

# Earth Education

## What can it offer Forest School?

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To declare myself from the start: I am an Earth Education (EE) practitioner of over 20 years. My Forest School (FS) history is a little shorter - about 5 years, qualifying 2 years ago. I think and feel (know!) that they both have a great deal to offer and until now have practiced them independently of each other.

Initially, I imagined that as both approaches are founded on quality time spent in the natural world would have a great deal in common. In fact taking part before training in a 'taster session' on forest schools with other leaders I was asked to engage in what I recognised as poorly understood and delivered EE activities, along with what I now know as more familiar FS ones. My training by the excellent Jenny Murphy and Sarah Lawfull (then of Oxfordshire County Council) contained nothing derived from earth education. During its many dimensions I was introduced to the concept of emotional intelligence, and revisited child-centred learning and elements of what I would have previously known as 'bushcraft'.

In my FS sessions with groups the training was very much employed but I found my EE background also useful in orchestrating if not engineering experiences for the learners. Since then I have noticed within my own practice of FS and contact with other FS practitioners a certain tension (creative tension?) between child led activity and that initiated or engineered by leaders. In some leaders there was definitely an interest in acquiring ideas to diversify and enrich their FS sessions.

Thus it did come as a total surprise that when I recently delivered an EE workshop to an audience, it was dominated by FS practitioners who considered that EE may have something to offer their delivery of FS. The workshop was well received but I have yet to follow up to see how EE approaches may have been incorporated, or simply used alongside more familiar FS ones. So does EE have something to offer? I believe it does, but perhaps more to some FS practice than others.

Objectively the ends of FS are personal development and child(person)-centred learning in natural surroundings. EE wishes to develop in any learner a more joyous and harmoniously relationship with the earth.

The main differences I perceive as this:

- FS is learner focused with a relatively free content but engaging the learner with the natural world in which the activity is taking place.
- EE has very defined content and outcomes, but uses approaches that take due account of the learner and strive to engage them in the process of their learning.

Some would claim that FS can help develop a more productive relationship between the natural world and the individual. EE helps to reform that relationship based on improved understandings, enhanced feelings/attitudes and changed personal actions. Some would claim that this reformed relationship contributes greatly to a clearer personal identity. I would claim both.

Essentially we are concerned with what a structuralist philosopher would consider to be a categorical clarification. Until we are sure what is 'us' and 'not us' we cannot have a good self-concept and nor a good relationship to the environment in which we exist. Until this is clear, both the individual and the environment will suffer. Another way of looking at it could be that you cannot educate individuals about the world when their self-esteem is poor and that learners with good self-esteem must learn a good relationship with the world that supports them and all other life, or their relationship with it will be destructive, through their ignorance or careless intention.

Where does this leave the initial question? I have no answer but I hope this article can initiate a dialogue between those who espouse each approach (or both). We need well-adjusted people living so that they are in harmony with the planet that supports them both materially and spiritually. I don't think that either FS or EE has a monopoly on either dimension. Neither claim that, nor do they aspire to be a total education but an essential part of every individual's experience.

There is time in every individual's education for both. There is perhaps scope for some integration of the approaches. What concerns me most is that in most school's curriculum the time spent outside on 'environmental' activity is perceived as limited. As with 'environmental education' in the past educators could perceive that 'the environmental box' was ticked by the pursuit of one environmental excursion or activity. How do we create space in the time allocated outdoors for the development of the individual and developing that individual's relationship to the planet into a productive and sustainable whole?

It is established that most (all) environmental champions had in their past enriching, first-hand relationships with the natural world. However, most of the lads I grew up with romping/shelter-building/cooking/exploring/collecting, in that natural setting did not become environmental champions but simply consumers of the planet for their own ends. "A cow is a four-legged animal but not every four-legged animal is a cow." How do we ensure that our learners' rich encounters and experiences in the natural world equip them with the understandings, feelings and skills/tools they need to live in harmony with the planet? I think EE has a great deal to offer here and teamed with FS could truly be a force for change.

For those who have not attended an EE workshop, or who wish to refresh their understanding of the approach workshops are arranged when hosts can be found and delivered by one of our trainers. The last was in October 2013 and I have another arranged for May 2014. If you have an interest in attending or hosting a workshop please contact me at [workshops@earthed.org.uk](mailto:workshops@earthed.org.uk)

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The Trust for Earth Education