

How can teachers imaginatively cultivate ecological understanding in learners?

To understand ecologically is to make sense of the human world as an integrated part of the ecological whole – to acknowledge our *implicatedness* in all life and to act accordingly. Cultivating a deep sense of ecological understanding requires more than simply conveying facts about environmental issues or getting students outside for a “brain break” in the fresh air. Educating for ecological understanding requires providing students with *meaningful* experiences of both the curricular content and the local places in which they live and learn.

Imaginative Ecological Education (IEE) is a teaching approach that aims to support the development of ecological understanding by engaging students’ emotions, bodies, and imaginations in learning with the natural world. Imagination plays at least two important roles in ecological understanding. It provides the ability to transcend conventional belief systems and consider possible alternatives; and it facilitates and strengthens the kind of emotional connection with the living world required to make sustained ethical choices.

In IEE, imagination represents the capacity to envision the possible in all things. All acts of creativity and innovation are rooted in the fertile soil of imagination. Imagination is the emotional context through which to learn and live our connections to a living world.

Three principles of Imaginative Ecological Education

IEE has three guiding principles that can support emotionally meaningful and memorable learning experiences: *Feeling*, *Activeness*, and *Sense of Place*. Each principle has learning tools associated with it that teachers can use to engage the emotional and imaginative lives of their students. A few examples are provided below for a proposed lesson on weather patterns.

Principle	What/Why?	How? (weather example)
Feeling	Feeling acknowledges the imaginative core of all learning. If teachers want to engage emotions we must draw on the “cognitive tools” of our imaginations (e.g. story-form, metaphor, role-playing, etc.)	Invite students to report on weather patterns as “meteorologists” vying for a job at the new school television station. Which reporter has the most engaging “story” on the weather these days? What is the most extreme weather recently?
Activeness	Activeness acknowledges the role of the body in learning. To experience the interconnectedness of a living world, teachers need to evoke the body’s tools for learning. These tools include the physical senses, gesture, musicality, and the ability to perceive patterns.	Invite students out on a “Weather(ed) Walk” to seek out all evidence of weather (e.g. sun exposure, cracking, moss, wetness, etc.). Students could record evidence of a specific weather pattern, then act out the pattern as a human mood or gesture (no talking) for their peers to guess. marginalized by systems of oppression.
Sense of Place	Sense of Place refers to our meaningful relationships with natural and cultural contexts, and acknowledges the role the local natural world plays in our sense of identity.	Invite students to collect precipitation, temperature, or other weather-related data in a specific “microsite” they select and visit repeatedly. In turn, these microsites can also be used for nature journaling, writing weather-themed acrostic poems, or drawing maps.

While getting beyond the classroom walls is an important first step, it is not enough to simply “get kids outside.” IEE employs tools of imagination that underlie all meaningful learning in ways that connect students with the living world. IEE is not a new curriculum. It is an approach to teaching any curriculum – and any age of student – in a way that engages the body, emotions, and imagination in the process. Interested in learning more? The *Walking Curriculum* is a great place to start!

For online resources and references please visit:
www.edcan.ca/facts-on-education

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