How an immersive outdoor art experience might influence student learning and how this teaching experience might influence my own ideas about pedagogy. My research was also highly personal and autobiographical in its exploration of walking, environmental learning, and artmaking. The
research methodology that fits my questions and interests most closely can be described as a qualitative case study informed by my own autoethnographic reflections (Kalin, 2013).

**Data and Methods of Gathering Data**

My personal teaching practice both in the classroom and in other environments was a key part of my research. I used my own journals and writings as data. Documentation of student interactions, responses, artwork, reflections, and conversations were also data for this study. This documentation included video, student writing, student art work, and my own written observations. I included fellow teacher and videographer Amy Ollerton in most of our activities. She was able to document what went on through video. This allowed me to be more fully engaged with the students.

**Self-questioning.** A teacher-researcher engaged in the self-study of practice might use self-questioning to generate data including questions such as: Who am I as a teacher? What does it mean to be a teacher? Who are the students? What are their needs as learners? How do I come to know them as persons and learners? How do I teach? What teaching methods are most appropriate?

Part of the process in self-study research is to make public what is normally private. I used critical reflective practices, such as journal entries, personal artworks, and autobiographical narratives to gather information. I used journaling as a means of documenting my personal stories regarding my teacher and studio practice. I included photographs from my teaching portfolio, which documented my personal artworks, travels overseas, exhibiting experiences. I also included pamphlets of lectures and exhibitions that I attended. In gathering these artifacts and stories, I made multiple comparisons between the
elements in my teaching portfolio, my journal writings and responses from a survey that I posted to two art education listervs.
CHAPTER 4: Curriculum

One purpose of this project was to improve my own teaching practice, and to reflect on teaching and learning in an experimental, immersive, outdoor environment. I recruited a total of 26 students who were interested in attending a summer art course. These students ranged from ages 11-14, including 8 boys and 18 girls. I conducted two sessions of this summer art course, one in June and one in July. Session one had 10 students and session two had 16 students.

The learning activities of the week-long project included discussions, looking at photos, videos, art making, gathering and assembling collections, discussions with visiting artists and scientists, and ecological studies at various sites including the Great Salt Lake, Red Butte Gardens, Ensign Peak, the Natural History Museum, and the Utah State Capitol. As a junior high school teacher, I am familiar with how busy students can be during the summer. Consequently, I determined to do two, one-week iterations of the project in order to make the project more feasible for students and parents.

Curriculum as an Ecological Text and Contemporary Art

According to Daniel Barney (2009),

(the intent is) to provoke thinking as an artist, not in terms of following prescribed sequential methods or processes. To be an artist not necessarily defined solely as one who acquires specific techniques or skills but to suggest that students are capable of knowing and engaging in the world artistically as they interact critically with historical and contemporary practices and discourses. (p.148)
Curricular and Teaching Contexts

During the semester before this study, I taught at a charter school in Draper, Utah. The emphasis of this school is academics, rigor, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The Mission Statement included: Provide a rigorous educational environment based on the principles of high academic achievement and specialized instruction for the benefit of all students.

The stated values of the school include:

- School is a student-centered learning community based on the principles of safety and respect.
- Teachers are innovative, committed and motivated to provide quality professional instruction.
- Parental involvement is important to the personal success of each student.
- School’s curriculum builds from year to year and specializes in core knowledge acquisition and application (Summit Academy, 2017).

In my own curriculum and teaching, I hope to add to these values: happiness, innovation, experiences, inquiry, and unexpected outcomes. In my school, teachers were required to have an objective posted in sight in our classroom for every class we teach. Although I understand it can be important to have some sort of learning goal in mind for our students, when designing a curriculum, I believe that it is also important to leave space for unexpected learning outcomes and unplanned teaching.

Curriculum Theory

According to influential cultural critic and environmental advocate C. A. Bowers, a post-liberal approach to learning is an attempt to move beyond individualism and focus on
dialogue, ecology and community, the ecological, communal, dialogical (Bowers & Flanders, 1990). One aspect of a post-modern approach to curriculum is that it creates a reality which is always emerging, a “proliferating realization of the yet possible rather than on a convergence toward an already existing Truth” (Doll, 2012, p. 151). An ecological approach to curriculum can be seen as a way of thinking in which cooperation, balance, and respect for others becomes central.

Curriculum as an Ecological Text

Ecology studies the interactions among organisms and their relationships with the environment. This makes it difficult to study any particular thing by itself, rather, everything must be studied in relationship with everything else. An ecological approach to curriculum should include the complex relationships among students, between students and teacher, and in this case, the natural, outside environments including ecosystems. I like the idea of curriculum as currere, which means seeing curriculum more as a verb or an action rather than an object. A good metaphor for this is, curriculum as taking a walk, echoing Richard Long’s *A line made by walking*.

My curriculum described ways of knowing and learning that are valuable to me but are often ignored by ordinary schooling. In this case, I am placing value on the teacher and students having a particular kind of experience, the results of which cannot be entirely anticipated. I could compare this type of curriculum to contemporary art. Much of what contemporary art focuses on is creating an experience for people. An artist can have a particular viewer experience in mind, but often the experience a viewer has when viewing a work of art is unexpected and personal. My approach also values slowing down in order to
become more engaged with the aesthetics of place and experience, to step back and notice what was formerly not noticed (Cutcher & Irwin, 2017).

One rationale for slowing down is to increase our awareness of ecological issues. Scientists, and educators are warning us about the self-destructive course of humanity and recognize the school curriculum as a way to inform students about climate change, environmental pollution, and unrestrained growth (Slattery, 2013). According to curriculum theorist Patrick Slattery, it is important to approach these issues holistically, through an interdisciplinary curriculum that critically examines connections between culture, language, and ecology in an effort to both inform and transform.

**Let’s Go for a Walk: Currere**

I am interested in the complex relationships among students, between students and teacher, and in natural, outside environments. Everything must be studied in relationship with everything else. So, for example, when I look at a student’s artwork, I am not so concerned with it being a “good” drawing, but how it reflects the student’s experience and interaction within the place. Some things remain similar to a standard curriculum; I talk and have class sessions and discussions. But I am also interested walking around and exploring new places with them.

I use the idea of curriculum as currere in my curricular designs and my teaching. Currere means seeing curriculum more as a verb or proposition rather than an object. Often curriculum is represented as “the course to be run” over what we know and needs to be transmitted to students. Teachers often emphasize covering the material. Currere defines curriculum as a process rather than simply an object (Slattery, 2017). One feature of this approach is attentiveness to autobiographical and phenomenological experience. This means
my own experiences or autobiography are important parts of the curriculum/research. Rather than only thinking of curriculum as a tangible object like a lesson plan, it is also the process or action of running the course.

I interpreted this curriculum as a walk. Curriculum, like methodology, might describe ways of knowing that are valuable, which in this case, were students and teacher having certain kinds of experiences together. I hoped for my students to become engaged with the aesthetics of a place, to step back, slow down and notice what was formerly not noticed (Cutcher & Irwin, 2017).

My teaching practices don’t fit very well into a traditional curriculum structure. I would like to dig a little deeper into how to represent curriculum. For example, curriculum could be represented as a cabinet of curiosities or a grove of aspen trees or by taking a walk. Curriculum could also be seen as movement or action that is about not knowing or about intuition. This is why an art studio, laboratory, or going outside are interesting learning situations. In a laboratory you may be exploring a hypothesis and in the studio you may be making an artistic inquiry where you don’t know what the end result might be. When you go outside the experience is full of unexpected possibilities. As teachers we deliberately try to set up opportunities for our students, but I want to have plans that deliberately engage with complex, unpredictable outcomes and that can be altered if other opportunities arise.

Currere allows students and teachers to be mindful. They are allowed to live in the moment, to make the most of it, and appreciate the experience by not dwelling on what needs to be done next in order to attain the objective. William Pinar is one of the first scholars to reconceptualize curriculum as individual experience and currere (Slattery, 2013). Curriculum
as currere is attentive both to the interconnectedness of all experiences and to the importance of the autobiographical perspective.

**Ideas About Nature and Criticality**

An important element of my curriculum is the idea of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is often applied to social situations in order to reveal and change oppressive practices. I wanted to use critical pedagogy in our study of and relationship with nature. Ideas about nature have a rich history in art and culture and are generative sources for teaching and learning that emphasizes experiences with local ecology. But most students rarely question cultural assumptions about nature and have only a vague awareness of the rich ecological and human communities that surround their schools. The character of local culture and ecology is easily hidden by modern civilization as local plants and animals are made invisible. Yet critical ecological challenges require teaching that reconnects children with the natural world and local communities (Graham, 2017).

**Critical pedagogy.** Well-known curriculum theorist Ira Shor defines critical pedagogy as follows:

Habits of thought, reading, writing and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (1992, p.129)

There are many approaches to getting children engaged with the natural world. Many art teachers use nature as subject matter for their own work and for the work of their students.
One of the distinguishing things about my approach is that I wanted our study to have a critical context. I wanted to explore, and I wanted my students to explore how nature is, in many respects, a cultural concept.

Walking

The idea of the walking teacher draws on traditions of a teacher as a walking guide. For example, the Buddhist Bodhisattva walks people toward increasing consciousness, forever going back to accompany new pilgrims. For the bodhisattva, the state of enlightenment is a kind of pilgrimage, of constantly walking with new people, as described by walking artist Ernesto Pujol (2018). This could also describe the work of a middle school teacher.

Walking has been a staple of art practice since the 1960's. And even before that, it was seen as an important creative methodology by English Romantic poets. Walking can involve a de-familiarization, a way to rethink what has become habitual, as a refusal to accept what is taken for granted and as an embrace of an alternative form. It is about physical engagement as part of how we know the world (Truman, & Springgay, 2016). In immersive practices such as walking or weaving, what matters is not conceptual categories as much as repetition and physical orientations (Irwin, 2017). Walking is a kinesthetic space that continues to produce a new experience of nature. It can be a means to connect with the earth, and to be at one with nature. Walking can be a way to gather stillness, a form of therapy, and a mystical communion (Thrift, 2008).

There are many ways to think about walking. It can be thought of as resistance to the post-industrial loss of sense of embodiment. It can be a methodology of slowness. It appears in the ancient practices of poets and monks or practitioners of Buddhist walking meditation.
Walking was embraced by the English Romantic poets as an essential way to gain inspiration. Walking appears as hiking, mountaineering, and flâneury. In the 1960s a new form emerged: Walking as art (Solnit, 2000). Walking is both a curricular metaphor for this project and a pedagogical action.

My curriculum and research include ideas about walking as art and other immersive art practices like drawing that might be a catalyst for ecological or social awareness. Walking and drawing could change the character of research, teaching practices and ways to think about knowledge. In walking, thinking and movement are connected. Scholars Rita Irwin, Valerie Triggs, Carl Leggo, and Stephanie Spinggay have written extensively about the intersections between a/r/tography and immersive practices such as walking (Triggs, Irwin, & Leggo, 2014).

Walking as de-familiarization. Walking can be a way to rethink what has become habitual or to deconstruct the taken for granted. Walking can be seen as a milieu, a site of interaction involving an immersion in a place (Truman, & Springgay, 2016). There is a non-cognitive element to walking that might include a transcendent understanding that goes beyond a linear segmentation of time (Slattery, 2017). These might be thought of as moments when time stands still; moments of clarity or insight or aesthetic awareness. These types of experiences are sometimes associated with a state of flow as described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), who investigated optimal experience. He suggests that what makes an experience genuinely satisfying is a state of consciousness called flow. During flow, people typically experience deep enjoyment, creativity, and a total involvement with life.
**Walking as slowing down.** Beginning with Richard Long, walking becomes an entangled mapping that involves slowing down in order to become fully engaged with the aesthetics of place, of experience, and of movement. It can be thought of as an enactment of slow scholarship, which foregrounds the importance of noticing, lingering, and reflecting. Slow scholarship and slow pedagogy have become important counterpoints to modern schooling practices. In this context, artistic actions such as painting, or drawing, are less about representation and more about being present and fully engaged (Cuther, & Irwin, 2017).

Philosopher and educator Nigel Thrift (2008) argues that walking is one of several current immersive practices that produce a new form of vitalism that aspires to a peculiar attunement with the natural world. In art practices such as walking, the way we recognize things is not so much a mental categorization or schema, but in how walking changes our physical orientation to things. Walking slowly can balance or cure our obsession with speed. Contemporary culture privileges speed and slowness is seen as dull. But slowing down allows us to see more, to encounter what is invisible at speed (Pujol, 2018).

**Nature and walking.** Nature and walking are, to some degree, cultural constructions. In Western culture, attitudes toward walking have changed, as have attitudes toward nature. Landscapes previously viewed as dark, foreboding, or unrewarding came to be seen as liberating, inspirational, and spiritual. Walking became something other than a chore or the province of the vagabond. These attitudes can be traced through the writings of Rousseau and Romantic Movement, which were embraced by the English poet William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. Walking became a fundamental part of their artistic methodology.
(Coverley, 2012). They were prodigious walkers, and walking became a way to experience
the natural world directly and intensely.

In America, one of the greatest of all walkers was Henry David Thoreau, who chose a
pedestrian life as a protest against the encroachments of the city and as an expression of free
thinking. His mystical and transcendent view of the natural world helped shape American
attitudes toward nature as a place of spiritual nourishment, where the wild could
counterbalance the ills of civilized society (Coverley, 2012). For Thoreau, walking was an
expression of both freedom and wildness. Thoreau’s ideals about walking and nature were
adopted by the naturalist John Muir, whose writing about nature did much to inspire the
movement to preserve natural places. Muir was also a great walker. His philosophy is
encapsulated in his journal; “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out
until sundown, for going out, I found I was really going in” (as quoted in Coverley, 2012, p. 121).

Nature can offer an opportunity for getting lost or going beyond what is already
known. The Greek philosopher Meno asks: “How will you go about finding the thing, the
nature of which is completely unknown to you” (Meno, quoted in Solnit, 2005, p. 4). The
problem is how to get lost. “It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience
to be lost in the woods any time…Not till we are lost, in other words, have lost the world, do
we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are, and the infinite extend of our relations
(Thoreau, quoted in Solnit, 2005, p. 15). Once we get lost, the world becomes larger than our
knowledge of it.

A walk may just be walk, or it may take on the character of a pilgrimage. Thoreau’s
idyllic nature was in the forest of New England, but other walkers have explored the
possibilities of walking in the desert. Muslims are encouraged to take a journey to Mecca in order to walk in the footsteps of Muhammad. Walking meditations are used by some Buddhists to focus the mind (Nicholson, 2008). Jack Kerouac, a self-invented Buddhist, part of the group of writers and musicians that informed the work of Richard Long, thought that enlightenment was something that had to be worked at, and said, “Walking on water wasn’t built in a day” (Nicholson, 2008, p. 195).

Walking may surprise us with what we meet along nature’s paths and may cause us to question our civilized beliefs. In addition to the footpath or the “line made by walking”, nature is already crisscrossed by multiple paths both visible and invisible. A curriculum most often describes a path of investigation or a tour of existing knowledge. The way forward is an essential part of the curriculum. Teaching, like walking embraces repetition, a patient repeated articulation that can happen in many ways as is noted by walking artist Ernesto Pujol (2018). But curriculum as an ecological text also incorporates the myriad paths that already exist around us that may take us in surprising or unforeseen directions.

As noted earlier, our notions of nature and walking are cultural constructions and full of contradictions. What does walking in nature really mean? The critic Geoff Nicholson (2008) blames Thoreau for current waves of New Age romanticism that equates walking in nature with spirituality. Nicholson points out that people who want to walk in nature want a very specific version of nature that conforms to what he calls “spiritual-lite” (p. 177). This version is a managed nature, which in the 21st century, includes just about every American environment. Our need for human interventions suggests that nature might not be the compassionate nurturing and spiritual place of the American transcendentalist-New Wave animism insist that it is, but rather contains more noxious and dangerous elements.
jagodzinski’s (2013) critical reminder is that Nature is not something for us to control or predict. In addition to being inspirational and nourishing, nature can be unforgiving, dangerous, rough and completely indifferent.

**Curriculum Design and Representing Curriculum**

As described earlier, my curriculum and teaching are informed by several theoretical constructs that seek to conceive of curriculum as something different than an inert object or topics to be covered. It is also informed by the ideas of place-based education, outdoor education, environmentalism and art, critical theory, and postmodern approaches to curriculum that include the notion of curriculum as currere. The design and content of my curriculum was informed by the ideas of multiple intelligences and holistic education.

For example, within a place-based approach, an assignment could be asking students to pick a place, perhaps near their school, and go out and write or draw in that place at various intervals during the class. This assignment asks students to figure out a place that appeals to them and make a personal connection to it. Students tune in to the fact that the natural environment is always changing. They may notice the changing seasons, the quality of light, temperature, birds, flowering of trees, dropping of leaves. Furthermore, the journal or sketch connects modes of observation and reflection, so just as students observe changes in a locale, they also observe their changing moods, reflections, and memories. Drawing is not so much about making pictures as it is about noticing, observing and becoming aware of context (Louv, 2013).

**Rationale**

The rationale for this project and curriculum was for students to begin to recognize the social and ecological connections and “consequences of climate change, economic
globalization, and resource exhaustion” in their local environments (Smith & Sobel, 2010, p.viii). Other important reasons for this project were for my students to have immersive outdoor experiences and to create a different environment or set of propositions for my own teaching. Students may begin to recognize how environmental inequality, such as when a social group is unequally affected by environmental hazards, is the product of social inequalities such as racism, sexism, classism, political climates, and other prejudices (Brulle & Pellow, 2006). Through a critical, place-based approach, students can begin to understand that climate change, globalization, resource exhaustion and environmental inequalities are not just ecological problems, they are inextricably linked to social problems (Kahn & Kotchen, 2010).

I have noticed that my junior high school students aren’t thinking critically, aren’t forming connections with the environment in which they live, and lack experiences with nature. I designed a curriculum and teaching experiences to see what might happen to my students’ thinking and attitudes. It is based on the question: How would a completely different school environment such as an art classroom in the mountains influence student learning, attitudes, and art making ideas? Testing and test performance are often seen as the primary ways to improve educational outcomes. Is there room for exploration, play, boredom, wonder, or nature in school curricula? How might students think about the character of art, the potential of art, and the social impacts of art? Can we give students experiences to form their own conclusions, ask their own questions and construct their own knowledge? Is it possible to provide experiences where they can apply what they are learning? Is there value in activities such as walking that are typically seen by students as mundane, repetitive, or boring?
Curriculum and Learning Objectives

According to art critic and historian Karen O'Rourke, (2016)

A protocol is a rule, guideline, or document that specifies how an activity should be performed. In the natural sciences, it is a predefined written procedural method in the design and implementation of experiments... In contemporary art, a protocol is a set of rules that an artist establishes to realize an artwork, it is a statement of intention and informs the viewer's understanding of the results. (p.47)

Curriculum and learning objectives could be thought of in the same way. O’Rourke goes on to say,

Defining objectives and methods in a preliminary document facilitates collaboration. Some prefer the terms scenario script, or score, borrowed from the performing arts. Unlike its scientific counterpart, an artistic protocol may deliberately leave room for interpretation, thus making it possible for a work to be executed in more than one way to be restaged by someone else. (p.47)

I like to think of curriculum as an experiment or research proposition, rather than a path toward pre-determined objectives. According to curriculum theorist James McKernan (2008), “One of the great challenges of our time is to teach for understanding as distinct from memorization and to view education as the construction of personal meaning rather than the reproduction of meaning” (p.38). McKernan believes that the teacher should be a researcher using action research. According the McKernan, research should be conducted by the practitioner who experiences a problem, with a view to improving the quality of action in the problematic situation through reconstructed actions.
One of the defining characteristics of McKernan’s work is the attempt to plan without objectives and to utilize action research in the educational experience. Curriculum, like teaching, may be considered an art or creative action. I hoped to create a curriculum in which I could experiment and lead students to unanticipated outcomes. The students would be able to apply what they learned because the things we learned about related to the things that truly matter in life. “The curriculum must, if successful, ignite the human imagination” (McKernan, 2008, p.1). Curriculum is a research proposal or educative plan that needs to be field-tested.

If students go outside, break their routine, run free, work as a class, and experience school outside the classroom on a normal school day they may not accomplish ordinary learning goals fast and efficiently. When a student asks, “So we’re just going for a walk?” there is an implication that this may be just wasted time. But, slowing down can impact a child’s experience, memory, and knowledge of a project or help a child become excited about a subject or skill. If students can’t make their own meaning out of learning, how can they become excited, enthused, and engaged in learning? In my own teaching, I need to ask better questions, and lead better conversations.

**Big Ideas in Curriculum Design**

In *Rethinking Curriculum in Art* (2005) Marilyn Stewart suggests that enduring ideas are foundational for curriculum in art. Marilyn Stewart is an influential curriculum theorist who embraced a Discipline Based Art Education approach using enduring ideas as an organizing principle. An enduring idea may extend beyond any one subject matter or discipline by making connections to many disciplines. She defines enduring ideas as themes that reflect big questions about the human experience. They are themes, topics or issues that
reflect big questions about the human experience and have been investigated over time. They are broad, umbrella-like ideas that guide students in understanding what it means to be human and to live alongside others and in the natural world. My enduring or organizing idea for this project was ideas about nature.

In a similar way, art educator Olivia Gude (2013), described how curriculum can be effectively designed around the idea of the project. She borrows the notion of enduring ideas and stresses the importance of connecting these ideas both to contemporary artistic practices and the social and cultural lives of students. She describes a project as a borrowed artistic practice, a space where students can enter as participants and vehicles for investigation. A good project introduces students to methods of making, the complexities of the discipline, and is an opportunity to make meaning that is connected to both the needs of students and communities.

**Contemporary Artists and Critical Pedagogy**

Lydia Ross, an art educator from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), was recently interviewed by the Harvard Graduate School of Education (2018). In the interview, she was asked why she believed contemporary art should be utilized in education, and she responded:

Contemporary artists are impactful on three different levels. [First], they ask provocative questions and compel their audience to look at issues in new ways. Second, they propose alternative strategies to systemic problems. Finally, they imagine radical possibilities for change, which encourages students to dream instead of feeling like they have to operate within an existing system. (Ross, 2018)
Art, especially contemporary art, can be a way for students to understand new ways of thinking about and being in the world, and in particular, their relationships with the natural world. Andrew Brown (2014) author of *Art and Ecology Now* says, “Artistic projects can offer tools for reflection, discussion, awareness and action that lead to new ways of thinking about and of being in the world” (p.8). Within the history of art, nature and place are recurring themes, from early cave paintings to the mountain landscapes of Albert Bierstadt. According to Brown, Thoreau’s *Walden* emphasized closeness to nature as an antidote to society’s materialism. His ideas were echoed among many 19th century artists who saw communion with or contemplation of nature as spiritual acts of reverence and meditation.

Not until the 1960’s did the environmentalist movement have a wider voice and not until 1970 did the United States establish the Environmental Protection Agency. Eco, Land, and Earth artists were involved in making work about ecological issues during this time. Artist such as Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria, Dennis Oppenheim and Michael Heizer became some of the first to express their disapproval of how the earth was being treated through their art (Brown, 2014). Contemporary art practice often focuses on the artist’s place or location and how that uniqueness in location inspires the artist’s creations (Greenmuseum.org, 2010; Hansen, 2009; Lai & Ball, 2002).

I used the study of artists, especially contemporary artists as a way to introduce critical pedagogy, as a way to provoke thinking, and a way to examine taken-for-granted assumptions. Richard Long was one of the first contemporary artist to see walking as an art form. Hamish Fulton, another British walking artist, said: “The walking is the constant the art medium is the variable” (Seymour & Hammish, 1991, p.37). The work of these artists reflects the attitudes of John Dewey. Dewey (1934) looked for links between art and the
everyday and how works of art emerge out of ordinary experiences. I will illustrate these ideas through a brief examination of the work of contemporary artists Mark Dion, Francis Alys, Agnes Denis, and Richard Long.

**Richard Long.** Since the 1960’s walking appears frequently as a staple of art practice beginning with Richard Long’s A Line Made by Walking (Roelstraete, 2010). A Line Made by Walking traces an individual gesture, which the photograph preserves. It is an idea that Long develops throughout his work which explores relationships with the earth and our embodied selves. Long’s first walk has a mythical nature in the history of art. It is almost an archetypical action, that continues to live on. It is a deep truth that in some sense is beyond explanation.

A line made by walking and much of Long’s subsequent work reflects his interest in repetition, ritual, and gesture, which draws on the work of musicians such as John Cage and the spirit of Zen Buddhism. In some ways it is a reaction to the ideology of the Enlightenment offering repetition, emptiness, personal gesture and effacement as antidotes to notions of clear progress and productivity, and universalism. (Roelstraete, p. 26, 2010)

For Long, an important medium is his own body and the path is perhaps the central image or archetype in his work Long states “My work is real not illusory or conceptual. It is about real stones, real time, real actions. I use the world as I find it” (Seymour & Hamish, 1991, p. 8). He is particularly drawn to places where there is a connection to the ancient past. His work resonates with and revises the British tradition of the country walk, which is enshrined in the mages of Romantic poets (Solnit, 2000).
Long is a sculptor who has said the medium of his work is walking. “…my intention was to make a new art, which was also a new way of walking, walking as art… walking as art provided an ideal means for me to explore relationships between time, distance, geography, and measurement…” (Wallis, 2010, p. 146). Although much of his work can seem as wholly conceptual, consisting of text describing an action, Long says that “while ideas are important, it’s crucial that I do make my art—that these are real walks, real stones, real mud “(Nicholson, 2008, p. 67). Much of his work involved circles of stone and lines made in the earth. According to art critic Evens,

I think the very fact that they are images that don't belong to me and, in fact, are shared by everyone because they have existed throughout history, actually makes them more powerful than if I was inventing my own idiosyncratic… images. I think it cuts out a lot of personal unwanted aesthetic paraphernalia.” (Evens, 2012, p. 26)

**Francis Alys.** Richard Long’s influence is seen in the work of Francis Alys, a Belgian artist who uses walking as a way of producing space. In his first series of walks, The Collector (1990-1992), he pulled a magnetized toy dog on wheels through the streets of Mexico City, collecting bits and pieces of cast-off metals as he walked (O’Rourke, 2013). Alys has used walking as a way of defining space. For example, he used a pierced can of paint to make a line, along the ground as he walks through the city. This work documents his walk and the gesture of walking.

**Mark Dion.** Dion’s work is largely about making connections through things and with things using the methods of a scientist or archaeologist. He creates displays that interrogate the interactions of commerce, culture, art, nature, and knowledge. His collections
include seedpods, a cabinet of colorful plastic debris and objects laboriously excavated
(Lange-Berndt & Dietmar 2017).

Dion uses a quasi-scientific method to organize nature and natural materials. His
work is a parody of the scientific method of classification. He uses his own intuitive methods
to organize and classify nature, setting aside institutionalized forms of knowledge.

His interests belong to a later moment than that of the pioneer ecologists, such as
Carson, whose chief goal had been to present 'better' information about nature and the
environmental crisis. Dion's concern is with the role of system and representation in
scientific thought, with the historicity of knowledge and the obsessive will-to-order
(wonderfully parodied throughout his work) that typifies institutionalized forms of
knowledge. (Corrin, Kwon, & Bryson p. 97)

Agnes Denes. Denes takes art out of the museum. For example, she planted a wheat
field in lower Manhattan. She planted a manmade mountain measuring 420 meters long, 270
meters wide, with eleven thousand trees with the help of eleven thousand people from all
over the world at the Pinziö gravel pits near Ylöjärvi, Finland, as part of a massive earthwork
and land reclamation project. According to the artist, Tree Mountain, conceived in 1982,
affirms humanity's commitment to the future wellbeing of ecological, social and cultural life
on the planet. It is designed to unite the human intellect with the majesty of nature (Denes,
1996).
CHAPTER 5: Results

This project was a teaching and learning experiment of an ecologically based, immersive, experiential art curriculum for middle school students. I wanted my students to have opportunities for significant experiences within local human and natural places and for me to better understand my students’ relationships with the places in their lives. I was also interested in how a summer intensive curriculum experiment based on experiential learning might influence my own teaching and relationships with students. I wanted to explore the teaching opportunities or challenges that type of program might create, so I created a new approach to curriculum, which I call going for a walk. I see my curriculum as a “diaristic gesture” or a souvenir of the gesture of teaching (Solnit, 2000, p. 268). I see it as an unbounded investigation into the relationship between ideas, acts, and the material world and a prompt for the reader’s own investigation.

An important focal point of this thesis was the two-week summer curriculum I designed and taught. However, I have been studying these topics for a long time and the Wild Art School was the culmination of years of planning. As part of this process I visited schools in other parts of the world, studied outdoor education, and was interviewed by the local radio station. I talked with other artists and teachers, presented my ideas at academic conferences, created artwork, and discussed these ideas with my peers and mentors. All of these experiences have contributed to the personal autobiographical character of this research and my own curriculum and teaching.

Overview of Wild Art School Activities

1. Nature studies, discussions, and learning activities in Big Cottonwood Canyon were conducted by me and other experts. This happened around a cabin at Brighton and during our
hiking, collecting, and drawing activities. Students responded to a questionnaire. This questionnaire was to give them an informational context for our study of art and ecology and to provide a baseline to determine their existing knowledge and attitudes toward art making and nature studies. Subsequent activities were designed to give students direct experiences with art making and interactions with nature and give the researcher opportunities to observe their responses. Student artwork and written responses were documented and used as data. Each day included formal educational activities as well as informal discussions and activities that might happen over lunch or on our walks. These activities happened throughout the day and evening.

2. Studies at the Great Salt Lake were conducted near the Spiral Jetty, a work of art by Robert Smithson. Students learned about earth art and its history, about the ecology of the Great Salt Lake and about the bird migrations that pass through the area. We also visited the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. Data was gathered through discussions, observation, and student’s artwork while on site.

3. Studies at the Utah State Capital Building. On the fourth floor of the Capital there are artworks, maps and murals which we studied. Students learned about Utah history through these artworks while also practicing their own art by drawing in their own sketchbooks. Many students also drew the building itself.

4. Studies at the Natural History Museum. Closely observing, slowing down and drawing at the Natural History Museum allowed students to see things they wouldn't normally see or remember.

5. Studies at the Red Butte Gardens. We looked at native Utah plants along with learning about other plant species throughout the Garden. The students designed their own garden in
their sketchbook after looking at the water conservation garden, herbal garden, medicinal garden, fragrance garden and rose garden. I collected data through their artwork and discussion.

6. Studies at Ensign Peak. The view from Ensign Peak gave students a view of the whole Salt Lake Valley and allowed students to see the development of the city. We spent time drawing at the top of the peak.

7. Little Cottonwood Canyon. We hiked to Cecret Lake. Along with a hike to Cecret Lake we identified native wild flower species.

8. Spruces Campground in Big Cottonwood Canyon. Students were taught wilderness skills including how to start a fire, set up a tent, and cook dinner. Students also built a small boat out of natural materials.

9. Discussion and Art Exhibition at the Brighton Cabin. At the end of the week, we gathered the work together and gave students an opportunity to display what they had created and learned to family and friends. We reviewed the week as a class and discussed what we have learned and how it has impacted our artwork and attitudes toward nature.

Student Experiences

I observed and reflected on student experiences. These were documented in my own notes, in student reflective journals, in their artwork, and through Amy Ollerton’s videography. Amy is a fellow teacher who accompanied us on most of our activities.

Drawing and experience. Drawing or painting is like walking, it can be an immersive experience that gave us opportunities to just be where we were and to pay attention. For the students, it changed the experience of being there, of how they viewed or interacted with the place, because normally they would just take a picture and move on. The
student drawings are evidence of a different way of engaging with or interacting with the environment.

For example, in Figure 1 you can see a drawing of a view from Ensign Peak. In making this drawing, the student observed the scene including the mountains, the atmosphere, the colors, the placement of man-made structures within the environment and then the student had to decide how to represent this information on paper. If we did not have a sketchbook and drawing supplies with us, students would get to the peak, look around, take a picture, then descend the mountain. When planning a drawing, the student had to find a place to sit or stand comfortable enough for a prolonged drawing, choose a view and direction to look, decide what information to put on the page including whether to zoom in or draw a panoramic. These are all perceptual, cognitive and artistic decisions the student would have missed out on if they had simply just hiked to the top of a peak. Students also had discussions with each other about what they saw and what they wanted to draw. They asked questions about the landscape and made guesses about answers.
Everywhere we went, we stopped and drew. This often changed students’ interaction with the location. Stopping and drawing made them think about where they were. For example, along the road to the Spiral Jetty, because we stopped, they noticed the mud on the walls from the swallows, and we considered the lives of the swallows. Slowing down to draw helped them slow down and observe otherwise missed scenes. Because we were together all day, there was more time for play, like the boy who kept putting his arm in the fountain to see how deep it would go. At one point, they had a competition to see who could draw the waterfall the best (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Student drawings: Waterfall at Red Butte Gardens](image)

A 7th grader showed me the sketchbook she kept with her at all times. It was filled with drawings and each one came with a story (Figure 3).
This drawing is a close up drawing of desert plants observed in the water conservation area of Red Butte Gardens. She remembers sitting with classmates and talking about what animals the plants reminded them of. Eliza (pseudonym) only mentioned her sketches as an afterthought. She was much more excited about the things she had seen and remembered about the week.

Art and being there. The Spiral Jetty is a famous work of art, but when we were there, the students simply wanted to experience the landscape. Reflecting on the experience later, I discovered I wanted to get out of the way and let them figure out their own learning experiences, which meant that they would need to decide for themselves how to interact with our situation and what it might mean. That’s a goal that is often difficult for classroom teachers to achieve because of the culture of restraint and expectations within a school. This is why I took the classroom out of the equation and let students lead the way. We had driven to the Great Salt Lake to visit the Spiral Jetty. But when the kids jumped out of the car, they
only acknowledged the art installation for a brief moment and then ran straight into the water and stepped in the clay. They were intrigued with the billions of brine shrimp swimming around their legs, with the pink color of the water and with what they learned was the halophilic salt loving bacteria which created the color. They floated in the water, collected slimy salty clay, felt the salt crystals form on their drying skin and complained of burning scratches on their legs.

Walking. An important part of the teaching and learning during this project were hikes and walks. These walks created opportunities for things to happen that were not planned. At Brighton, in the wet lands, we were looking for moose walking through the river. Some of the students were jumping through the river and leaping between mounds of grass. A walk creates opportunities for conversations. On the aspen hike, we saw a moose at the top of the trail. All the way up, I had to wait for a girl that was going really slow. It made me wonder if, as a teacher, I needed to be on the front. But in this case, I said, well let’s just hike.

One of the hardest parts of teaching outside was trying to figure out how loud I wanted to let them be. Of course, this can be a problem inside a classroom as well. But outside I wondered if we should encourage them to be quiet. I wondered how far ahead I should let them go and wondered if they would get lost. I wondered about the value of their own explorations independent of my teaching, telling or guiding. The hikes also allowed for different students to do different things. For example, some of the girls wanted to stop and try to identify flowers. Those hikes were also a reflection of a particular teaching style; turn them loose and talk later.
Reflecting on the experience later, I discovered that I felt guilty for not making the experience more educational. But, what would a more educational hike have looked like? This method, of turning them loose was both satisfying and worrisome for me. I wondered if there were ways to better prepare them for what we were going to be doing. It made me consider more deeply the roles of teacher and learner and what makes an effective teacher.

Camping. I noticed that the students loved camping. They liked being in one spot with others their own age, with open ended chances to explore, yet also having an opportunity to come back to home base. They carved sticks for eating utensils and helped prepare meals. They worked together and made a teeter totter with a log over a river bank. We decided to have a boat race. They designed boats, the rule being they could only use natural materials. In the race, I improvised categories such as, most beautiful, fastest, the most boat-like. I gave them an hour to do it. It was creative challenge to work within constraints, and some of them kept trying to use man-made materials (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4. Photo of students' boats
During the boat design, construction and boat race, I went around and gave them ideas and suggested things that they should try. Because we were together for such long periods of time, it made me wonder; Are teachers always teaching? I also wondered if they were always watching me. In this environment, I became like a mentor. There was a group of students who would not leave my side. I think they admired me for being at ease with what I liked to do and for having confidence in them.

I was inclusive with the experiences that they could not normally do. For example, one of them said “I never get to use a knife” So I said, “here is a knife, go whittle that stick.” I just expected that they could do it. No one said, I can’t do this, they just figured it out. When we were drawing. I just expected them to draw, and they did it.

**Student Artwork**

One of my areas of investigation was how my Wild Art School might influence student learning and artmaking. Understanding how and what students are learning is never easy. But, important indications of learning are found in student artworks. These artworks included collages and drawings done at various locations.
Collages. The intention of this assignment was to explore the artistic conventions of landscape in American art and to give students some context for thinking about landscape images. Collage allows students to think about the formal elements of landscape, to simplify these elements, and to compose them using the simple means of painted paper. When I have more time, I have students paint their own paper to become more familiar with the painting process, and it is fun. Most students enjoy making collages because the difficult problems of representational drawing are not part of the process. For these collages, students worked from reproductions of 19th century American landscape paintings. We talked about how and why these artists made these paintings and what they meant within the art historical context. This included the idea that nature can be a healing and spiritual aspect of life. For 19th century American transcendentalists, painting a landscape was much more than recreating a scene as a decoration. For these artists, painting a landscape could become a deeply spiritual experience.
One of the good things that happens when working with painted paper is the accidental effects from the various nuances within the paint. Although students are trying to reproduce color, value, and shape relationships, these accidental nuances add to the effectiveness of the final collages. This approach also helps students see artwork as a kind of construction based on what is available and gives them opportunities to think in terms of color, value, and shape.

**Drawing from the cabin porch.** After we did the collages based on reproductions, students worked from life. We did oil pastel drawings. The emphasis was on simplifying the complexities of what they were seeing into more simple shapes. This was in the evening and we discussed the qualities of light. At this point, I brought in a visiting artist who worked with the students on how to create a landscape using oil pastel. The emphasis was on shape,
atmosphere, and light. These are also important qualities in 19th century American landscape painting, particularly for the Luminist painters. One of my intentions with this workshop was for students to gain some familiarity with these methodologies of art making. By working in the same ways as these artists I felt these approaches still have relevance in the study of art and in our culture’s ideas about nature.

Figure 8. Student plein air oil pastel drawings.

In Figure 8 we can see these two drawings, the students were concerned with the details of what they were drawing, and as is often the case, would occasionally fall back on their own conventions of drawing, such as the emphasis on tree trunks.
Most of the students had never used oil pastels before. This was a challenge for them because oil pastels do not have fine points. They had to learn to draw using shapes and blending of colors. The visiting artist also stressed the importance of white and the idea that a drawing of a landscape is an idea about light and relationships of color and value, but that oil pastel is really just mud. In spite of these challenges, students were able to think through these concepts as is evident in their use of shape and value.
Figure 10. Student plein air oil pastel drawings.

In Figure 10 the students used shape and value to create simple masses which convey the beginning of sense of the landscape.
In Figure 11 you can see this student was particularly interested in drawing. Her interest in detail and line quality is evident in her drawing of an aspen tree.
**Drawing from Alta in Little Cottonwood Canyon.** Figure 12 demonstrates a strong sense of massing as well as atmospheric qualities.

![Student drawing: Little Cottonwood Canyon from Alta.](image)

**Figure 12. Student drawing: Little Cottonwood Canyon from Alta.**

**Drawing from Ensign Peak.** Ensign Peak is an historical landmark north of the Salt Lake Valley. It is a short hike to the top with excellent views of the entire valley. From this vantage point, we discussed Utah history and how Brigham Young set up a grid system to organize the city. We could also see the industrial parts of the city, the tailings from the
copper mine, Antelope Island, the train tracks and the expanding city. This peak is where Brigham Young planted a flag in 1847. He said, “This will be a beacon.” This happened during the same time as the paintings we had been studying were painted. The subsequent development of the Salt Lake Valley reflects ongoing concerns about development, progress, and our relationship with the natural world.

Figure 14. Student drawing: Ensign Peak.

This drawing (Figure 14), by the same student who did the aspen tree drawing, represents some complex artist thinking as she attempts to combine the close up of the railing with the long-range views of the valley.
Drawings from migratory bird refuge. Our visit to the bird refuge followed our visit to the Spiral Jetty. This is where we noticed the swallow nests. We learned about the Bear River marsh wetlands, the migration of birds to this area as well as other wildlife and plant life in the area. At the visitor center, there was detailed information about the ecology of the bird refuge. We drew while seated on benches on the boardwalk where we could hear the frogs. We were under some swallow nests and had to be careful not to disturb the swallows or get dunged. We were all very salty from running through the water at the Spiral Jetty. This was July and it was very hot. We sat in the shade and had a long drawing session. One of the aims of my work with these students was to change our sense of time so that we could have time for longer investigations, ruminations, and drawings. For me, if students could spend a long time sitting and drawing, the experience was a success. But these drawings also demonstrate growing skill with the mediums of colored watercolor pencils or oil pastel.
The student in Figure 15 demonstrates a growing awareness of value relationships as they try to work out the different value relationships. For example, she modulates the values on the distant mountain so that the mountain becomes lighter in order to allow for contrast with the darker tree, but the mountain is darker at its edge to allow for contrast with the lighter sky.

**Drawings from Natural History Museum.** The introduction to the Natural History Museum was a discussion of collections, making collections, and how collections could be an art form such as in the work of Mark Dion. I just let them loose in the museum, one of my favorite strategies. The general assignment was to make a drawing on each floor (Figure 16). Students were able to spend more time in the areas they were more interested in. We were in the museum for about two hours. Most of the students wanted to stay longer.
Figure 17. Student drawings: Natural History Museum.
Drawings from Red Butte Gardens. Red Butte turned out to be one of the favorite places for students. This garden is located at the mouth of Red Butte Canyon. We talked on the front steps about what we had been doing all week and about the garden and the desert. Although this is carefully cultivated garden, it also includes the wild canyon, as was evident when we encountered a rattlesnake.

![Student drawings from Red Butte Gardens](image)

Figure 18. Student drawings. Red Butte Gardens.

We went first to the water conservation garden. I showed them illustrations of artists who made the drawings of plants; both as an art piece and a piece of scientific investigation. We stayed together and moved from garden to garden. Within each garden, students were free to draw whatever they chose.
In Figure 19 the drawing shows the nearby hills. It has a strong carry over from our earlier discussions about constructing a landscape drawing. In our discussions in the garden, they mentioned how they enjoyed the class because they were able to make friends. They drew the plants and labeled them (as per my assignment). They were encouraged to choose the plants they would like in their own garden. For me, the garden experience was similar to camping. They had both freedom and boundaries. The garden had areas where they could explore and learn about on their own. We had a picnic at the fishpond and talked.
Figure 20. Student drawings: Red Butte Gardens.
**Drawings from Silver Lake or Lake Mary.** Contrary to my expectations for massing of values, this student used a much more linear approach so that every object is given its own distinct representation, including the spruce tree, the ski lift, and the house. One of my objectives with our artmaking was for students to observe and to notice. Although we talked about some general approaches to drawing and painting, such as the use of shape and value, I was also interested in their idiosyncratic approaches to a drawing. I am not overly concerned with measuring how well my students draw, I am more interested in how they draw and how they can surprise me with their drawings.

![Figure 21. Student drawing: Silver Lake.](image)
We did these drawings during our walk around Silver Lake. My method was for them to walk around and draw. I am always surprised by the different perspectives that my students give their drawings. In this case, some students gave the scene a perspective based on their actual vantage point, while other students drew the lake as if they were looking at it
from above. In the Wild Art School, I was not as concerned with the qualities of the student
drawings as much as I was with the experience, they might have through the process of
making the art.

Figure 23. Student drawings: Silver Lake.
Figure 24. Student drawings: Tents.
**Tent Drawings from camping.** The tent drawings happened on Friday morning after we camped. We started the morning by exploring and drawing. I asked them to go draw their tents because I really like tents and because it was something new that they hadn’t drawn that week. I like the geometry and bright colors and implied sense of adventure. I like the shapes within shapes. They always seem to pop out in the natural landscape. I like that when you go in a tent it seems like a protected space, but when you are out you are outside. They are cozy. Before they packed up, they had to draw their tent.
**Teaching Experiences**

In addition to student experiences I wanted to explore the affordances and limitations of constructing and implementing a curriculum as currere, based on immersive, outdoor, art experiences, on my own teaching and on student and teacher relationships. This was the autobiographical part of my research.

I'd rather not teach...I just want to be there. I have been exploring the ideas behind the Wild Art School for years. I talked about this project as we hiked in Nepal and visited schools in the Himalayas. For many reasons, I usually feel better when I am outside walking someplace and wondered what this might mean within the normal confines of schooling. My own teaching style is fairly informal. I am comfortable with my students and I try to engage them with whatever we are doing. Part of this study was to extend teaching possibilities to include other kinds of experiences not usually found within the classroom.

Mark Dion describes his teaching style, which is similar to how I would like to teach. He says he is driven to place students in direct contact with inspiring people, experiences, places, and things. He wants to introduce them to the culture of being an artist. His pedagogic methodology includes field trips, collaboration with volunteers, travel, and contact with brilliant thinkers. He also gets his students into the field, digging, finding things, and studying artifacts. Like me, he is dedicated to experiential teaching and the good that can be done by exposing students to enthusiastic people who love what they do and are motivated by something other than money (Erickson, 2017, pg. 94). For me, teaching is an experiment that, ideally, should involve direct experiences with places, people, animals, plants and rocks.

My approach to teaching is very informal. I delegated most of the formal teaching to expert visitors, because they were experts. I am not really an expert on anything, and I
certainly don’t want to be talking the whole time. This made me wonder: What does not being an expert afford? One thing I noticed, is that I became a kind of guide or coach. A big part of my role as teacher was to set up experiences for my students. I never knew exactly where a conversation would end up or what a student might ask. Our conversations were informal and conversational. The students would speak what came to their minds. “What is this flower? I like this one best. Why is that tree dead? Oh, I saw a butterfly, Shhhhh a moose.” Sometimes I did not know the answer to a question and the questions were left as questions. Sometimes I prompted further thought on a subject to provoke a different way of thinking. Sometimes I answered their questions. I felt like a part of the group except that I had a driver’s license and a few more years of experience.

**Teaching environments.** The first week we were all in the van, and it was awesome. While Amy, an art teacher and friend who helped me with Wild Art School, read information about the Great Salt Lake, I drove. I printed out a big packet of materials, so they could read to each other. The first time we were driving up the canyon, they asked so many questions about the canyons, about the rocks, about the animals and about the trees. There was a sense of enthusiasm and excitement you definitely wouldn’t get in a classroom environment.

During the times we were enclosed in the van or in the cabin, I introduced the students to many contemporary artists who use nature as a theme. I showed them work from Agnes Denes, Robert Smithson, Richard Long, and Mark Dion. These artists create work using bulldozers, planting wheat, walking in lines, and making collections. I asked the students questions such as: How do these artists ask viewers to think about nature and art in a new way? Students started making collections and thinking about ways of making art in nature.
I set up our learning the day before the activity and during breakfast. We talked about artists, and I gave them a slide show with tons of pictures. At the Red Butte Garden, we talked in the parking lot and on the stairs. I asked them questions, and we talked about the previous days. I realized once we were in the midst of the project that I needed more time with them. I could have easily spent an entire week at each location. I remember thinking after the first couple of days that this is how I want teaching to be. I felt like I never want to go back to the regular classroom. When I make a drawing of a place, I have to sit down, think, meditate and take my time. In the process, I experience the things around me more deeply. When I did this with students, I experienced teaching differently.

When we were outside, I didn’t have the pressure of entertaining, of making sure students were on task and they were engaged, because when I was outside with them, they were always engaged. We were experiencing things together, so I could give them my point of view. I liked to see them exert themselves. It was fun, like coaching soccer. I enjoyed the experience of being outside with them. There are parts of being in a classroom that I like too, particularly if there is the sense that I do not always need to be in the front of the classroom.

The Wild Art School changed the logistics of being a public-school teacher. As a public-school teacher, I thought about whether students were on task, what learning outcomes were being accomplished, and when the assessment was going to happen to see if the class reached the expected objective. But during Wild Art School, these external constraints disappeared.
CHAPTER 6: Discussion

I see so many students who are sick of being stuck at a desk. I think it’s possible to learn when you’re not sitting at a desk—when you’re outside, asking questions and experiencing life. For example, on the hike to Ensign Peak, instead of pulling out their phones to snap selfies, the kids sat in silence and drew what they saw. Their work might not have the resolution of a smartphone picture, but I believe the memories from the experience were far more valuable (Figure 26). When I sit down and draw something, that place and the details of the place seem to stay in my memory. I believe that we learn to appreciate a place even more when we spend that silent time sitting there.

![Student drawing: Ensign Peak](image)

Figure 26. Student drawing: Ensign Peak.

Wild Art School was part of my own journey into place-based, experiential teaching and learning. It was the culmination of years of planning and background study as I tried to construct ways to foster different ways of teaching and learning. Wild Art School was a response to my students’ lack of significant experiences with nature, my own dissatisfaction with ordinary teaching, and my sense that school curricula neglect ecological issues and restricts teaching innovation. Everywhere we went, we drew. Drawing changed students’ interaction with the location by making them pay attention to what they might have otherwise
overlooked. Although I was interested in the qualities of their artwork, if students could spend a long time sitting and drawing, I felt that the experience was a success. This happened often during our time together. The drawings also provide evidence of growing skill and confidence with drawing mediums and picture making.

**Student Experiences: Nature Is a Home**

The Wild Art School was a way for students to learn about much more than art—it was a way for them to learn about nature and their connection to it. When you spend time with a place and observe it, you build a relationship with that place, and you feel more inclined to want to help it and protect it. My main goal was to get students from Utah out into Utah to see the natural environment in Utah. The Wild Art School and my work as an art educator in general are not meant to make artists; they are meant to inspire students to ask questions and be excited about learning. I wanted students to think critically about issues taking place in Utah that they had not considered before. At the same time, art helps them to engage with these questions, both from the experience of making art and from questions that artists ask in their work and processes.

Rather than a decontextualized curriculum, the students learned the basics of Utah’s climate from an expert and talked about issues surrounding Bears Ears National Monument and other monuments and public spaces in Utah including discussions about the impact on Utah of Rio Tinto Kennecott’s copper mine. Art education informed by a critical place-based pedagogy emphasizes the activist, restorative possibilities of artmaking and affirms the need for students to become involved in learning outside the school. Nature is a more effective classroom than some might think. I can teach atmospheric perspective in the classroom on
the projector, but it makes it real when you can go outside and see that atmosphere and talk about atmospheric perspective while looking at it.

The natural environment is an informative place, but perhaps more importantly, it’s a fun place to learn—and that’s how I believe school should be. A highlight for the students was the boat-making competition. Boats were crafted entirely from natural materials and then given awards based on their strengths. For example, the boat that functioned the best received recognition as the most boat like (Figures 4 and 5).

But, spending time outside is more than a fun idea. I think it is a necessary part of student development. Students need to be outside. It’s not something that is an option—they need to be outside. Place-based experiential learning has proven benefits and is a step towards truly holistic education. The 1994 Association for Experiential Education definition expanded the idea of experiential learning: "Experiential education is a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences" (AEE, 2002, p. 5). Experiencing nature is much more memorable than reading about it in a book. Long walks, camping in the mountains, and time for meditation and reflection hardly seem like elements of normal curriculum. But perhaps they should be part of the way students learn in school—or rather, out of school.

**Teaching in the Field**

My interest was how to translate the experience of being outside and the artistic conventions we were studying into personal expressions using color, shape and line. My method was to set up opportunities for the unexpected to happen. I set up a general location, where there is a potential for students to learn. This was different from telling them the facts. My role was to set the initial schedule and a proposition for what might happen and where
we would start walking. I set an example by starting to draw with my students instead of ordering them to do something.

This project brought many questions to mind about my own teaching practice. It made me wonder if, as a teacher, I needed to be in the front. I wondered how far ahead I should let the students go and wondered if they would get lost. I wondered about the value of their own explorations independent of my teaching, telling or guiding. My method, of turning them loose was both satisfying and worrisome for me. In this environment, with such extended time together, I became like a mentor. It made me wonder; Are teachers always teaching? It also made me wonder what does a teacher do, or allow or occasion in their teaching.

I am not really an expert on anything, and I certainly don’t want to be talking the whole time. This made me wonder: What does not being an expert afford? One thing I noticed is that I became a kind of guide or coach who occasioned learning experiences for my students. I also remember thinking after the first couple of days that this is how I want teaching to be. I felt like I never want to go back to the regular classroom.

I like to ask questions that orientated students toward things they might not have not noticed otherwise (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2007). It felt different from being a regular, teacher. It was like students were hanging with a “cool aunt”. I think that really changed the tone. I could be really open with the participants because I knew them. I was less concerned about discipline than a normal teaching situation; the rule was basically leave no trace. We had sleep overs at a cabin, camped, built fires, cooked food and floated boats. I was always asking questions. I felt like car time was valuable conversation time. These were questions you could ask in a normal classroom, but in this situation, they were more excited
about the questions because we were such a small and intimate group. Questions were a good way to have conversations and to get to know students. We talked about life and death, as well as moral questions. This was all possible because we had time to walk together, draw, and explore.

**Future Prospects**

After planning for a year for this research project, I can appreciate how much work a summer art program is to execute. My interest and ideas for planning a school in the mountains and outside of a classroom comes from my experience of teaching students inside a classroom for 4 years. I can see how being in a rectangular cube, sitting at a rectangular table on rectangular chairs, year after year can affect the desire for student exploration and learning and affect teacher creativity and engagement. I have observed how youth are spending less time outside playing, and I can see their disregard for the environment. These observations led to me to many questions regarding methods of teaching and specifically to the question; how would an art curriculum based on an investigation of place, ecology, and outdoor experiences influence student learning, attitudes toward learning, interactions, mindfulness, sense of place, ecological literacy and art making?

While I feel this is a good question, I did not have enough data to come to a conclusion about all of these topics. Although there was evidence that my students were more knowledgeable about local environments, it was beyond the scope of this study to draw conclusions about their ecological literacy. My students may have been influenced by Wild Art School, but this thesis does not have a final answer regarding interactions, mindfulness, sense of place and ecological literacy. Future investigations could explore how an experiential outdoor art curriculum might influence these topics.
However, I did find that students were deeply interested in learning and interacted with each other even more than they interacted with me. Their confidence as observant art makers increased, as was evident in their drawings and conversations. My field work was an intense, immersive learning experience for both me and my students. Designing, planning, and making Wild Art School happen influenced my own sense of what curriculum and teaching might be able to do. In order to create a class like this, I had to design my curriculum for the summer months beyond my students’ public-school classes. That being said, I believe a curriculum like this could be implemented at any time during the year with a few alterations. This project was also an experiment in designing a learning environment in which I felt inspired and comfortable. It was an exploration of my own teaching possibilities.

The Origins of Wild Art School

I have done a lot of walking in places throughout the world and in the mountains and around the valley where I live. This walking gave me time to meditate on ideas relating to being a teacher, an artist, and a researcher. Walking in the Himalayas was challenging. Walking was required as there were no other modes of transportation. There I saw yaks carrying heavy loads, monks meditating while walking, porters carrying goods and gear, school children walking at 14,000 ft. elevation to school, and soccer fields next to cliffs. In this rich environment I couldn’t help but think about new ideas for the way I teach. The discussions I had with fellow students and my professors led to the ideas for a Wild Art School. As we walked, we also took time to stop and draw along the way. I learned from discussions and observations. Sometime the walks were tiring and challenging. But sometimes they were exhilarating, like the time we left the little village of Phortse and walked through the
rhododendron forests in the early morning light, gathering the red birch bark from the trees, which I later used in a collage reliquary (Figure 27).

Figure 27. Birch Bark Reliquary

I had never hiked at elevations above 13,000 ft. until I traveled to India and Nepal. When you are this high, it is difficult to breath and walk so you have to walk slowly. Walking slowly is meticulous and repetitive and makes a perfect space for a conversation.

On my first trip to northern India to the base of the Himalayas, we saw a very tall snow-covered mountain. We decided we wanted to reach the summit of this mountain called Mount Mun. Apparently, if you reach the top you can see into Pakistan. We tried to summit this mountain three times without the knowledge of how to get there. I had never climbed a mountain without a trail before. The idea of a trail is intriguing, with many connections to what teaching might be like. I love trails, they are comforting and contain the promise of
adventure. But Mount Mun had no trail, only a vague description of some caves and rumor of mountaineering accidents. Normally, I do large amounts of research before I hike a mountain. Mount Mun didn’t have information except from the yelling sheep herders telling us we were going the wrong direction. Each time we tried to hike this peak we were led to loss, hunger, and memorable experiences. This experience made me think about tents, and I did a series of paintings about tents. Tents, like trails, have a certain magical metaphorical quality. (Figure 28)
The first time we camped under a large rock at the base of Mount Mun hoping to get an early start in the morning. That night lightning, wind and rain happened like I had never experienced. The lighting was close, loud and it was very windy blowing our tent back and forth. The water at the base of the tent kept rising, and we kept curling into smaller balls in our sleeping bags trying to avoid getting wet. This experience was my first “epic”. Epic is defined differently among the adventure world. But it is often defined as the unplanned and often miserable. The Thanka paintings of the monkey leading the elephant seemed calm and winding, opposite of the experience I had climbing Mount Mun. I made a Thanka painting (Figure 29) including a pathway up to Mt Mun.

Figure 29. Path to Mount Mun Thanka painting.
The second time we tried to summit Mount Mun a lightning, hail, wind and rain storm came, and we had to turn around. When we returned to the place where we camped the night before, the only thing to be found was a single tent stake. Our tents were gone. After searching and almost giving up hope of finding them, they were spotted down the mountain side, soaked, full of holes and contorted. We had to walk down the rest of the mountain in the middle of the night and camped in a parking lot at 2 am. These epics were memorable, exciting, educational and life changing. While walking in these places, I thought about how I could make an art class more memorable, exciting, educational and life changing. Our experience made me think of this quote.

What is reverence? All my experience as a psychologist leads me to the conclusion that a sense of reverence is necessary for psychological health. If a person has no sense of reverence, no feeling that there is anyone or anything that inspires awe, it cuts the conscious personality off completely from the nourishing springs of the unconscious. It is ironic, then, that so much of our modern culture is aimed at eradication or all reverence, all respect for the high truths and qualities that inspire a feeling of awe and worship in the human soul.


One of the hardest walks I’ve ever done was walking up to camp 1 of a mountain in Nepal called Ama Dablam. Camp one is at 18,300 ft. elevation. While walking, I observed many things that have influenced paintings I made (Figure 28 and 30). I collected birch bark and prayer flags in the Himalayas. I saw bright tents swirling in the wind. I saw textures of rocks, and lichens.
Figure 30. Tent paintings.
In Ecuador, I walked up volcanos and many grass covered mountains. I also learned to weave, which is similar to walking. We learned in a naturally lighted, low ceiling room. In this room, we saw old looms, spinning wheels, bamboo mats, and unfinished weavings. When the wind blew, leaves fell through the ceiling and onto us as we sat around the outside of the room on the floor facing the wall with our back-strap loom attached. Reflecting on how I learned to weave, I realized that I could have not learned how to weave very easily. I did not speak the language, so the only way I learned what was going on was by watching. I could have chosen not to watch or to think about how to weave. This would have made it easy for me to not learn anything. Fortunately, I was curious, and I wanted to learn so I sat next to instructors and watched very carefully. I also practiced with the instructor watching to make sure I did it right. Watching other people learn was also key in learning. I watched other people make mistakes and the instructors correct those mistakes. I believe the instructors taught simply by doing, having us sit beside them, and by trial and error. Because weaving isn’t super complicated, we were able to pick up simpler patterns relatively quickly. I loved the room we learned in. It was as if we were very close to the outside, and I love to be outside. Being close to the ground, which was brick and not clean of dust and leaves, having the door blow open, not having a climate-controlled air-conditioning, bark slowly falling off the long logs on which our looms were attached all added to the outdoors feeling. I loved sitting close to so many people doing a repetitive task. I did not feel like I had to talk to the people close by, and I could hear other people’s conversations, but just the act of sitting close to someone doing the same task for such a long period of time builds a relationship.

The experiences I’ve had walking in the Himalayas, India and Ecuador have led to the ideas for my thesis. Currere requires self-reflection from past, present, and future
experiences. My drawing on my experiences led me to forget objectives, forget expected outcomes, begin the journey, and see what would take place. What would a curriculum look like if we went for a walk together as a class, got out of the classroom and in the natural environment, explore, ask questions, have discussions, make drawings in nature, develop a deeper relationship with and understanding of our place? Must we sit still to be paying attention? When I take my students for a walk in the mountains, it is a teaching gesture that acknowledges the importance of complex interactions with the place, among students and between student and teacher. In putting this curriculum into practice, an art teacher might look at a student’s artwork and not be so concerned with it being “good” but how it reflects an interaction with the place. These are all thoughts that came while walking.
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