

BOOK REVIEW

Ecoliterate: How Educators are Cultivating Emotional, Social, and Ecological Intelligence.

By: Daniel Goleman, Lisa Bennett, Zenobia Barlow

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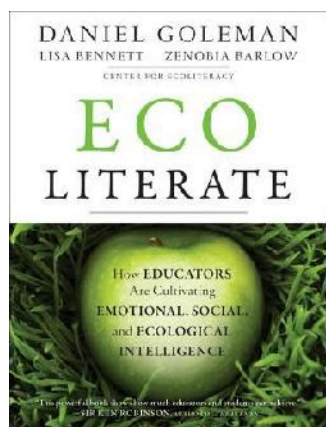
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There's a growing nip in the air forcing many of us to turn on the heat in our homes. With the twist of our thermostats, the rooms gradually take on a cozy warmth. But do we or our children know how that heat is generated? A hundred years ago we used firewood. Fifty years ago coal. Today, we largely use high quality fossil fuels, specifically natural gas, heating oil, and propane. But what are the implications of using one over the others? Are we contributing to climate change, polluting the air we breathe, damaging the environment of others to enhance our own?

In our increasingly global and complicated economy, it is difficult to trace the path between our actions and their consequences. For most of us, that line remains largely invisible. But as Hurricane Sandy has recently reminded us, we humans are members of the natural world, not distinct and superior. We must begin to see ourselves as part of a complex, interconnected web that values sustainability, the responsible management of resources, as opposed to durability, the capacity to endure through persistent resistance to change. Ideally, the place to develop this ecological sensibility is school, where students can study and understand how nature sustains life, and can ultimately empathize with other life forms, recognizing their own interconnectedness to the natural world.

The Center for Ecoliteracy has long been known for its work to promote integrating ecological principles around sustainability into school curricula. Recently, in collaboration with Daniel Goleman, author of the classic *Emotional Intelligence*, two directors of the institution, Lisa Bennett and Zenobia Barlow, have published [*Ecoliterate: How Educators Are Cultivating Emotional, Social, and Ecological Intelligence*](#), a book that identifies five practices to cultivate these dimensions of intelligence and ways to develop curriculum to support their expression.



The need to become ecoliterate is based on the recognition that man's anthropocentric approach to the globe has disrupted the natural ecological balance, affecting even our own sustainability. Acting primarily as consumers, we have relied heavily on our Western linear thinking, focused exclusively on the end product rather than the system that produces it - on the part rather than the whole.



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Certainly, there are timeless skills and knowledge necessary in any century; however, system thinking is integral to meeting the challenges posed by today's global complexity. Teaching students discrete, linear facts does not develop the capacity to understand the complicated web of interconnections and dependencies that support life. As the authors of *Ecoliterate* explain, "When students begin to understand the intricate interplay of relationships that sustain an ecosystem, they can better appreciate the implications for survival that even a small disturbance may have, or the importance of strengthening relationships that help a system respond to disturbances."

With the aim of developing students' ecoliteracy, the authors identify in the first part of the book five practices that integrate emotional, social, and ecological intelligence: developing empathy for all forms of life, embracing sustainability as a community practice, making the invisible visible, anticipating unintended consequences, and understanding how nature sustains life. In the second half of the book, they share stories of passionate and inspiring educators, students, and activists engaged with issues related to water, food, and habitat.

In one such story, history teacher Allyn Steele at Spartanburg Day School exposed his students to system thinking in relation to mountaintop mining in Appalachia. Although 45% of the U.S. population relies on coal for electricity, few understand how the process of extraction affects the people of Appalachia or its ecosystem. Steele began educating his students through the traditional methods, exposing them to the basic facts of the process of mountaintop mining. But in order for them to fully appreciate its impact, he "designed a course called 'The Power Trip,' which examined the political, ecological, and economic consequences of coal energy – and most significantly, included a field trip to southeastern Kentucky." When the students arrived at the retreat center where they would spend several nights, they were informed that they could not drink the tap water since it was polluted. Through the course of their stay, they visited the nature reserve to witness the local flora and fauna, interviewed Appalachia residents to understand mining's personal impact on their lives, and traveled by plane to see a mountain's destruction. One student on the trip recalled, "It was just the worst case of environmental injustice I've ever seen ... Words really can't describe the level of destruction and degradation and complete disrespect for the land there. You go from gorgeous mountains and trees and valleys to sludge ponds and fractured earth."

Importantly, Steele moved his students beyond a simple view of the coal industry as pernicious, underlining the reality that people rely on fuel. As one student acknowledged, "It's a horrifying way of doing it. But if we weren't asking for it, they wouldn't be doing it. It's just the laws of supply and demand that make it cheaper and more profitable to blast the mountain."

Back at school, the students, equipped with knowledge and empathy, were ready to take action to explore ways to tackle the problem. Working with a reporter from the *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, one student published an article chronicling the community impact of mountaintop mining. Others attempted to serve water with chunks of coal at a local forum. They founded an environmental



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club at the school and galvanized the whole community around their activism. Students weren't just exposed to an environmental problem and left feeling angry but helpless; they were empowered to solve a real-world problem. As Steele underscores, "If we are to sustain ourselves, we have to think and act differently. And I think we can make education a valuable asset for that transformation."

Praising *Ecoliterate*, Sir Ken Robinson advises, "One of the most urgent issues facing humanity is fixing our broken relationship with the earth, on which all life depends. To do that, we have to think, feel, and act differently." The book outlines the necessity of employing system thinking to solve today's social and ecological problems, urging the recognition that moving toward sustainability entails more than simply a cognitive approach; students must be empowered through knowledge, empathy, and action.

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