
Nurturing the EcoID in You

Making the Personal Professional

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Abstract

Ecological identity (EcoID) refers to all the ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth (Thomashow, 1995). EcoID work can shape both a student's personal and professional identity. Since many of them will be advocating via their programming efforts for nature-based places and the natural environment as future professionals, EcoID work can help provide a foundation to fall back on. After introducing the EcoID concept, students are asked what they have in common when it comes to environmental experiences. This is followed by a discussion of three types of experiences: childhood memories of special places, perceptions of disturbed places, and contemplation of wild places. Class experiences follow with a practical goal to get students thinking and feeling about nature so they can be not only grounded personally but also have an educational tool in their programming kit to facilitate a similar type of experience for the publics they will serve.

KEYWORDS: Ecological identity, recreation resource management, environmentalism, recreation programming

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E. O. Wilson defined ecology as “the scientific study of the interaction of organisms and their environment, including the physical environment and other organisms living in it” (1992, p. 396). Borden suggested that the study of ecology leads to changes in perspective and can provide the foundations for an ‘ecological identity’ (1986). Drawing from Borden’s work, Thomashow described ecological identity as referring “to all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self (1995, p. 3). Ecological identity’s purpose is to provide the “language and context that connect a person’s life choices with his or her ecological worldview, serving as a guide that coordinates meaning, a transition to a new way of seeing oneself in the world” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 6). Thomashow further suggested that ecological identity (EcoID) work is setting up learning situations that allow people to reflect on and “reinterpret the memories, events, and circumstances of personal development” (p. 5). EcoID work is important because it provides a “trail map for the difficult decisions that may lie ahead, a way to reiterate what’s important, and a means for interpreting the experience of nature” (p. 7).

As concern for the natural environment continues to grow across the globe, ecological identity (EcoID) work provides a foundation for not only personal growth but also serves as a framework for ecological citizenship, as well as reflective environmental practice in one’s profession (Thomashow, 1995). EcoID work may help counteract the effects of a public that is increasingly suffering from what Richard Louv (2006) refers to as “nature-deficit disorder” (i.e., a lack of connection to nature).

EcoID Work in the College Classroom Setting

While EcoID work can be practiced by anyone at any time, in the context of a college parks, recreation, leisure services curriculum, it can serve as a method to help shape both a student’s personal and professional identity. Since many of them will be advocating via their programming and educational efforts for natural environments as future professionals EcoID work can go a long way in advancing the principles of sustainability and stewardship of the planet. The purpose of EcoID work is to offer students not only an awareness and understanding of where they stand when it comes to the environment, but to also provide them with an educational tool to reach out to the public.

The Activity

There are many learning activities that are designed to nurture and shape student EcoID (see Thomashow, 1995). Drawing from Thomashow’s work, the author has created an activity for use in an introductory-level Recreation Resource Management class called “Nurturing the EcoID in You: Making the Personal Professional.” The activity is undertaken during the first week or two of class to help set the stage for the rest of the course since much of the future material is about managing natural resources from an outdoor recreation perspective. The activity provides a good foundation for students to more clearly see how their ecological identity has implications for the sites they may ultimately be responsible for managing be it as a site supervisor or provider of guided services.

A step-by-step approach is taken and is as follows:

1. Introduction of the concept of ecological identity. This usually takes about 10 minutes with material primarily drawn from Thomashow's text as he does a great job introducing the background of the concept, its evolution, and use in his courses. The concept is easy for students to grasp with a few PowerPoint slides prepared to facilitate the understanding.
2. Further discussion focuses on how a student's ecological identity and environmental worldview ultimately influences their personal and professional identity and may even help explain why they are sitting in the author's class and have chosen to major in recreation management. This usually takes 5-10 minutes depending on the size of the class. The author uses this time to introduce his own story about how he found his way to recreation management to set the stage for the students.
3. Students are then asked what they might have in common when it comes to environmental experiences. Responses range from outdoor experiences with family as a child (e.g., camping out) to hiking with college friends to playing in the rain. It is fairly easy to introduce the topic and discuss commonalities in 15 minutes although it may take longer depending on the class size and student engagement. Instructors should use their discretion.
4. While the discussion of commonalities usually generates a wealth of discussion, the class is ultimately directed down three paths of experiences (see Thomashow, 1995) (Note: Other paths, such as memories of new special places, could be examined too):
 - a. Path 1—childhood memories of special experiences and places (e.g., camping with family, going fishing in nearby pond) where the natural environment played a role. The purpose of revisiting the special places and experiences of childhood that go with them is to “gain awareness of the connections we make with the earth, awakening and holding these memories in our consciousness of the present” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 9). The author then introduces the notion of “touchstone memories” based on special places adults commonly return to in their mind when reliving some of their first explorations with independence. Students are asked to share their special places and experiences of childhood. This helps imbue additional meaning to the places and experiences for the students. This part of the activity can take 10 to 30 minutes depending on how much time the instructor allots. The author has found that hearing from 8-10 students establishes a good foundation.
 - b. Path 2—perceptions of disturbed places (e.g., loss of woods in the backyard due to development, a beach area destroyed by storm). This path recognizes that many of the special places or experiences students had as a child have changed be it due to pollution, development, destruction, etc. While the memories are still in place, the special places may be gone. As Thomashow suggests, “these memories serve as an idealized vision

of what it feels like to bond with a place” (1995, p. 12). Much as with their childhood memories, it is pointed out that these feelings are also connected to their ecological worldview which in turn provides the focus to attempt to create new touchstone memories in their adult life. This part of the activity can take 10 to 30 minutes depending on how much time the instructor allots. Hearing from 8-10 students establishes a good foundation.

- c. Path 3—contemplation of wild places (e.g., being awed by a spectacular waterfall). This path focuses on the awe, wonder, mystery, and joy of “wild” places that also make up one’s ecological worldview. This part of the activity works best outdoors, ideally in a “wild place” (e.g., a place relatively untouched by human development). Once outdoors, students participate in a brief solo experience where they are to engage their senses in relation to the wild place they are visiting. As Thomashow suggests, “the point is simply to cultivate an awareness of ourselves in this wild place, to slow down for awhile and cherish the surroundings” (1995, p. 15). After 15-20 minutes, students are gathered to briefly discuss their impressions. Once a good point is reached, or when time forces a return, students walk back silently to the classroom or their vehicles. The next class meeting, students often come to find that the “wild place” experience as a class as well as particular events in their lives provide a new lens to see their life through. For some, it is a simple recognition that “just being” like the big tree they observed during the out-of-classroom experience is something they wish to practice. For others, it is recognition that their life is full of distractions from technology to unimportant tasks. It is in these moments many students express a desire for the wild.
5. Upon completion of Path 3, students go home and turn in the following week a paper that addresses each of the three paths discussed in class. The paper has few restrictions (e.g., three to five pages) with students asked that they write about each of the three paths and also how the paths may help explain: 1) why they are in my class and, 2) how they have influenced their decision to enter the recreation management profession. They are told their paper is confidential and as such students seem to really open up and share even more than they may have in the classroom. A week to two weeks following the activity, students are given back their papers and a discussion of how one’s ecological identity has implications for their professional path is undertaken. This part of the activity takes 15 to 30 minutes or as much time as the instructor allots. From the author’s perspective, the discussion puts closure on the activity, tying the “personal to the professional.”

While the larger goal of the activity is to help students begin to internalize the interconnections and dependence of all living things, harking back to the roots of ecology, a practical goal is to get students thinking and feeling about nature, the role it has played in their lives, and how this information can aid them both personally and professionally. While EcoID work is grounded in real-world problems, the work is empty unless it relates to a person’s “deepest values about nature.”

Nurturing the EcoID in You Making the Personal Professional—Recommendations for Use

As mentioned previously, this activity is used in a Recreation Resource Management course, ideally during the early part of the semester (e.g., second week of class) and takes between 90 and 150 minutes (Note: It can take longer if a field trip off university grounds is included). Prep time for the activity is very little other than preparing a few PowerPoint slides and arranging for the field part of the experience.

The author's class ranges in size from 20-25 each semester. Since the nature of the activity is a bit personal, it may not work well in a class much larger than what the author uses it in. On the other hand, this activity should work great for smaller classes. The activity is certainly suitable for that type of course, as well as any course linked to environmental or outdoor education, natural resource management, interpretation, or any course designed to raise awareness about the role of the natural environment in a student's life. It probably works best in an introductory-level course to establish a foundation for students to build on in later courses. As such, it could work in a gateway class such as, "Introduction to Recreation and Leisure Services" or something similar to act as an additional hook to attract students to a recreation and leisure services program or department.

The activity works best over the course of a typical week (e.g., two classes meeting for 75 minutes or three classes meeting for 50 minutes). The outside part of the activity works best if students can get away from campus into a natural setting free from built structures (Note: The author plans for this ahead of time and fortunately has a setting to use walking distance from the classroom). Due to various constraints (e.g., inclement weather) students sometimes venture out on their own to "wild places" and practice a silent meditation of sorts. As well, a field trip can be scheduled for the activity, whereby everything can take place over one afternoon.

Lastly, instructors should practice the activity on themselves and possibly some colleagues to get some sense of the type of information that might be received from students. This can be of great benefit, as it has with the author, and helps one explore their own ecological identity and may provide some personal confirmation as to the professional path chosen. It also greatly enhances your ability to carry out the activity with students. It sure is a great excuse to practice what you preach, and who wouldn't want a reason to contemplate the wild while in the wild?

References

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