Aesthetic Experience in Gardens: Engaging in Philosophical Inquiry in Nature

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With work by:
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Aesthetic Experience in Gardens Unit

RESOURCE OVERVIEW

Unit Plan
Grade 7 – English Language Arts, Art, Science
Isabel Prpic
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Aesthetic Experience in Gardens
Engaging in philosophical inquiry in nature

Overview

This cross-curricular unit encourages engagement with aesthetics and other philosophical considerations in a garden or natural setting. Engaging with aesthetics offers a rich learning experience for student’s emotional and intellectual development and their ability to make connections to the natural environment in a way that emphasizes beauty and wonder. Ideally, the development of aesthetic sensibility will also help to form a foundation for social consciousness, knowledge, and care for nature.

Core Competencies

English Language Arts
I can weave multiple messages into my communications; I understand that my audience will use their own knowledge and experiences in making meaning.

Arts
Demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of personal, social, cultural, historical, and environmental contexts in relation to the arts. Examine relationships between the arts and the wider world.

Curricular Competencies

Students will be able to:

1. Express feelings, ideas, and experiences through the arts
2. Make observations aimed at identifying their own questions about the natural world.
3. Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world.
Big Ideas

Curiosity and wonder lead us to new discoveries about ourselves and the world around us.

Why do living things change over time?

How does your understanding of place affect the ways in which you collect evidence and evaluate it?

Objectives

To strengthen a connection and appreciation of nature through the development of aesthetic sensibilities in students.

Content

Students will understand:
1. That their experience of place is influenced by emotions, past experience, and Indigenous peoples who have stewarded the land for millennia.
2. Some things that they find beautiful and some justification for why.
3. How to make personal connections with a selection of poems set in nature.

Cross-curricular + Trans-disciplinary Connections and Critical Questions

1. What are some ways that we can incite and sustain a feeling of wonder and appreciation for nature? Subjects: English Language Arts, Art, and Science. Students will begin by careful observation and appreciation of nature and see how this can lend itself to scientific inquiry and a commitment to the protection of the natural environment.
**Equity and Diversity**

This resource can be used at the UBC Botanical Garden or any other outdoor space to be accessible to all learners. The texts and resources provided can be selected from based on student interest and ability. Emphasizing the variety of ways that one can engage with the natural world means valuing different ways of knowing.

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**First Peoples’ Principles of Learning**

Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.

Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).
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<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Resources and Materials</th>
<th>Lesson Overview</th>
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| **Lesson 1:** Reflecting on Nature, Anthropocentrism & Perspective Taking | Link to complete handout package: [Link](#)  
**Materials:**  
- “Bee! I’m Expecting You!” Emily Dickinson Poem [Link](#)  
- “The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee” M. Scott Momaday Poem [Link](#)  
- Letter Template [Link](#) | **Objective:**  
Emily Dickinson’s poem captures a feeling of excitement, anticipation, and hopefulness. Students will engage with these themes and think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts to the natural world. This exercise is meant to challenge students to take on new perspectives and reflect on their experience of place and the passage of time. Students will share something they are looking forward to doing in nature.  
**Guiding Questions:**  
Is it possible to meaningfully write from the perspective of something other than yourself? (ex. another person, an inanimate object, other species)  
If our understanding of the world is mediated by our experiences, can we understand what it is like to be something else?  
Can imagining ourselves as other things still be useful as a metaphor?  
Is it easier to imagine yourself as an animal rather than as a plant? If so, why do you think this might be?  
Could it potentially be problematic to anthropomorphize nature?  
For example, can we say that trees have communicative capacities, but would it be too far to say that they have language or mothering instincts?  
**Activity:**  
Students will analyze and interpret the poem, “Bee! I am expecting you!” by Emily Dickinson. To start, students will
be given fragments of the poem and will be asked to organize them in a way that makes sense to them. The class could have cut up physical copies of the poem or use a tool like google Jamboard to share their ideas.

Students will also be introduced to the poem, “The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee” which also addresses themes of personal-identity and connection to nature. Students will then go outside and independently work to write their own poem/letter from the perspective of something in nature to something else.

Students will reflect on any challenges associated with the project/perspective taking. This might raise some further philosophical topics such as: identity, interconnectedness, and reciprocity.

Even if we know a lot about something, including scientific facts, we may not know what the experience of that thing is like (“what it is like to be that thing?”)

With that said, it can be meaningful to think of our identities as porous/interconnected. This interconnectedness can also ground our ethical obligations to other beings.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Lesson 2: Appreciation of Green</th>
<th>Materials:</th>
<th>Objective:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The Green Eye James Merrill Poem (Link)</td>
<td>Students will interpret James Merill’s poem and create a visual catalogue of green colours in the garden.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
|                               | - Scientific explanation for the green pigmentation in plants (Link) | Guiding Questions:  
What is the setting of the poem?  
Discuss the line: “Things you shall live among, things seen, things known.” |
### Aesthetic Experience in Gardens Unit

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<th>Lesson 3: Gardening &amp; Time</th>
<th>Materials:</th>
<th>Objective:</th>
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</table>
| - Chlorophyll Video Part 1 ([Link](#))  
- Chlorophyll Video Part 2 ([Link](#)) | - Excerpt from Burnt Norton ([Link](#))  
- Photo Description Challenge ([Link](#))  
- Frog and Toad – The Garden Video ([Link](#))  
- Introduction to Aesthetics for Kids ([Link](#)) | Gardening can help us reflect on the passage of time. Students will learn how gardens are an evolving repository of natural beauty and a place to take inspiration from. |

**Guiding Questions:**
Reflect on the passage of time: Think back to a time when you had to wait for something. Have you ever had to be patient and wait for something that you really wanted? What did this experience of waiting make you feel? Did the experience teach you anything? Do you think that is a good thing to be patient? Why or why not? Can you think of a situation where it may not be a good thing to be patient?

How is knowledge obtained in the poem? Is it a type of experiential knowledge or knowledge gained through introspection?

What are connections between the outer world and inner life of the mind?

Additional Inquiry Question:
What is the scientific explanation for variations in green pigmentation on plants?

**Activity:**
Students will close-read the poem and create a “mosaic” installation in the classroom. In the poem, James Merrill describes a “mosaic of all possible greens”. Go out in nature and pay close attention to your surroundings. Take pictures of various shades of green and create a catalogue of shades of green.
### Lesson 4: Trees

**Activity:**

Project the photo description challenge. Using descriptive and poetic language students will try to convey their choice of image to a classmate.

**Materials:**
- Overthink Podcast ([Link](#))
- The Secret Social Lives of Plants ([Link](#))
- Are Plants Conscious? ([Link](#))
- Emily Carr Inspired Tree Art Project: Construction paper, pastels, paint.
- Instructional Videos:
  - Paint Trees Like Emily Carr ([Link](#))
  - Emily Carr ([Link](#))
  - At Home Art Lesson ([Link](#))

**Objective:**

To carefully observe the shape and movements of trees. Students will reflect on the significance of trees in their daily lives. Focus on perspective, space, tints, and shades during the art assignment.

**Guiding Questions:**

Why do many of us overlook trees in our everyday lives and ways of thinking? Are trees intelligent, conscious creatures? And if so, should they have rights? Are trees caught in an endless struggle for individual survival? Or do they exhibit mutual aid and collaboration? (adapted from Overthink podcast)

Can knowing more about something make it more beautiful?

**Activity:**

Reconsider your relationship to trees by learning about their capabilities and life. Complete a study of Emily Carr’s trees and emulate her process.

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### Lesson 5: Attention, Naming & Knowledge

**Objective:**

To think about the significance and epistemic implications of names when interacting with nature.
# Aesthetic Experience in Gardens Unit

- Knowledge Keepers: Medicine Walk ([Link](#))
- Importance of Biodiversity for First Peoples of British Columbia ([Link](#))
- Venn Diagram Handout ([Link](#))

**Guiding Questions:**
Can knowing more about something make it more beautiful? What are some different ways of knowing about something?

**Activity:** Students will each receive a Venn-diagram handout to document their thinking about the following: In Plato’s Phaedrus, the philosopher Socrates says, “I’m a lover of learning, and trees and country won’t teach me anything whereas the men in town do”

Do you agree with this way of thinking? Can you identify any limitations with this view? Compare this perspective with the First Peoples principles. Do you think that the land can teach us things? What would it mean to learn from the land? Would this knowledge be obtained by direct observation or is our knowledge mediated by other people. Can it be both?

In the video, “Knowledge Keepers: Medicine Walk” T’uy’tanat-Cease Wyss reflects on how “learning the Indigenous name gives you the key to the relationship of that people, of whoever language it is, to the plants.” T’uy’tanat-Cease Wyss also remarks that “a plant will tell you what it’s for by how it looks” and reflects on the relationship between plant anatomy, naming and other helpful memory aids to remember what plants can be used for. Students will consider how these observations might refine our thinking about nature.
# UNIT PLAN

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| **Lesson 6: The Art of Andy Goldsworthy** | **Materials:**  
- Examples of Andy Goldsworthy’s work ([Link](#))  
- Andy Goldsworthy Podcast ([Link](#))  
- “Do You Know What an Inukshuk Is” Article ([Link](#)) | **Objective:** Students will engage with the work of Andy Goldsworthy and recognize that the skills of attention that they’ve been developing are involved in Goldsworthy’s process. Goldsworthy is deeply attuned to the environment he is working with, and he uses his senses to express and emphasize the natural beauty of his materials. Identify similarities between Goldsworthy’s method and longstanding indigenous artistic practices.  
  
**Guiding Questions:**  
Are there things in nature that you think are beautiful? What makes them beautiful to you? What makes a garden beautiful or not beautiful? Is nature beautiful in the same way that for example, music and art are beautiful? Andy Goldsworthy’s craft takes time and commitment. Do things matter more to us if we’ve worked hard for them than if they just come to us? Why or why not? Can art be more beautiful than nature? What about the reverse? Does something have to be man-made to be considered art, or can it come from nature? Does something have to evoke a feeling for it to be considered art? What if you see something different than what the artist meant for you to see? Is that okay? Can two people interpret the same thing differently and both be right? What is art? What makes someone an artist? (adapted from the Prindle Institute for Ethics) |
### Activity:

Familiarize the class with Andy Goldsworthy's work and then create artwork in a similar style using found materials outdoors. Engage with Indigenous artwork and reflect on whether the feelings and themes evoked by the work are similar or distinct. After the activity, students will reflect on their experience of the assignment.

### Lesson 7: Gratitude & Nature

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<tr>
<th>Materials:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- “Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude” Ross Gay Poem Read-Aloud <a href="Link">Link</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Natural Clay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 5 Senses Bingo <a href="Link">Link</a></td>
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### Objective:

In philosophy, some thinkers have thought that appreciation of beauty can produce a feeling of gratitude. Take some time in nature and reflect on what you are grateful for. Careful attention to sensations will augment the experience.

### Guiding Questions:

What does it mean to be grateful for something? Does gratitude require attention? Gratitude is often understood as a response to a good situation. Does it make sense to be grateful to nature in this way? Why or why not?

### Activity:

Students will spend time in nature and pay close attention using their 5 senses. Students can participate in a 5 senses scavenger hunt.

Students will create a temporary outdoor art installation with clay-sculptures that we will refer to as tree-guardians. “Tree-guardians” will be made up of natural clay and other fallen materials like berries, moss, twigs, and grass. Students will place their sculptures somewhere outdoors, in a place that is special to them, and return periodically to document their experience.
<table>
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<tr>
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<th>the decomposition of their guardian to the land.</th>
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Aesthetic Experience in Gardens Unit
Pick a plant that you identify with and try your best to describe it to a partner. Challenge yourself to use the most evocative and poetic language to describe it and see if your partner can correctly identify your choice.

Word Bank

stamen, violet, crown, jagged, overlap, trumpet, horn, smooth, crevice, dappled, shadow, feathery, golden, shell-pink, ruffle, bough, off-shoot, split, flowering, gathered, tufted, broom-like
# 5 SENSES bingo

When you experience the event listed, mark it on your bingo board. See whether you can find 5 in a row. Bonus: How many can you mark off in total?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bees Buzzing</th>
<th>Birds chirping</th>
<th>Sticks crunching underfoot</th>
<th>Dragonflies zapping</th>
<th>Leaves rustling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People talking</td>
<td>Animals moving</td>
<td>Running water</td>
<td>A breeze through leaves</td>
<td>Smell the pine needles of a grand fir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smell the skunk cabbage</td>
<td>Feel the gravel under-foot</td>
<td>Feel the fuzzy underside of a leaf</td>
<td>Feel the heat of the cement or a rock</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look for a skeleton leaf</td>
<td>Notice the spikes on succulents</td>
<td>Tell time on the sun dial</td>
<td>Smell the plants at the physic garden</td>
<td>Look closely at the veining on leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look for water droplets on plants</td>
<td>Step lightly on the mulch</td>
<td>Hear the echo in the moon tunnel</td>
<td>Smell the mixing of dirt and rain</td>
<td>Observe the jewel tones of produce in the food garden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear

Yours,