

The Jaguar Walk: Reflections from the Amazon Field School

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Abstract:

My three trips with the Interdisciplinary Amazon Field School, a global partnership between the Calanoa Project in Colombia and Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) near Vancouver, Canada, have profoundly influenced my teaching. This reflective paper describes my experiences through narrative, journal entries, photography, and examples from both the Amazon and my classroom instruction at KPU. From these experiences, I have shifted from being a teacher to being a facilitator of learning who encourages whole-person pedagogy. Four themes are followed: (1) the importance of teacher adaptability in active learning environments, (2) confidence building for teachers to become capable leaders and mentors, (3) contemplative education that embraces a reflective and relational pedagogy, and (4) the movement toward Nature as Teacher.

Key Words:

Nature as Teacher, contemplative pedagogy, experiential education, interdisciplinary learning, field schools.

Introduction

I awoke on my birthday to the rush of the Amazon River outside my cabin. As I stepped into the deceptively cool morning, iguanas emerged to catch the sunrise and a troupe of squirrel monkeys scurried overhead. After arepas with fresh guava jam, we would embark on a 6-hour hike through primary tropical rainforest, the finale to our two-week Amazon odyssey. I documented this journey in my journal: "...we set out on the Amazon. Into the maze of side streams we travelled, and then the great trek began.

Palm, vine, fern, tree fern, epiphyte, moss, shelf fungus, walking trees, bullet ants, evidence of jaguar, mother spiders and the spirits of the rainforest...Diego said we were heading into the heart of the Amazon” (May 18, 2014).

The Interdisciplinary Amazon Field School (<http://amazonfieldschool.ca>) is a collaboration between the Calanoa Project in Colombia, founded by Marlene and Diego Samper, and Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) near Vancouver, British Columbia. Two KPU instructors fly down to Colombia with 12–18 undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines. After brief stops in Bogota and Leticia, it’s a 3-hour boat ride up the Amazon to Calanoa. The Calanoa Project is an arts, design, ecology, and sustainability learning center that collaborates with aboriginal scholars and artists, and engages both local and global communities with indigenous ways of knowing. From here, students engage in everything from ethnobotany walks, boat rides to find Peruvian dolphins, pottery workshops, talks from shamans, and many other creative and ecological experiences.



Figure 1. Students crossing the Amazon River in Colombia. Photo by Lee Beavington.

In my three trips to the Amazon, I progressed from observer to faculty to leader, closely mirroring my personal journey as an educator. These experiences have significantly influenced my teaching. I have shifted from teacher or lecturer to being a facilitator of learning. Four key lessons from my journey include (1) the importance of teacher adaptability in active learning environments, (2) confidence building for teachers to become capable leaders and mentors, (3) contemplative education that embraces a reflective and relational pedagogy, and (4) the movement toward Nature as Teacher.

Lessons from Leaf Cutter Ants (The Importance of Adaptability)

Travelling with a group of students in a country with a foreign culture and climate is fraught with the unexpected. We experienced cancelled flights, tarantulas in our cabins, and flooded forest paths. Having two instructors means two minds for problem solving. Equally as important is a resourceful flexibility: adapting to sudden changes, maintaining composure in front of students, and letting go of expectations.

By way of example, let's return to the start of our 6-hour jungle trek. Not long after commencing, the sky opened and turned the hot, dry day into a hot, wet day. Twenty plastic ponchos appeared as we waited out the worst of the deluge. Afterward, senses heightened by the elements, we saw an ecosystem transformed. The whole forest began to *drip drip drip* down to the thin soil below, and the wet leaves glistened with verdant veins as though revealing the fingerprints of the forest. We trekked forward only to find that the trail had become a river. Flooding in the wet season widens the Amazon River by over 30 kilometers. Our guides, Elvis and Jorje, bushwhacked with their machetes in search of an alternate route, leaving us with insistent mosquitoes buzzing in our ears.

The rest of us lingered. We began to notice pockets of wonder: vines that looked like snakes and snakes that looked like vines; mossy lichens on the bark that resembled maps of the world; leaf-cutter ants harvesting chlorophyll like so many marching soldiers. Out came the cameras. The flooding afforded us an opportunity to attune our senses. While some students were impatient, the delay allowed others to settle and appreciate the tremendous biodiversity—the greatest the Earth's surface has to offer—surrounding us.

Adaptability for the classroom instructor is an ever-evolving skill, best learnt through practice. This skill is especially important in environments that foster active learning, group work, class discussions and other experiential approaches. In such classes, uncertainty can be both intimidating and liberating. Students may take conversations to unexpected places, react differently to planned activities, or offer another way of approaching the subject matter at hand. Formal lesson plans may not be the best approach in these situations. Rather, tangential paths often enrich learning by revealing student biases and misunderstandings, and opening other windows of perspective to the topic. When leaf cutter ants hit an unexpected barrier, they will climb, burrow or build living ant-bridges until they find the path that best serves them.



Figure 2. Snakes that look like vines. Photo by Lee Beavington.

I recently gave a presentation on re-imagining the KPU Surrey campus. My co-presenter, Sylvia Borda, the real expert on our topic, was unable to attend. I hastily patched her in via Skype, and had her speak to the 15 participants. About halfway through our hour-long session, she cut out. I had noted the five flip charts in the classroom. At this point, I broke the participants up into five groups, and had them each discuss a different question related to the topic. They wrote their brainstormed ideas on the flip charts, which we discussed as a large group. This was not the plan, but the situation demanded adaptation. The result? From this discussion arose a number of fantastic conversations and inspirations for transforming the campus. Similar situations have often arisen in my classrooms and labs, where harvesting learners' ideas and creativity proved more fruitful than PowerPoint or lecture.

By example, renovations on the Surrey KPU campus kept the science labs closed the first month of one semester. Instead of delaying the start date of my biology labs, I took students outside to learn about local ecology. Students explored unfamiliar areas of the campus, embodied tree physiology, and taught each other about local species through research they did on-site using their phones.

One day, in my interdisciplinary expressive arts (IDEA) class, two of the three groups scheduled to present cancelled. Instead of ending class early, we entered into a lengthy (but respectful) debate based on the first group presentation's ESL topic, engaged in a reflective writing exercise, and each student shared the progress of their major, semester-long project. Such spontaneous and opportune moments facilitated several experiential exercises that I now carry forward as regular activities.

The Jaguar Walk (Confidence Building)

Who am I as a leader? Can a (formerly) shy introvert be an effective leader? This question framed my personal inquiry during the Amazon Field Schools.

My first Amazon trip represented, in many ways, the first five years of my university teaching. I didn't know the terrain, and rarely initiated new ideas or took on leadership roles. I made timid but meticulous observations for future reference. During our trip, and because of my background in biology, I became by default the so-called 'expert' in all things scientific. *What's the difference between centipedes and millipedes?* Ask Lee. *How did the universe form?* Ask Lee. Or simply, *What's that plant?* Ask Lee!

In Colombia, there are more than 55,000 different plant species, not to mention nearly 2,000 bird and 3,500 butterfly species, none of which had I encountered in the wild. Each unanswered question put another dent in my sensitive shell, and made me determined to learn. I also slowly came to appreciate that *not* knowing an answer is an opportunity for collaborative learning.

My second trip, I found myself having to make elbow room for my leadership role. In addition to Lucie Gagné, my co-instructor who founded this field school, we also had hosts Marlene and Diego, an associate dean, another instructor from Design, a student leader, not to mention frequent guides or guest lecturers. "With six people in leadership/instructor roles, there is little room (or need) for additional directions to be given. If I were the only one in a leadership role, I trust and believe I would be the leader that was needed" (May 28, 2015). This surplus of leaders required careful navigation of

when to lead, and when to step aside to avoid there being too many cooks in the kitchen. As I struggled to find my place, I pondered the line between being assertive and passive, between confidence and hesitation. Does stepping aside permit others to lead, or does it fail to honor my own leadership role? Extroverts can, at times, become the default leaders through charisma, conviction, or by simply being the loudest.

Later that trip, Marlene facilitated a symbolism workshop. We each chose something to represent who we are. “Besides my familiar symbols—the moon, river, ocean, water, fern, cheetah—I chose the morpho butterfly. I cycle through phases of intense focus (caterpillar), deep reflection (cocoon/chrysalis) and transformation (adult butterfly). Also, its brilliant blue wings are hidden when it’s still, only revealed in short bursts which is resonant with how I teach” (June 15, 2015). I recognized that, as an introvert, I offer a quieter, more intentional confidence that emerges only when needed.

The third year, if the students, our guides, Marlene, or my fabulous co-instructor, Farhad Dastur, had a question, they usually brought it to me. “For now, need to take it all in. Explore. Break boundaries. Inspire. Learn. I’m the primary faculty this year. Feels strange. I’m the one people go to for most questions. Me. Lots of responsibility. Humbled by this. Extraordinary, really” (Mar. 2, 2017). This year, there was no student leader to help coordinate and relay information. I became a focal point. Because of my experiences in the previous two field schools, and inspired by leaf cutter ant adaptability, I was prepared for almost every circumstance. Getting through security to our connecting flight, helping students order food, providing emotional support and, of course, answering the question *What kind of tree is that?*

For myself, confidence facilitates clear instruction, student comprehension, the motivation to try something new, as well as a willingness to be stretched and challenged. A confident instructor, in my case, is more welcoming to uncertainty. At one point during our 6-hour trek, one of our guides stopped next to a tree. “Jaguar,” Elvis stated, as though this were commonplace. I examined the shredded bark of a tree trunk. Then Elvis pointed to the path. “Here are his prints, made not long ago. Maybe yesterday.”

I remember this moment clearly, because both terror and wonder collided inside my head. *A jaguar has hunted here.* I walked next to the print, imagining that great cat padding forward with his bulging muscles and massive paws. To walk like a jaguar is to radiate confidence.

When I teach, I prefer to be the side guide rather than the stage sage. I view instructing less as the imparting of information but more so the finding of one’s path in the academic world (and beyond). Furthering critical and communication skills, emotional and ecological literacy, as well as cooperative and relationship building capacities are all part of this process. “Thinking about leadership. I am not a directive leader. That is not my path. I provide a space for my students’ confidence to grow, for questions to be asked, trust to be built, curiosities followed, and a bridge connecting the outer and inner worlds” (May 28, 2015). In my IDEA courses, students typically run the last three to four classes. They have participated and engaged in various student-centered activities that I have facilitated, and then I move aside so they can lead.

The Opening (Contemplative Education)

In the Amazon Field School the cohort travelled together, ate together, shared cabins and numerous experiences that stretched them physically, emotionally, and perhaps spiritually. The Amazon also has the power of “cracking people open, letting vulnerabilities loose, and inviting people to share from a deeper well” (May 29, 2015). As the instructor, building solid relationships and a container of trust is paramount. This is true for both the pre-departure classes and while on-site in Colombia. This means being approachable, inviting all voices to be heard, and cultivating a learning environment where the whole person is welcome to show up. Mind, body, and emotion are all interwoven in this journey. In such an environment, fears and tears are not turned away. Rather, they are acknowledged as valid parts of who we are and supported by the learning community we have co-created.

This field school often took students out of their comfort zones. As my May 3, 2017 journal entry attests, “we will be stretched, smelly, sweaty, humid, hot, mosquito-bitten, rain-soaked, sun-warmed, and having the time of [our lives].” During our travels, many days are packed full with workshops and boat rides to villages, dolphins and flooded forests. Finding time to reflect and share our reflections—both positive and challenging—is vital to help ensure students avoid feeling overwhelmed, get a chance to voice their hardships or worries, and perhaps find the courage to be vulnerable and authentic in expressing their experience.

I aimed to facilitate a daily mindfulness practice through intentional silence, reflective journaling, or both. These purposeful, contemplative pauses enabled students to consider what they’ve seen and heard, and to integrate these experiences into their learning. In addition, having circle check-ins (either at the start and end of class, or in the morning and at dinner while in Colombia) provided further opportunity for expression and reflection.

“If you give students a safe and supportive space to share, it’s amazing what they will express...The cracks are opening, and the light is getting in. Even the quiet students are laughing and animated. The anxious are sharing their beds with cockroaches. The complacent are seeing the world not only through new eyes, but through a complete embodiment of experience” (May 15, 2017). The porous realm of Amazonia has a way of getting under the skin, and bringing the hidden to the surface.



Fig. 3. The permeable nature of the Amazon. Photo by Lee Beavington.

My IDEA classes begin with a few minutes of silence. Circle check-ins allow all voices to be heard, and varying perspectives and ideas to be acknowledged and perhaps incorporated into the current class. For example, one student spoke to their anxiety about presenting that day, and felt the need to take some deep breaths. After this suggestion, everyone stood up to engage in a collective breathing practice. Other student suggestions to stretch and roll our shoulders were also enacted.

Whether in the Amazon or a conventional classroom, a contemplative, holistic approach (Miller, 2000) imbues the learning environment with whole person pedagogy. It recognizes each person as unique, harbouring their own fears, worries, talents and daring. When students are allowed to show up as themselves, they can surprise even the most skeptical teacher with their wisdom and heart.

Bird Language (Nature as Teacher)

“I learn from nature first, people second” (May, 2015).

What does Nature as Teacher mean? This is where students, instead of learning *about* nature via textbooks or otherwise, learn *from* or *with* nature. It often requires place-based, experiential approaches. That is, learning that happens (a) at the actual site of the phenomenon under study (e.g., learning about intertidal ecology while at the beach during a low tide) and (b) by using the senses to directly engage with the phenomenon (e.g., inspecting algae with your hands or turning over rocks to find barnacles, crabs and limpets).

For nature to be a teacher or co-teacher, other important conditions may include becoming familiar with the site, careful attunement of the senses, being quiet long enough to hear the forest speak, and indigenous knowledge. The lattermost point is relevant because many indigenous ways of knowing are animistic; they listen for teachings from the natural world, hold reverence for nature's wisdom, consider nature to be a subject rather than an object (Mathews, 2008), and give a voice to the more-than-human.

On that birthday trek, "[s]lurping mud on my boots, humid leaf exhalations, rain-soaked fronds, shadows of the canopy, screeching red-throated caracara, roots in 5 meters of water (yet still alive), clothes plastered to skin, drips of the cut water vine on my tongue" (May 18, 2014), we were startled by a terrible scream from above. The sound repeated like a crow on steroids. We were too close to the nest of the red-throated caracara, a large black-feathered bird of prey that becomes raucous when its territory is trespassed.

Listening to this constant screech, we located her near the top of the canopy. I never saw the caracara, but to this day I still remember her cry. Bird language, for those who know how to listen, can reveal everything from place and time to species identification, nest location and even the whereabouts and potential danger of an approaching predator.

Whether teaching biology or expressive arts, and in the Amazon rainforest or the temperate rainforests that I call home in British Columbia, I regularly take students into the forest or other local ecosystems. I facilitate activities that open and attune our awareness, such as 'Expanding our Senses: Animal Senses' from *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature* (Young, Haas, & McGown, 2010). I facilitate activities that open and attune our awareness, such as 'Expanding our Senses: Animal Senses' from *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature* (Young, Haas, & McGown, 2010). I provide space for them to simply listen and notice the pockets of wonder surrounding them. I have them explore the ecosystem and bring back subjects to discuss (e.g., leaves, twigs, insects, fruit, moss, lichen, stones, etc.). They hold these nature subjects in their hand, and in a circle speak to what they notice about their subject, what it could symbolize, and how it might be connected to other subjects.

Nature is filled with wisdom evolved over billions of years. There are other intelligences we are just beginning to hear, though many indigenous peoples have long-standing relationships with such other-than-human voices. Even when teaching indoor-based courses, the wonder of nature can be evoked through storytelling, poetry, and other creative modalities.

A Poetic Conclusion

The sun set on my 38th birthday as we paddled back to Calanoa. Being on River Amazonas was a peak life experience. I hope this reverence spilled over to students. "My greatest moment of wonder, when Diego said: 'You can use this paddle, if you want.' And so I paddled through the forests flooded by the Amazon River, floating through tropical canopy, spotting monkeys (woolly and howler) leaping from branch to branch, stumbling upon a fishing grey dolphin, watching the moonrise and her (his?) perfect light reflecting in the water, and of course gliding through the tunnels of trees,

eliciting such unfathomable awe not even a poem will capture (though I will undoubtedly try)" (May 30, 2015).

And here is my attempt, as written in the Amazon on May 12, 2017:

The paddle is in my hands. The meanders of Matamata reflect the heavens above. Squirrel monkeys provide a sideshow. But the River is the flood of wonder.

The paddle is in my hands. Treetops dip into the water's surface. We navigate through a tunnel of foliage. A forest river. A verdant archway. A leaf-lined corridor.

The paddle is in my hands. Pink clouds betray the sun's departure. The current is the sky is the stars. Golden light turns a thousand shades of green even more brilliant.

The paddle is in my hands. Each curve of the creek reveals the truth of who we are. Every bend a reminder of life's meaning. My pores open to all existence.

The paddle is in my hands. The water holds a memory of time and blood and the pulse of Amazonia. This is the wonder that does not sleep.

The paddle is in my hands.



Fig. 4. Paddling through the flooded Amazon forests. Photo by Lee Beavington.

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