

**PRESENTATION
TO THE
CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR CREATIVE SCHOOLING
by**

**Mike Bell, Principal
Comox Valley Green New Deal Community High School
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Dear Friends,

Thanks very much for your invitation to come here today to speak to you about our high school. I'll begin by telling you about our history and our rather lengthy name.

Then I'll talk about our vision, and what we call our "3 Rs": relationships, Responsibilities and Rights of Nature. Together these make up the educational framework for our curriculum.

Next a brief word about our community and student practicums. I'll conclude with a few comments on helping to prepare our students for the psychological and emotional challenges they will be facing.

I'll try to save enough time for questions and I'll be happy to meet afterwards for discussions over coffee.

Our History and Our Name.

In 2015 the world's nations held a major conference—COP 21--to deal with global warming. Promises were made but, for the most part, were not kept. But the science on global warming continued to advance.

In 2017 the United Nations published a study done by earth scientists from around the world. They painted an ominous picture of global warming. They noted that there was a steady and rapid rise in global temperatures. If we did not take drastic steps to deal with climate change by 2030 we would be facing disastrous consequences by 2040. They were skeptical about our ability to rise to the challenge.

But who is the "we" that we are talking about? It is our current adult generation. How do we go about teaching students how to deal with climate change, and do it in such a short time span, when we don't know how to deal with it ourselves?

Closer to home, in 2018 Canadian scientists produced another study. It indicated that Canada was warming twice as fast as most other countries (with the Alberta Tar Sands the major cause) and the Arctic was warming three times faster than the rest of Canada.

The studies sparked an immediate increase in articles in the press and on-line warning about the consequences if we did not take action. But there was another major motivator.

At the end of 2018 a fifteen year-old Swedish teenager, Greta Thunberg gave a speech at COP 24. She said that the world's nations were failing to act on climate change. This was having a terrible impact on the lives of other young people around the world. Her speech was the spark that led to student demonstrations in our community and in other communities around the globe. Many young people are not hesitating to take on the climate change challenge. They recognize they have no other realistic option. For me the real significance of Greta Thunberg's speech was a question: How can we teach young people to teach one another?

Faced with these realities we realized we needed not only a different way of teaching but a different educational model—some kind of context that would help us and our students prepare for this climate changing world. We came across the model almost by accident.

In 2018 a couple of American politicians created an approach to climate change called the Green New Deal. The term “New Deal” was originally coined by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the economic depression in the 1930s. Its programs succeeded in helping Americans pull themselves out of the great depression.

We adopted the Green New Deal because unlike many other policy or program approaches it provided a broad new context. All the programs and services included in the GND had to be consistent with efforts to deal with a climate changing world.

This new model was exactly what we were looking for. If it could work for politics why couldn't it work for education? So we became the Comox Valley Green New Deal Community High School.

Now a few comments about how we provided a new context for our courses by adopting the Green New Deal to a school setting.

Curriculum: A Vision and the Three “Rs”

At first glance our curriculum would seem to be the same as you would find in other schools—math, science, history and so forth. But our students will be living in a very different world than the one we knew. They will exist within a climate changing context that will influence and in some cases dominate everything. This requires a new vision and some guiding principles—The Three “R”s: Relationship, Responsibilities and Rights of Nature.

The vision is straight forward: *a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth*. Because we are dependent upon Earth, whatever we do must benefit Earth. And Earth depends upon us to co-operate with the Earth community. In a sense Earth is our Greater Self.

Relationships Just as many people test their DNA to identify their human ancestors, so we must do the same thing with our Earth. We discover from our science that we are earthlings, members of a living and conscious Earth and universe.

Our science tells us that 13.5 billion years ago a living and conscious universe came into existence. Four billion years ago a star went supernova, exploded and created our sun and eight planets including this one. In terms of DNA the minerals in our body are the same as the minerals in the stars.

Our life and consciousness has come down to us through the process of evolution. Two hundred thousand years ago our early human ancestors emerged from other species. So we are kin with the living Earth community of life species. And, as some of the quantum physicists are telling us, our human consciousness is the universe reflecting upon itself.

So what is the point of this cosmological history? The point is that we living, conscious humans are in relationship with a living Earth and conscious universe and this relationship brings with it responsibilities—if we wish to continue as a species.

Responsibilities refer to our responsibilities to care for the living, conscious Earth. As we reflect upon the Earth we have inherited we can see that it is in deep trouble. And because we depend upon Earth for our own existence we, too, are in deep trouble. For a start we must determine what has disturbed Earth's systems and given rise to climate change.

Again, science tells us that there are many sources of the problems. But the underlying cause is our neoliberal economic systems and their demand for continual profits and unlimited access to Earth's resources.

It is clear that we need to develop new living systems that can live within a living Earth. This is why one of our major courses is Systems Thinking. Students need to understand how current systems are linked together and are harming Earth. They must explore some alternative living systems that are beginning to emerge—systems that can live within a living Earth.

Rights of Nature. Long before there was writing and legal systems our ancestors knew they lived within a living Earth. Because they depended upon Earth for survival they were sensitive to what we call the laws of nature. Today, we can still see some of these rights being respected in Indigenous cultures.

Our human laws should recognize and flow from the rights of nature but they don't. In most cases our laws are ignoring and over-riding the rights of Nature. Fortunately some progress is being made. Several South American countries have given rights to rivers and sacred places. There is a renewed interest in nature's rights and we are seeing the development of an Earth Jurisprudence.

In our Rights of Nature course we discuss the limits of human laws and legal systems to protect Earth. We combine this with new information about the Rights of Earth and the development of Earth Jurisprudence systems.

Our Local Community and Practicums

The psychiatrist Erich Fromm once said, *“People don’t think their way into new ways of acting. They act their way into new ways of thinking”* And Lao Tzu said, *“If you learn, but do not act, you do not learn.”* These observations have special relevance in terms of our Comox Valley Community.

We don’t think of our community as just a location for our school. We think of it as a place of learning. Our students will be involved in trying to reform systems in order to bring about change. History shows us that deep, meaningful change does not come down from the top, from the power brokers—the elected officials and the heads of institutions who are controlling the systems. It only comes up from the bottom—from people in communities who organize for change.

The people who see the need for change can do very little by themselves. They must join with others in the community, work as members of groups and solve problems together.

There is another role for the community. It is the protector and facilitator of a community culture. The climate change struggle our students will be facing will not be achieved in their lifetime. It will continue for their children and for some generations to come. We can’t afford to have each new group start from scratch. They must be able to build upon the experiences of their predecessors. This can only be achieved by a community culture that can be preserved and passed on to future generations.

Finally, to make life in the community a viable learning experience we have required those in their third and fourth year to adopt a practicum. We will help them identify a group or institution with which they will volunteer a prescribed number of hours. We have a staff person who will help them identify opportunities and will meet with them on a regular basis over the course of their practicums to get feedback on their learning experiences.

Some help for the struggle.

Having listened to me over the course of this talk you may have the impression that everything is well-organized and hunky-dory. It isn’t. Working in a continually climate changing world with failures as well as successes can be very frustrating. Each student must have a safety valve--some access to resources that can help them deal with the emotional stresses and strains they will face. This may come from their parents, a church, a teacher, a counsellor in the community, or just a trusted friend they can talk to. We advise them to find someone to help when things get difficult.

Conclusion

So I’ve talked about how we got started and discovered our name. Then we discussed our vision and the three “Rs”, the importance of our local community and the need for students to find someone to help them with the challenges they will be facing.

In closing I want to stress that we don't have the answer to preparing students for the climate challenge. There is no single answer. But the number of visitors that come from other school boards to see what we are doing, and the fact that you have invited me to come here today is an indication that we might be doing some things right. This is very encouraging. And I hope you will invite me to visit other schools trying to adapt to this climate changing challenge.

A final comment. On a table in the back you will find information on our school and our student website. I thank you again for this opportunity to meet with you.

Mike Bell, Comox Valley Climate Change Network.