

Incorporating nature into education can build skills and improve mental health

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Could carving a wooden spoon by a lake be the answer to the mental health crisis in Canadian universities and also global sustainability?

Clearly, no.

However, our research has shown that shifts in our attention using Nature-based crafts and skills may just be the key to addressing the developing crises of mental health on campus as our world struggles with sustainability.

Nature-based education

At the University of Waterloo we are running a series of workshops for staff and students [as part of our new initiative called Land Skills for Wellness and Sustainability](#).

The University of Waterloo is often known for its science, engineering and tech expertise, but this initiative aims at supporting well-being and fostering discussions around sustainable behavior through the re-connection of participants to land and nature. Workshops led by local craft practitioners focus on spoon carving, basket weaving, nature weaving, herbal tea preparation, nature connection walks and scything.

The emphasis with each of these activities is sensory connection, relationship building with natural "materials" and the power of crafting with hands and simple tools, engaging in skills that have connected humans to land and place, sometimes for thousands of years. Participants formed new relationships with maple and willow wood, birch bark, tulsi and chamomile herbs, a Canada goose skull or a field of milky oats.

The workshops focus on the role that connecting with nature and practicing skills play in widening and shifting our attention, perception and relationship with the natural world.

In doing so we explore how our connection to nature and a sensory appreciation of the world [increases our sense of well-being](#) and is a

[prerequisite for sustainable behavior](#). These observations also mean we are laying foundations to examine and further understand sustainability as what author Fritjof Capra has called "[a crisis of perception](#)".

A crisis of perception

We live in a time of [social and environmental breakdown which has been called The Great Unraveling](#) with [unprecedented and globally significant impacts](#).

While global health has mainly improved during this period, [serious health implications are expected in this age of crisis](#). [One out of two people are predicted to experience a mental health disorder in their lifetime](#) which is likely to be [exacerbated by climate breakdown impacts](#). In Canada there is a noted [mental health crises at Canadian universities](#).

There is a sense of urgency for solutions to the sustainability crisis and a dominant response to this is [technological solutions such as electric vehicles, solar panels, carbon offsetting and green energy](#). While not without merit, these technologies do little to address the deeper, more complex, causes of our current sustainability crisis. As such, transformations towards sustainability must involve [deep shifts in the patterns our inner mind](#), including shifts in attention and a renewed relationship with nature.

Neurologist Iain McGilchrist [sees a central role for attention in creating our world](#): "The kind of attention we bring to bear on the world changes the nature of the world we attend to..."

As we participate with the world, we create stories that tell us how the world is, creates strategies for action, and moral and [ethical standards](#) to live by. The [Philosopher Alasdair Macintyre](#) acknowledges the importance of the question "What am I to do?" But first, he argues, we

must consider: What story or stories do I find myself a part of?

Our work aims to re-center the planet and our environmental community within our collective stories.

Reconnecting human nature

Throughout most of evolutionary history, humans, like other animals have been in direct participation with the [natural world](#). This shaped our behavior and provides [explanations for the benefits of reconnecting with the natural world](#) including [increased mental and physical health](#) and [sustainable behaviors](#).

Arts and craft-based activities were [once a core part](#) of [occupational therapy](#), and with reported benefits of increased sense of pride, purpose, identity and hope. Crafting and skills practice also have [widely reported physical and mental-health benefits](#) and [support resilience](#). Skills in "making" have been identified as important components in sustainability education and practice focusing on, for instance, embodied cognition, [flow activity](#) and anti-consumerism.

We acknowledge that teaching land skills on the stolen Indigenous land of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee peoples is complicated. The loss of life-ways, crafts and skills of peoples from Turtle Island (North America) and elsewhere through centuries of colonialism needs to be addressed and we aim to ensure that efforts to connect to the land do not perpetuate harm.

Our initiative has been designed as a "[safe to fail](#)" experiment to explore possibilities for change in academic culture and to support the well-being of all those present on campus. With over 61 participants engaged so far planning is underway to continue the workshops as part of a formal research program. We hope that in time these practices can become

standard across universities and Canada as a whole as part of wider efforts to address dual mental health and [sustainability](#) crises.

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