

Developing Deep Nature Connection in Students, Framework and suggested activities.

Dr Miles Holmes

Background:

This document came about as a collaboration between Dr Miles Holmes and Wanta Pawu-kurlpurlurnu, a Warlpiri man from the Central Desert of Australia. The original work and monograph (co-authored by Lance Box) called Ngurra-kurlu can be read here, <https://www.nintione.com.au/resource/DKCRC-Report-41-Ngurra-kurlu.pdf>

Or watched online here <https://www.ictv.com.au/video/item/2997>

It also draws on a long-term mentoring relationship between Dr Miles and international nature connection mentor – Jon Young – whose book ‘Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature’ has become a guide for nature connection mentoring and bush schools worldwide.

This document is a vision of how the core routines of nature connection can be aligned with Indigenous pedagogies, and though a series of games and activities be made suitable for students in Australian schools. It is intended to be adapted to local Indigenous contexts, but the framework presented here is a useful bridging tool as it contains key elements common to all Australian First Nations cultures.

The intention of this document is to provide a framework for discussion. If it is to be formally implemented, please seek permission from the authors due to Intellectual property (IP) and cultural Intellectual property provisions.

Both Wanta and Dr Miles are available to talk more on the vision, and adaptability to local settings and local Indigenous cultures.

Wanta continues to live in the Northern Territory community of Lajamanu, he teaches at the school and consults as a guest lecturer at Melbourne University on the principals of Ngurra- kurlu and can be contacted on 0457572923.

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Pedagogical Approach

1. Nature connection is good for us, a wealth of scientific evidence shows that it is good for mental health, learning and personal growth.
2. Nature connection is about creating deep awareness and connection to place and self. It is different from nature education and nature recreation. If done well it also can create an ethic of environmental stewardship which many argue is the most pressing conservation need
3. Aboriginal people have pedagogical approaches that are world class in terms of creating deep nature connection. Their methods create superb naturalists, and humans who are deeply connected to place, each other, and self. Furthermore, the training techniques that are embedded into the cultural framework inherently train successive generations just via membership into the culture. It is excellent succession planning.
4. What is the fundamental value of this system? As many anthropologists and ethnobiologists have noted, an enduring feature of Aboriginal social systems is the close link between nature and culture. There is no Cartesian duality in Aboriginal culture in which information about the natural world is separated from information about the cultural world. This is also the key to nature connection pedagogy.
5. In terms of teaching nature connection, it means that people connection and nature connection are one cycle. It means matching the nature experience with integration and extension on the people side. Said another way, nature time with mentoring time. This is important for two reasons.
 - a. Firstly, exposure to nature by itself does not cause transformative change. For example, not all people with outdoor jobs are conservation minded or connected to nature even though they are all outside a lot. It is integration and framing of the experience through healthy social systems that creates deep connection.
 - b. Secondly, nature connection cannot occur as a lecture or single event, it must be a habit or core routine as discussed below. The habitual aspect therefore requires mentors outside of the vocational space. This is what Indigenous societies do particularly well, they have structures (outlined below) which create a continuing series of mentoring, teaching and experiential moments throughout life. Nature is something that is happening within the culture, essentially nature connection occurs within an “invisible school”.
6. Drawing on a long-term collaboration with Warlpiri people from the Central desert, the following information is a mix of social and cultural processes used to create deep nature connection within the invisible school. According to Warlpiri educator and researcher Wanta Patrick Jampijinpa they are called Ngurra-kulru, which means “from country and country within”. The five elements are:
 - a. Kinship – is family, feeling a sense of kinship with place, and having a nature connected human community around us.
 - b. Language – a way of speaking about country, but also reading the “body language of country”
 - c. Law and Lore- a set of ethics, laws, hero stories, and morals in relation to nature and people’s role in it
 - d. Ceremony – a set of processes such as rites of passage, celebrations of particular species, grief healing and teaching ceremonies that give heart and soul to the country and keep the community functioning smoothly.
 - e. Country – the environment itself, having access, being immersed in it.

7. These elements are underlain by some fundamental processes. For example, mentoring is favoured over lecturing or telling, learning occurs through all modalities (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic etc), community processes that govern behaviour are in place, grief healing is in place.
8. In an Indigenous sense deep connection is achieved when a particular species, place or process like the weather is understood through all these elements. As this involves simultaneous immersion in social and natural system the end result is not just good naturalists but good citizens who are connected to themselves, each other, and the country.

Vision for Schools

The invisible school – meaning a process that naturally and effortlessly creates a connection to nature - can be created “in school” and with the collaboration of after school carers, parent, aunties, uncles it can be extended out of school for even more effect.

The vision is that based on the Indigenous pedagogy above. Participants come to know their “country” which could be a school, a backyard, an afterschool care centre in as many possible ways as they can over a year.

This deep connection to nature will realise all the health, emotional, and behaviour benefits outlined in the literature.

Education tools get education outcome, connection tools get connection outcomes. If we just want kids to know about nature, then we can lecture them – if we want them to be really connection to nature then we need to adopt a different approach. I see three elements:

- Nature Pedagogy
- Nature Activities (i.e. Core Routines of Nature Connection)
- Practice Principle (Jon Young’s principles of Deep nature connection and cultural repair).

The cultural or pedagogical framework is a nature pedagogy based on the five elements of Ngurra-kurlu.

The actual activities are based on Jon Young’s core routines of nature connection with some additions. Many of which are themselves drawn from Indigenous Teaching.

The end result is that a “place” is transformed into something full of feelings, stories and connection. The inclusion of social processes means that the individual is not alone in their feeling but is surrounded by a community of people connected to that place. (This is important, too avoid becoming a pathological naturalist, feeling overwhelming grief at the state of the planet).

In empathic terms we are making the environment feel literally like a home. This transforms it from something nature to something social. This is the transformation to connection and all the benefits that come with that.

Based on Jon Young's work there are core routines that are known to create deep nature connection, they can be matched to the 5 pedagogical elements of Ngurra-kurlu outlined above. They are designed to stretch an individual in different ways in relation to the landscape.

The pedagogy and activities are embedded in some practice principles that are known to create deep nature connection but also repair the cultural village community which can become the "invisible school".

Jon Young calls these

- Deep nature connection routines
- Conscious competence in the art of mentoring
- Effective healing routines (to remove our own blocks to connection with nature and each other)
- Access to transformative role models and leaders

Core Routine Curriculum Models

Each Core Routine is a curriculum model which is linked to an aspect of the Australian curriculum.

They can be delivered individually, or can be combined, some are cumulative, other should always be done together (eg sit spot and story of the day).

There are no age considerations in this list. This would work for kids 9 years to Adult. Younger kids would require some modification to suit their life stage.

The routines are on the following pages.



Routine	Cultural element	What is it	How to do it	Curriculum
Sit Spot	Country/ Kinship	Children adopt a spot which they call their own, and get to know it through the seasons and times of day. Over time the sit spot can be tended, a school garden planted, bird attracted trees included. In Ngurra-kurlu this is the transformation of country into kin, of environment into relationship. That is why sit spot is both country and kinship.	Have Access, learn hazards to feel safe, play games like eagle eye to introduce sit spot.	
Expanding our senses	Language (reading body language of country)	A focus on using all the senses. Language for Warlpiri is what you say, but also what you perceive as the body language of country. The senses are the ropes/raw materials on which we build stories of place, and that is why senses are language.	Sensory games (blindfolds are good), triggers, sense meditations. Animals as teachers, owl eyes, kangaroo ears, dingo nose etc.	
Story of the day	Kinship/ Language	Harvesting the stories to integrate the nature experience and create a shared (peer) story. Harvesting story is the role of kin, aunts, uncles, friends. Mentoring is an obligation as much as it is a choice, hence; story of the day is part of kinship.	Based on "safe sharing" principles, children return from nature experience to share story. Focus is on storyteller's mind which is a deep full sensory re-telling. Community/ teachers/ parents are trained to catch stories.	

Routine	Cultural element	What is it	How to do it	Curriculum
Questions and tracking	Language (of country)	Learning animal and sign tracking Bird tracks, animal tracks, human tracks, landscape level tracking are everywhere. It is like reading the newspaper of the landscape. Ngurra-kurlu is translated as from country and country within. It is itself a metaphor for wholistic tracking as Ngurra-kulru tracks outwards and inwards.	Going tracking, drawing tracks, making plaster castes, learning gaits, trail cameras	
Animal forms	Ceremony / kinship	Moving the body like an animal. Knowledge is in the head, connection is in the body. Animals forms gets people in the body People love to mimic animals. Indigenous ceremony is based on animal mimicking to a highly refined degree. Not only is the form copied, but also the essence, good dancers are said to become the ancestor of the animal which is also kin.	If you really want to know an animal act it out. Can you guess others? Learning gaits is done through animal forms. Animal form yoga. There are so many great animal form games. ID a bird just by copying its wing flapping.	
Wandering	Country	To go in a timeless fashion and explore, unstructured play, let the mystery find you. Let country be our guide. (don't forget to bring back the story to the village). The word Wilinyi is translated as hunting but really means to go on the land with no destination other than to return.	Although it seems odd, you can teach people to wander. Owl eyes, cat animal forms, gratitude, wide angle hearing, and the attribute of the quiet mind are they are the keys to successful wandering.	

Routine	Cultural element	What is it	How to do it	Curriculum
Seasonal Calendar	Law/Lore	Keeping track of seasonal changes Wanta says “we don’t know why it flowers at that time of year, it is just the law for that thing. That is its role and purpose”. This is not an original core routine, but Matt F and I think it should be one.	Keep a seasonal diary for a year. When does that tree flower, when was the hottest day, when was the school garden plagued by grasshoppers.	
Mapping	Law/Lore	The aboriginal landscape has one of the most beautiful and sophisticated mapping systems on the planet. Dreaming tracks criss-cross the land marking all the feature, roles and ethics. The tracks are songs, designs and places. An elaborate song map of knowledge. It is called Jukurrpa, the law or the dreaming.	Get focused, make maps. How many houses between you and the first corner? Make a map of your path to school, Make a map of school, map the trees, map the kids, map where the teachers like stand. Map anything.	
Exploring Field Guides	Law/kinship	In a natural village we are surrounded by elders who know stuff about everything. Field guides are published by those elders. They can be our virtual elders to a wealth of information. The elders are kin, and they hold the law which is in this case a combination of ecological, human and spiritual.	Give kids nature names (like totems) let them look it up, use field guides to solve mysteries, have an “animal of the week”. Use art class to draw animals and so on.	

Routine	Cultural element	What is it	How to do it	Curriculum
Journaling	Language/ law	Sometimes there is no one to catch our story – that feels bad. Tell it to a journal. A journal is also a way of keeping track over time? what did I see here last week? What did that track look like. Just as in oral history, these stories are the science, and knowledge of the landscape. In an Indigenous sense they would be called the Law for country.	Keep a journal, keep a sit spot blog, keep a secret journal, and write your deepest feelings, or make it public on the net.	
Survival Living	Country/ Law	One of the principals of connection is to see the land in a different way. That bush is not just a bush, it is food! That rock can be used as a stone tool, that wood is good firewood In Indigenous society, the country looks after people if it is in turn looked after. Therefore this routine maps with country (the provider) and The Law (the rules and regulations for looking after county)	Practice survival skills, or gardening or bush regeneration. Anything that involves getting close contact with the land.	
Mind's Eye Imagining	Cere- mony	Aboriginal people have powerful abilities of recollection. I have flown with elders many times who remember the location of sites they have not visited in 40 years. Up in a chopper they sing their way back over the country. The phenomenal memory of songs, designs, dances, phones numbers and bank accounts are a function of minds-eye imagining.	This routine goes with journaling and story of the day and field guides. Take something in with your full senses and replicate in art, or words, or song, or story. It builds over time to a powerful skill.	

Routine	Cultural element	What is it	How to do it	Curriculum
Bird Language	Kinship/ Language	Listening for the patterns of noises and postures that the birds make. Bird language tells us when a cat is in the yard, a hawk in the sky or a human coming in the bush. It is one of the easiest and most powerful first steps in the nature connection journey.	Teach bird language, do bird sits, act out the five voice, play bird language games, do bird animal forms, journal birds, listen to bird recordings.	
Thanks-giving	Cere-mony	Being grateful is now scientifically proven to be good for us. Knowledge is in the head, connection is in the body. Gratitude takes what we "know" about nature and makes it a powerful feeling. It also has a similar affect to the sense meditation in calming people down. Overt gratitude is not a function of Central desert tribes. It is present in purpose-built increase ceremonies.	Based on safe sharing principles – start activities with a gratitude circle. Kids are naturally good at this. They don't need to be taught – just role model. It will become a highlight that people look forward to.	

One caveat to all of this. You can't teach nature connection. You need to role model it. Teachers, mentors etc – need to commit to their own journey as well, if they are not already on it.

I was impressed with the attention that the young people had to their space, and how they had internalised some routines of connection during the time they came together in the outdoor classroom. Looking after the space, the furniture and engaging in rounds of welcoming and witnessing each other takes maturity and a commitment to something greater than self. There was a comradeship and a commitment to being present and recognising the value of doing something different to what they normally do in class. They also showed a clear pride in some of their achievements such as the gardening. For the day I led, the group was very responsive to the nature connection routines we practice. Some were quite committing such as an long blindfold string walk designed to break out of sensory ruts - it was a testament to the work that eat dirt had done over the terms that the young people could engage with this activity in a mature way and reap the rewards. Congratulation Eat Dirt crew.

Dr Miles Holmes