



Educational Philosophy

A 'living school' demonstrates the new vision for a sustainable culture. All over the world models of best practice are showing that better alternatives exist and that these alternatives can provide the same if not better standard of living without impacting adversely on our ecology or our fellow human beings.

These living schools are in community gardens, schools, homes, farms and parks. Many exist in isolation, rarely seen but highly developed and functional. Living schools incorporate appropriate technologies and are designed using the principles of living systems.

Living schools acknowledge both the interconnectedness and complexity of current social and environmental problems, and the urgency of creating a new generation of informed and skilled community leaders. They foster a deep understanding of the natural world, grounded in direct experience that leads to sustainable behaviour.

Living Schools aims to promote the development of these models and to build the capacity of the organisations and people creating them. Thus, *Living Schools* educational philosophy is based on four principles:

Critical thinking

Critical thinking can be enlightening: the realisation that so many of our ideas and actions spring from assumptions that might be inappropriate opens up pathways for the exploration of new and better ways of living.

We must learn to apply this kind of critical thinking to all our actions. We must constantly ask ourselves 'what would happen then?' Consequences are like everything in nature: they are not discrete. The consequences of human actions continue on forever, evolving, giving rise to new actions and consequences and creating entire realities in their wake.

True critical thinking is not a skill that is valued in our education system. We are taught to listen, not question. The child who questions the teacher is most often considered impertinent and told to be quiet. He is taught from an early age that it doesn't pay to disagree and this fear of nonconformity has come to dominate our entire society, with devastating results.

Questioning your unconscious assumptions is a confronting and difficult process that many people avoid. By placing yourself in an unfamiliar situation, where your expectations are no longer the accepted norm, you force yourself to rethink these assumptions and to see yourself, others and your environment from a different perspective. The extent to which this perspective creates real change in yourself and in the world around you depends on the receptivity you bring to the experience.

Action research learning

Action research learning promotes a process by which people actively participate in events and relationships which affect their lives and better the lives of others. Students learn through the active adaptation of their existing knowledge in response to their experiences with other people and their environment.

Action research learning encourages students to investigate their personal learning and development processes. Learning is evolutionary: all actions are followed by reflection on that action and how it might be improved in the future.

The learning community

A learning community is a social ecology with a common goal of expanding collective understanding in a particular area. Members bring with them their diverse experiences and knowledge, and through a sharing of their perspectives collaborate together in the learning process. In a learning community:

- Each member is both teacher and student; the structure is not hierarchical
- The value of each member's unique skills and experience is acknowledged
- Learning is self-directed and members set their own learning goals
- Self improvement is emphasized over competition
- Each member is responsible for their own learning
- Curriculum is flexible enough to accommodate the interests of the group
- The individual learning styles of each member are respected
- Differences of opinion are an opportunity to develop greater understanding
- There is an atmosphere of respect and trust
- Constructive feedback is an important aspect of the learning process
- Learning is an exploration of many viewpoints, not acceptance of one theory
- Learning is an evolutionary process and takes many forms

Learning in this way can be challenging at first because we have been trained to learn primarily in strongly hierarchical and competitive environments. Cooperation and collaborative learning does not come naturally to most westerners, brought up in a culture that emphasizes individual achievement over collective well-being.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning, or learning through doing, allows the development of both skills and knowledge as well as creating a strong bond between the learner and what is learned through the application of creativity and energy to the learning process. Experiential learning retrains fundamental neuromuscular pathways neglected in our sedentary lifestyles and educational models.

Experiential learning assists the student to move from immersion in the safety of the learning community to the application of new skills and knowledge within daily life. It can be challenging. Participants must face their fears and assumptions about life, working with others and their own capacity to develop and learn.