

Project looks at learning beyond the classroom

3 October 2012

Teaching is no longer restricted just to the classroom, with students now venturing outdoors to learn how to connect with their environment and develop the values, knowledge and practices of environmental sustainability.

Professor Peter Renshaw from UQ's School of Education has joined forces with Principal of the Pullenvale Environmental Education Centre (PEEC), Honorary Associate Professor Dr Ron Tooth to study this concept.

They are working on an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project between The University of Queensland and Education Queensland that investigates learning beyond the classroom, narrative pedagogy, and place.

The project's primary goal is to research how students learn to understand the environment and value themselves, others and the places around them so they can live more respectful, sustainable and connected lives.

PEEC was the perfect place to begin this research in 2010, as it had created a strong pedagogy of place through its Storythread program – a way of teaching beyond the classroom in the outdoors that connects people with place.

Through PEEC Storythreads, students and teachers are both audience and participants in differently-themed stories about characters – real and fictional – living in harmony and in conflict with their environment and the natural world.

Dr Tooth said students involved in the program observe, inquire, investigate, predict, influence and subsequently reflect upon their own lives and experiences in order to shape future knowledge, attitudes, values and actions.

"The choices and dilemmas they face and the impact of their choices and actions are played out for the students and teachers to appreciate in real places," he said.

Dr Tooth said feedback from participants of the program had been positive, with many teachers reporting a significant change in the behaviour of their students after Storythread.

"One teacher reported that her students' attitudes had changed significantly towards wildlife in their immediate vicinity after Storythread, because they now realised the impact that their actions may have on the wider environment," he said.

Attentiveness is a key focus of the research project, and Storythread programs incorporate this element by asking students to spend time alone in natural places where they observe natural systems and develop the ability to notice fine detail in their surroundings.

This has been shown to develop key scientific and artistic skills, as well as improve their ability to write, think deeply and communicate their insights.

Dr Tooth refers to attentiveness as an inner deep listening with the ears, eyes, skin and heart.

"It is all about seeing the 'extra' in the ordinary – the ability to observe what's actually there."

He said that these results did not just happen by chance, and the technique of deep listening was one that took time to learn and appreciate.

"Just taking students into nature is not enough to create authentic learning – experiences must be mediated by passionate and caring teachers using powerful pedagogy," he said.

In 2011 Dr Tooth and Professor Renshaw began working with seven other Outdoor and Environmental Education Centres (OEECs) as part of the ARC project.

These centres are part of a network of 25 OEECs across Queensland that have developed professional expertise in teaching and learning beyond the classroom through dialogue, commitment and the sharing of knowledge over many years.

This has resulted in a wide range of quite distinct experiential pedagogies running through all their programs.

The insights emerging from this three-year research project are adding important new knowledge to the field of environmental education, and suggesting ways that conventional classroom teaching might be transformed to engage the head, the heart, and the senses in learning more deeply.

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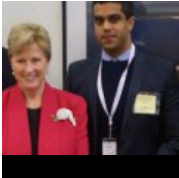


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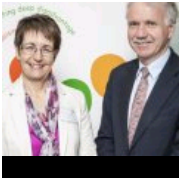
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