Discomfort in the Elements, Discomfort in Schools: An Anthropocentric Response to an Anthropocentric Argument

Bradley Rowe

Monmouth College

Everyone, everywhere experiences the atmospheric conditions. Weather is awesome; it is pure energy — creating, converting, transforming, recreating. Although human beings do not control and dominate weather (as we do other aspects of the environment), we have managed to alter it, to poison it — global warming being the obvious example. As such, place-based environmental education scholarship, such as LeAnn Holland's eloquently written "An Element-ary Education," posits that it is not enough to continue learning merely *about* the natural environment from within the confines of school walls. In challenging deeply entrenched assumptions about what constitutes a learning *environment*, Holland's essay makes a strong case for exploring environmental conditions for learning outside the school structure. She offers a meditation on exposure among outdoor elements — *in* weather — to engender an educative encounter that is holistic, incorporating the body and mind for a transformative learning experience. In building a strong theoretical context for her argument, Holland urges her audience to rethink the canon (specifically Plato's *Phaedrus* and Rousseau's *Emile*) as she illustrates the relationship among the body, mind, and the elemental forces of weather in the context of experiential learning.

I see this essay as a good example of taking the material conditions of the natural environment and then fleshing out their theoretical and educational significance. Since the essay draws, as Holland puts it, "from the spirit" of environmental education, which characteristically takes account for the interests of nonhuman organisms, it should be noted that the case this essay presents is noticeably anthropocentric.[1] That is, human beings are located at the center of this discussion and the implications concern primarily the interests of our species. The essay is not about how an element-ary education would address the interests of *nonhuman* animals, plants, water, air, or the land. The purpose, rather, is to encourage transformational experiences for *human* learners.

To be clear, I am not implying that anthropocentric aims are entirely independent from nonanthropocentric aims. I am simply pointing out that the essay observes how our species will benefit educationally from an element-ary education, which is not to say that nonhumans will be of no benefit in some way or cannot be addressed within the theoretical framework Holland presents. In fact, since human interests are deeply intertwined with nonhuman interests, and since there is no sharp division between culture and nature (a point the author alludes to), I see no reason why an element-ary education cannot be conceptualized in a way that takes account of the welfare and interests of other species. Nonetheless, Holland draws on common understanding with her audience to establish a case for furthering philosophical discussion where human and nonhuman encounter one another: in the elements. Thus, I will remain in the same playing field, so to speak, and discuss the essay on anthropocentric terms.

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Central to the element-ary education project is reconsidering the role that discomfort and distraction play as educative inputs for experiential learning. Holland interrogates an unquestioned educational norm: it is educationally beneficial to deliberately avoid "the distraction and discomfort of weather by sequestering students indoors." It is believed that an effective learning environment necessitates removing students from the uncomfortable weather outside and keeping their bodies comfortable in a climate-controlled, insulated building. Doing so, it is assumed, will keep students "focused" and "undistracted" and "protected," establishing the most suitable conditions for learning. Holland points out the consequences of this norm and makes a case for how schools, in the effort to protect students, end up *over*protecting students, shielding them from the same uncomfortable conditions and distractions that an element-ary education recognizes as productive.

An element-ary education pushes us to think of discomfort in noticeably, but not exclusively, corporeal terms — *bodily* discomfort "in a weather-rich learning space." Holland shifts the philosophical emphasis to the body as the primary pathway of transformative learning; that is, physical discomfort giving rise to a "bodily-induced *aporia*." When writing on discomfort or pain, philosophers of education place most of our emphasis on the way our minds are discomforted through intellectual distress (I'm not trying to set up a binary between mental and physical discomfort but simply highlighting what is underscored). For example, when we encounter an unnerving idea or argument that challenges our previous understanding and beliefs, or when we read a philosopher who pains us with conceptual confusion and impenetrable prose, the transformative discomfort and pain we speak of emphasizes not physical change but how it can be painful when accustomed ways of thinking are challenged and we are compelled to change habits of thought. However, the discomfort emphasized in Holland's esssay (if we stick with the example of the act of reading philosophy) is more about literal, physical pain: the way your butt hurts after hours of sitting in an uncomfortable chair, more about how you missed lunch and now feel nauseated while turning the pages, more about how your head hurts because you've had too little or too much coffee — the kind of discomfort that cannot help but influence states of mind. Just as Socrates' body becomes discomforted outside of the familiar and comfortable Athens city walls, when our bodies interact and react to the material elements of space, tactile sensations generate moments of bodily discomfort that, when purposefully practiced in the right context, encourages the fruitful doubt and puzzlement of *aporia*.

Now, there seems to be an assumption driving much of the essay: in order to experience bodily discomfort, it is necessary to leave the school and go outside into the elements. However, I want to point out that, regardless of the weather outside, students are continually exposed to bodily discomfort *inside* schools, for these are institutions that, for many students, are particularly uncomfortable spaces. Holland concludes that with an element-ary education, "students and educators have the chance to become reaccustomed to discomfort and bodily-induced *aporia*, embracing change and unpredictability." I want to consider how students are very much already accustomed to bodily discomfort within the confines of the school, while highlighting a few ways — both extreme and routine — schools can be very unpredictable.

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The material and spatial conditions of schools effect both moderate and dangerous bodily discomforts in their own right. Many walk into a school accompanied immediately with sensations of unease and anxiety and restlessness. The space is cramped and overcrowded; the fluorescent light bulbs emit ultraviolet radiation; the bell and alarms are jarringly interruptive; and the smell of sweat, body odor, and cleaning chemicals is nauseating. While statistically speaking, dying is highly unlikely, schools are not so protective and comfortable to the point that being shot, stabbed, or killed is out of the question. The threats of school shootings are all too real, as shooters and armed police officers occupy the halls of too many schools. Some students are bullied and beaten in school; others suffer from sleep deprivation, while all students sit motionless for hours each day in hard, unforgiving seats with only fleeting moments of bodily movement. Rules and rigid schedules dictate eating, drinking, and bowel movements; and younger children in particular often "hold it in" until they urinate or defecate on themselves. The pesticide-laden, highly processed and refined foods are sickening; bacteria, mold, and germs fester; and the threat of food-borne illness and of viruses contracted from unvaccinated children comprise some of the most common dangers. These are distractions and certainly discomforts — discomforts that are the reasonable effects of massing hundreds or thousands of human animals into a confined space for hours a day, five days a week, almost two hundred days per year. Sure this is bodily discomfort, but to what aim? *Aporia*? Highly doubtful.

To be discomforted in a school differs from being discomforted in the elements, but it is bodily discomfort nonetheless, and in some ways, more disturbing. For instance, the material conditions of schooling, coupled with the ideologies of standardization and accountability (which are not exclusive to American education), led officials in a Chinese province to attach students to IVs to intravenously supply amino acids during testing to prepare for college entrance exams.[2] These officials clearly see the importance of mind/body interaction and the role that bodily discomfort and fatigue play in learning, or not learning. My point is simply to be cautious in assuming that students' bodies are comfortable inside schools.

To conclude, perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that an element-ary education does not reposition students from a comfortable space to an uncomfortable one, but that they are leaving one type of uncomfortable environment for a different type of uncomfortable environment — from discomfort of institutional elements to "discomfort of the natural elements."

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1. For a book in philosophy of education aiming to challenge anthropocentrism, see Suzanne Rice and AG Rud, eds., *The Educational Significance of Human and Non-Human Animal Interactions: Blurring the Species Line* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

2. Valerie Strauss, "Chinese students use IV amino acids to study for high-stakes tests," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/chinese-students-use-iv-amino-acids-to-study-for-high-stakes-tests/2012/05/10/gIQAMZw2GU_blog.html, accessed March 1, 2015.

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