

Aesthetics of Sustainability and the Ethical Imagination

***“The world is finite,
but imagination makes us infinite.” John Muir***
founder of Sierra Club

An ecologically literate person has a basic comprehension of ecology, human ecology and the concepts of sustainability. As all education implicitly refers to our relationship with the environment and design knowledge informs choices about how we interface with objects, systems, and environments, eco literacy needs to be developed through introduction of K12 environmental design education. Design thinking, or the ability to engage complex information in creative ways, is a critical 21st century skill for jobs that for the most part, do not exist today. Developing the ethical imagination, or the inquisitive nature to question, the ability to focus and conceive, the skill to recognize rigor and excellence, are traits of the educated person. Eco literacy and the ethical imagination are the necessary foundation for the work of artists, scientists, environmentalists and designers. Environmental design education introduces what design is, what it does, and why it is important to our future through nine interconnected scales of activities- nano, pattern, object, space, architecture, neighborhood, urban, regional, and global. Instilling wonder of the built and natural world with local learning and global insights, eco web learning empowers learning from practices around the world and positively expands perspectives for working to live in the world more creatively and more gently.

“Deep ecological awareness recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature.” Fritjof Capra, founder Eco Literacy Foundation

In pressing the role of eco literacy as a portal to stewardship of urban living for future citizens, there are three arenas: the architecture of education, the access to education, and the fundamentals of education. Cultivation of stewardship begins with building a desire for learning and awareness that personal choices affect local choices, which, in turn, affect everyone globally. This critical awareness of the need to respect immanent relationships between persons, nature, the artificial, and the understanding that design has unique responsibilities in shaping these immanent relationships develops, through education, into an ethical imagination. The ethical imagination is a mode of empowerment for individuals to become creative and political instruments of change connecting responsibility of personal choice to local and global understandings. Our world is finite, but our imagination has the potential to make us infinite.

The development of the ethical imagination and the means of embodying ideas into habitable environments are the aims of the design disciplines. While learning about design is a life long process, students can develop critical thinking during early design education experiences. In the process of developing critical thinking into a platform of activism, students are introduced to the politic of research, the politic of perception, and the politic of advocacy. The understanding that ideas have consequences is embedded in all aspects in the development of the ethical imagination and the impacts that they have on the biodiversity of the earth.

“If facts are seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.” Rachel Carson
author of The Silent Spring

An ethical imagination is the foundation for leadership in that it addresses human economies and the impacts that they have on the biodiversity of the earth.

Eco literacy is a critical 21st century mandate. The first Earth Day, founded by the late Senator Gaylord Nelson in 1970, led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species acts; before that, John Muir, naturalist and conservationist, had established the Sierra Club, America's oldest, largest, and most influential grassroots environmental organization.

By Earth Day 2000, 5,000 environmental groups around the world had joined to raise awareness of climate change and environmental stewardship. In 2007 North American Association of Environmental Education established standards for the K12 population. Earth Day Network developed online access to environmental education about climate change, air and water quality, United States Green Charter Schools, schools that put learning about the environment, came together to share environmental education strategies. Eco literacy activities that provide skills that in turn translate to the 21st century workplace are key to our changing perceptions and behavior. All learning inevitably is environmental as our existence depends on our relationship with the environment; future jobs need to address climate change and more sustainable lifestyles. Knowing that the jobs of tomorrow will be filled by the youth of today demands introduction to work force possibilities during the K12 years.

“Everything touches Everything.”
Jose Luis Borges

NEXT.cc connects design awareness, thinking, and advocacy for change through interactive exploratory activities introduced in Tools, Languages, Discovery and Design. Tools introduce DPI(Department of Public Instruction) based standards of research, reading, writing, speaking, graphic communication and documentation as investigative skills of the artist, scientist and designer. Language journeys introduce systems of ideas with components (nano, pattern, object) combined to create products (objects, spaces, architecture) that form part of larger regional or global systems (city, regional global). Discovery journeys introduce thinking and making which use, analyze and evaluate interactions between ideas, overlapping systems and their consequences. NAAEE (North American Association of Environmental Education) standards are evaluated in study of how the design world works or could work (urban, fashion, logo), direct experience with materials and forces (matter, materials, structures, beams, columns, trusses, bridges, earth, air, water) analysis of products and environments (shoe design, chair design, architecture, skyscrapers, interiors, landscapes, and design of solutions to complex problems (mass transit, recycling, green building, green roofs, energy). Journeys connect research to analysis, diagramming to drawing, digital interactivity to modeling interweaving traditional teaching methods with new digital connectivity in an eco web classroom.

NEXT.cc journeys are easy to use. Clicking on journey icons opens the subject of the journey. Each journey introduces vocabulary, concepts, and principals of the journey topic. Scrolling down are activities that build on the subject introduction and take participants online, into their homes or classrooms, or out to the community to observe, document, research, conceptualize through writing, drawing, graphics, or modeling. Each journey links to the gallery of student work by clicking on the blinking camera. Once in the journeys' gallery collection, proceed by clicking next or previous. To return to the journey click the back button. The review offers a self assessment of new vocabulary and key principles introduced in the journey. Explore offers links to virtual field trips, museum interatives and contemporary art, science, design practices. Students and teachers develop awareness of vocabulary, understanding of environmental issues, and express individuality and creativity while developing responsibility for their ideas. Everyone learns about themselves, their friends, their community through the world of ideas and their consequences.