

Lessons from the Land

Judy Dow

Saba

Abstract

Most original schools in Vermont were built adjacent to a river. The river provided a way for students to transport themselves to school by foot, on skates or snowshoes when it was frozen and by boat when the water was flowing freely. The river provided the water needed to meet the personal needs of the students and teachers while at school and also provided a wonderful place and opportunity for them to explore and learn.

The river today provides us with all of these things, as well as the educational tools we need to teach history, math, science and art while at the same time meeting the state's educational standards. Many Abenaki students are spread throughout this state in the small towns that still use these very old school locations (the school maybe new now, but the location is often the same). As there is no Abenaki reservation in the state of Vermont, creating a culturally responsive learning environment that includes using the outdoors allows these Native American students to learn using the hands-on, observational learning style they seem to thrive on.

I had worked in an elementary classroom teaching for over fifteen years, increasingly I began to realize something was missing from the curriculum I was mandated to use. Teaching about community, cycles, the meadow and forest from a book inside four walls just didn't work for me. So off to school and a second degree later I am now an outdoor educator teaching in over eighty towns in Vermont, forty states in the US and three providences in Canada. In this paper I would like to share several experiences I have encountered while teaching in some of these schools.

Keywords: Multicultural education, observational learning, cultural markers, Abenaki, Native American education, American Indian education, Eugenics

Lessons from the Land

The University of Vermont with support from the State of Vermont ran a Eugenics program from 1925 to 1936 (Gallagher, 1999). This program targeted mainly people that were of French-Indian descent who lived in a manner that didn't fit into the picture White, Anglo-Saxon People of Vermont had in mind for Vermont's future. These French-Indian people survived by adapting to changing social, political, environmental and economic times as best they could. In an effort to save their history and culture, living on the fringes of town seemed to provide the freedom to adapt but not assimilate. Here they hunted, fished and gathered plants for food, using the land the way they had learned to do for generations, they survived. At this time in history (1920s and 30s) adults usually preferred making a living outside as trappers, guides, fishermen, boat builders, taxidermists, hunters, loggers, basketmakers, or tanning muskrat hides to meet the demand for muskrat coats, rather than take an inside job as a laborer at a cotton or woolen mill as many of the younger generations were doing. The connection with the land and family continued to be very important for these people.

This style of living, of course, interfered with the scenic views the "good citizens" of Vermont wanted (Vermont Commission on Country Life, 1931). Hence these French-Indian people became targets of the eugenicist. Families were broken a part, parents and children were divided up into the many various institutions throughout the state. Some were sterilized in these institutions, some never made it out of the institutions and many lost connection with family, histories, kinships and relationship with the land. For generations these families have been tracked by social welfare agencies and talked about in school teacher lounges. Consequently, there is little to no trust between many of these families and their schools. Today, many of these

families still hide their identities, physically and culturally, on the fringes of towns throughout Vermont.

Brandon is a small town in Vermont with a great community. There is a large population of artists living in this community. One needs to simply drive down the Main Street and you quickly see how art and community have united in their projects. But in the surrounding hills are pockets of very materially poor families. These families in some cases have hidden in the back woods for decades to avoid the long tentacles of the Eugenicists of the 1920's and 1930's whose various programs reached far into the 1980's, 1990's and the twenty-first century. You don't see any finely painted boxes, Adirondack chairs or hear worldly discussions occurring on the front porches of these homes the way you do down on the Main Street. But you do see an intelligence of the woods and a wealth of amazing stories of adaptation and survival that far surpasses the discussions on Main Street.

I was invited to come to Neshobe School to do an ethno-botany program with the third and fourth grade students there. I'd been to Neshobe before and loved working with both the teachers and their students. Neshobe is an Algonquian word meaning *full of water*. The land in Brandon is nestled next to the Neshobe River, and the land is often full of water that overflowed the Neshobe banks. The original forefather named the town Neshobe, which best described the land, some twelve years later when a group of Indians burned the town down, it was renamed Brandon.

I started each class with an introduction of what we would be working on the following day. It was the beginning of October, the students were told to dress for the cold weather, and told to wear boots, hats and mittens. We explained that we would be talking a hike up on

Blueberry Hill in Goshen. Goshen is a very, very rural town next to very rural Brandon. Some kids quickly told me they had picked blueberries there before and knew where we would be going; others sat back and listened. We divided the students into groups of five, gave each group a digital camera and a lesson on using digital cameras. I then shared with them the option of creating one of four different environmental books in their group. I've learned that using this visual strategy prior to the activity and referring back to it occasionally seems to work best when working with rural Abenaki children. I've also learned that they choose their words carefully and are not the children that quickly raise their hands with the answer or the first to join into a conversation. So I have to work hard to get them involved by personally asking them for a question, answer or comment. These kids are the descendents of the generations that were tracked down and hunted by eugenicists. They have learned to be reserved and cautious around "people of authority" and a teacher is seen as someone of authority, for this reason I ask them to call me Judy. I have a very short time to build a relationship and teach, using this method of showing equality seems to work for me. Being seen as an older still affords me the respect I need to control the class. My reasoning behind this is that the informants in the eugenics records were often the teacher or the truant officer. These kids have heard these stories from their grandparents and great grandparents over and over again, and they don't forget; their survival and way of life depends on it still today.

The books we are making are a collection of photos and stories that 1. Tell the story of the land. 2. Identify patterns in nature. 3. Identify Fibonacci's rule. 4. Tell the difference between land and landscape. Each group works together to choose one of the four books to create. Not being in the same classroom every day, this strategy of working with small groups is

also something that seems to work best for me and for the students that are too shy to speak out in a larger group.

The hike was the next morning. Of course there was a light drizzle and as usual, many kids were not prepared with the proper clothing. As we drove to Goshen in the bus I quickly discovered the kids with the proper clothing were the ones from the back woods. They proudly pointed out their “camps” as we drove deeper into the woods and higher up the mountain. As we exited the bus, the drizzle turned to snow. When the hike started, I first explained that there were only two rules 1. Stay behind me and 2. Stay on the trail unless I say we are going to bushwhack. I started to explain about “introduced plants” and how they eventually find balance on the land. But adults are often too impatient to wait for the plants to find balance and they quickly label these plants invasive and organize groups to pull off the flower heads before they go to seed, or introduce bugs that are also non-native to eat the plants. I also explained that there was a pattern of this type of behavior for over one-hundred years here in Vermont. In the late 1800’s the scientists used to tell people to put salt on Canadian hawkweed to stop it from coming down from Canada and invading their lawns. I asked the students if they thought hawkweed knew where the Canadian boarder was. Located less than one hour away from where we were standing, the border is something most Abenaki people of the past and present seldom acknowledge existing. They loudly said “No.” One student then said, “Are these guys from Montpelier?” Interestingly, he was correct. Montpelier is our state’s capitol and this student was quick to make a connection with unbalanced decisions coming out of Montpelier. I wondered if this was an Abenaki child. Often they are more aware of the bigger picture around them than other students their age; it is a survival thing for them. Cameras clicked off a couple of pictures.

We continued on the hike learning stories of the land, taking us from the mile-high glacial ice sheet covering this rounded mountain top, to the formation of deep valleys and the glacial erratics that dotted the land to the discovery of a beaver dam and deer rubbings on trees along side the river. Cameras clicked off pictures. Several boys in the group were clearly hunters and had lived off the land at some time during their short lives. They offered recipes and medicinal hints for various plants as I continued to tell the story of the land. They knew of making sumac tea with the bright red cluster of berries while others in their class could not even identify the sumac plant. These boys beamed when we got to a clearing with two big, old apple trees in the middle of the field. As the students hopped over and some stepped in the middle of huge piles of scat, these two boys roared with laughter as the students tried to figure out what these huge piles of what appeared to be applesauce really were. The boys showed the students the bear tracks, the claw marks on the trees and the bear scat that contained hundreds of apple seeds. Cameras clicked off lots pictures. I could see the pride in their teacher's eyes and I asked her if they were Abenaki. She said she believed they were. The lessons continued all morning, after lunch, wet and tired, we returned to the classroom to warm.

In the afternoon we printed off the digital photos and asked the students to choose the ones that they would be writing about in their class books. I bounced back and forth between five classrooms. Each time I returned to the class with the two Abenaki boys, I was greeted with a smile and an explanation of what they were working on. They gleamed as they shared the stories they had heard in the morning and told me this was the best day of school they had ever had. Their teacher raised an eyebrow at me as I moved to the next room. When the day was

done, I checked back in with the teacher to look at their writing. She was so happy both students had completed a full page of writing the first time ever. This was quite an accomplishment for these boys because this was the beginning of their second year in this multi-age class. “This type of teaching is exactly what these kids needed” she told me, “I’ve never seen them write like this before.” I agreed visual and observational learning is so important to many children and this type of observational teaching is often left out of the curriculum.

The Winooski River is the river from which my people come. *Winoz* means wild onion (leeks) and *aki* means land. Along the Winooski River is the land of the wild onion (Day, 1994). The river is such a teacher, she changes every day and presents something new with each change. I worked with a friend, Douglas Frink, who is an archeologist, for two years trying to save a one-mile trail along the river. This trail was doomed for development; the trail was the oldest site in the state of Vermont to show continuous Native occupation for over 10,000 years and the river ran between the cities of Burlington and Winooski, two very busy cities. This spot was also the original spot for the first colonial fort built by Remember Baker, Ethan Allen’s brother-in-law and an original Green Mountain Boy.

We started walking the trail several times every season, journaling about the plants, animals and things we discovered along the hike (Frink and Dow, 2005). The change was drastic from season to season and told a wonderful story of the introduction of something, adaptation, and survival. We discovered old cellar holes, river crossings and old abandon dams. We found very old medicine and food plants and very newly introduced plants. We discovered right in the heart of these two busy cities, the cycle of life continues with the wildlife. We discovered when the shad bush are in bloom in the highlands, the shad fish are running in the lowlands, explaining

the ancient springtime use of this land. Ever so slowly, through observation, we discovered the lessons and stories this very old river had to tell us. Our walks were only half the story, we then had to do the research and find the documentation about the things we were discovering.

The land is the book of life; the land is the written language. Over time we learned how to read the story this trail along the riverbed had to tell. We were eventually successful in saving the trail. And I started teaching this lesson to teachers and their students so that they might find the stories that the river their school is built on has to share.

An Abenaki teacher in Waits River School is now raising salmon fry in her classroom each winter and releasing them back into the Waits River in the spring; in hopes of bringing salmon back to the river. They have monitored the salmon each spring and have found that two-year old salmon are still there. They are now doing the historical research needed to document that salmon were in this river prior to the building of the dam. If they are successful, they will be able to mandate that a ladder be placed on the dam for the salmon to return to their birthplace to spawn.

I've heard back from other teachers that have studied the river their school is built on with some of the most amazing stories and lessons that they have learned. Many have also discovered and come up with solutions to correct community problems like illegal dumping on riverbeds and fixing over-used hiking trails. One third grade class I took on a river hike along a huge and very old glacial ravine were outraged by the fact that their community park and recreation facility was dumping trash, lawn clippings and tree litter over the bank into the riverbed. The children wrote to the local newspaper and the town manager. Quickly the site was cleaned up. The next year when I went back with classes, there was not a piece of trash in sight.

The outdoor classes that I love the most are the ones where the students make self-discoveries. Every fall, I take about 1500 elementary students out on various nature walks. Every one of these classes seems to have two or more Abenaki in the class. State Archeologists here in Vermont suggest that 2/3 of the people living in Vermont with a French surname are from Abenaki descent. Police Chief Charles Barber stated in the eugenics records, "That the tracing of the pedigree of the 'A' family in Vermont is no less difficult than would be the tracing of the pedigree of the frogs in the Lamoille River." Both people seem to imply, in different ways, that there are a lot of Abenaki living in Vermont. It is not their appearance that make me notice them; but rather, that they seem to all have the same cultural markers that make them apparent to me. They aren't the kids that quickly throw up their hands with an answer. They often talk to you looking at the ground, they point at a discovery with their chin, many times they will ask me if I know their family, and their humor is unmistakable. I work hard to make these kids feel comfortable and part of the family they call their class.

On these walks we talk about actions and consequences and we talk about when you pull on something in nature you quickly discover that the rest of the world is connected. The Abenaki kids will often add a story or a little humor into the lesson. I tell the children that we will only use the tools that we have on us when we enter the woods for our walk. We talk about the five senses and how important they are to good scientists. On the trail we have a network of woodchuck trails and holes. I usually wait until someone notices the holes and I try not to point them out until someone else does. Just about every time a hole is first noticed, a child will say "a snake hole." I usually stop the class and ask the kids to wiggle the end of their nose with their

finger. I then ask them if they think that they can dig a hole with their nose. They usually all say no. I then explain that neither can a snake. I give details explaining that the snake will usually use the hole that someone else made, have a little dinner, spend the night, and then move on. This little Abenaki kid said to me one time after I'd told this story, "I stayed at a place like that once. It was called a bread and breakfast." The adults in the class laughed and the rest of the kids didn't even get the humor. Indian humor is often a form of acknowledgement that they understand what you are explaining.

As I explained earlier, in Vermont many Abenaki took jobs working outdoors as their life ways changed because of encroaching European settlements. This outdoor connection often comes down the generations. On my hikes I will find a lawn or a corner of the parking lot to explain the rules of the hike to the children and as we begin to enter the woods one or two children will say that they are afraid to go into the woods and that their parents tell them that it is not safe to go into the woods. I usually stop the class and explain that this is my back yard. I don't get lost in my back yard and I ask the kids if they get lost in their back yard. At this point I begin to hear all kinds of stories from the Abenaki kids about hiking in the woods with their parents and grandparents. It's wonderful to see them so proud of this and it seems to comfort the child that is afraid, so I let them continue for a while with their stories, then we move on.

Over the years I've gotten letters and booklets that the classes have made and sent to me, thanking me for the experiences we have had together. I find it so interesting to see what stands out in their minds to draw or write about. I've worked in schools for over twenty-five years now and have had many opportunities to talk about expectations of the students. But these letters and pictures that I get clearly show me that the expectations they have for a teacher is someone that

teaches in a manner that allows them to explore and learn on their own, in their own way and on their own time schedule. They love having the chance to get dirty while exploring a riverbed, sticking their foot in a hole or stepping on a squishy pile of scat. That chance to learn outside of the classroom meets the leaning style of a group of kids that rarely have the opportunity to learn this way. The children that learn visually or by observation suffer greatly if they do not have an opportunity to be taught in the style they best learn. The learning environment needs to meet the needs of their culture and their learning style.

I've seen the other side of this learning spectrum. I am teaching science and math in a correctional facility with 18 to 23 year olds this semester. These students rarely, if ever, had the opportunity to learn in a different way. They are each incarcerated because of something different, but basically it comes down to the same thing. These kids fell through the cracks because their learning style is different. They now learn about vertical and horizontal patterning, radius and circumference through basket making and they learn about whole numbers, fractions, ratio and probability with an ancient Abenaki hand game. They learn that when you pull on something in nature the rest of the world is connected. Their jailhouse recreation yard has a twelve-foot high barbed wire fence around it, this is their outdoor classroom now, while a river runs a mere six feet away with bob cat tracks gently marking an ancient trail. It makes me sad to see that something as simple as the proper learning environment could have saved these students. It seems to me that school budgets should be made available to provide these opportunities for children to learn. It might be cheaper in the long run.

References

Day, G.M. (1994). *Western Abenaki Dictionary, Vol 1: Abenaki-English*. Hull, Quebec:

Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Frink, D.S., & Dow, J. A. (2005). *When the shad bush blooms: An archeology story*. Burlington,

VT: State of Vermont, Division of Historical Preservation

Gallagher , N.L. (1999). *Breeding better Vermonters: The eugenics project in the green*

mountain state. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Vermont Commission on Country Life. (1931). *Rural Vermont: A program for the future*.

Burlington, VT: The Vermont Commission on Country Life.