

LESSON 2.3

EXERCISE

Monocultures Of The Mind (Forest/City Walk)

(exercise is based on Unlearning bundle 1, created by departments of Educational Studies and the Faculty of Land and Food Systems at the University of British Columbia in 2020 and has been adjusted for the purpose of the course)

This is a task that you will need to do outdoors, preferably in a forest or a park, if these are available.

This walk consists of 3 parts. You will be asked to read a passage and look through a series of images before the forest walk (link below).

Then you will walk for about 20 minutes, reflecting on what the text and the images are saying about monocultures of the mind. When you have arrived in a space where you can sit or be still, you will engage with the questions and instructions in Part B.

Finally, on your way back, you will engage with the invitations in Part C. Do the exercise in a safe way for you that is also considerate towards others. This should take about 50 minutes of your time.

Overview:

It is common to encounter the perspective that the grand challenges of today's society are due to a lack of education. Education, we are told (and tell each other), is the pathway out of poverty and gender inequality. Education will help us dismantle harmful stereotypes and implicit bias and avoid unsustainable lifestyle choices. A better future for all will only emerge if we invest in our children, youth, and young adults, evidenced by increased rates of high school graduation, attendance in post-secondary education, completion of Bachelor degrees, and enrolment in graduate school. Similarly, when discussing why individuals, families, and communities are experiencing issues like food insecurity, reliance on addictive substances, or experiencing homelessness, those with advanced degrees often begin their description of the problem with, "If they only knew [_____], then they wouldn't be [_____]".

But what if education is part of the problem? What if the way in which we "educate" our children, youth, and young adults is actually contributing to and reinforcing the patterns that underlie the grand challenges we are facing today? If our education system is complicit in perpetuating harm, the prescription of greater access to and successful completion of educational programs may not help us overcome our issues. What are your thoughts on that? How do you think content you learnt about in module 1 could support you on your path to a more sustainable and just world?

Part A: Reading + Sensing Patterns

Insight/foresight/hindsight:

Read the following excerpt from Vandana Shiva's (1993) book, *Monocultures of the Mind*:

"The disappearance of local knowledge through its interaction with the dominant western knowledge takes place at many levels, through many steps. First, local

knowledge is made to disappear by simply not seeing it, by negating its very existence. This is very easy in the distant gaze of the globalising dominant system. The western systems of knowledge have generally been viewed as universal. However, the dominant system is also a local system, with its social basis in a particular culture, class and gender. It is not universal in an epistemological sense. It is merely the globalised version of a very local and parochial tradition. Emerging from a dominating and colonising culture, modern knowledge systems are themselves colonising.

The knowledge and power nexus is inherent in the dominant system because, as a conceptual framework, it is associated with a set of values based on power which emerged with the rise of commercial capitalism. It generates inequalities and domination by the way such knowledge is generated and structured, the way it is legitimised and alternatives are delegitimised, and by the way in which such knowledge transforms nature and society. Power is also built into the perspective which views the dominant system not as a globalised local tradition, but as a universal tradition, inherently superior to local systems. However, the dominant system is also the product of a particular culture.

Dominant scientific knowledge thus breeds a monoculture of the mind by making space for local alternatives disappear, very much like monocultures of introduced plant varieties leading to the displacement and destruction of local diversity. Dominant knowledge also destroys the very conditions for alternatives to exist, very much like the introduction of monocultures destroying the very conditions for diverse species to exist.”

Shiva, V. (1993). *Monocultures of the mind: Perspectives on biodiversity and biotechnology*. Palgrave Macmillan.



After reading the passage, open [this document](#) and use the images to reflect on how aesthetic patterns in modern societies reflect “monocultures of the mind”.

Take the idea of “monocultures of the mind” on a walk. Walk for about 20 minutes or until you find a place (a clearing or bench) where you can engage with the material in Part B.

Part B: Seeing, Making + Releasing Patterns

1. Find a safe place where you can do the second part of this exercise (ideally a clearing or bench), please be mindful of others.
2. When you have found this place, pause and look around you. Observe any patterns in the vegetation around you. How are the different plants, animals and entities in this place related? What are the patterns that emerge from those relations?
3. Begin to collect materials on the floor (rocks, sticks, leaves etc.) and form them into little piles on the ground. As you are collecting, remember the images and patterns of monoculture in agriculture, food processing, retail, and education.
4. For each of the following questions, create a line with the material:
 - *What are the connections between Vandana Shiva's description of the development of a monoculture of the mind and the modern landscapes (both rural and urban) in which we are embedded? Are there connections or is this coincidence?*
 - *Consider the landscapes that you inhabit. In which ways do they represent monocultures, both cognitively and in material forms? In which ways, if any, do they resist?*
 - *Consider your journey through educational systems and consider the impact on your beliefs about the origins, limits, and nature of knowledge? Where does knowledge reside and how is it evaluated? Who decides?*
 - *If Western educational systems result in a monoculture of the mind, what form/type of educational system could support the development of a polycultural mind? Where would learning take place? By, for, with whom? What would success look like in this system?*
 - *Is it even possible to interrupt the violences and harms of western ways of knowing through working in western educational institutions?*
 - *How would you position this course you are enrolled into based on what you have learnt and experienced so far? Is it perpetuating old patterns or does it interrupt them?*

When you are ready, take a step back from the lines you have created.

Take a deep breath and then (gently, and with compassion) disassemble your piles – scattering the pieces back onto the land.

Part C: Reflecting Patterns

David Orr, who writes about environmental education, reminds us that most of the harm done to the planet is done by people who have gone through higher education, many with PhDs. Chewa Indigenous elders from Tanzania also point to this problem. They have re-interpreted the acronym PhD: for them, PhD stands for “permanent head damage”. They claim that Western education is responsible for creating fantasies of separation and superiority that alienate people from the realities of interdependence: the obligations we have towards the land, each other and future generations of human and non-human beings. They say that this type of education prevents people from growing up to become mature elders for their communities.

On your way back, walk in silence in receptivity for the teachings that a silent walk might give you. Reflect on how epistemic hegemony (the domination of one view/form of knowledge and the subordination of all others) and western education has both expanded and limited your experience of the world.

As you walk, connect with the ways we are conditioned to move and think. Consider how the path you are walking through has been pre-designed by someone, and how your movements are curated or defined by another's boundaries and pathways. Who decided on this pathway, with what/whose permission and consent?

Write reflections on this walk in your personal private (un)learning journal.

FURTHER THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS:

- *Is destroying the conditions for alternative ways of knowing to exist a form of violence? Why or why not?*
- *What might be the challenges and complexities of creating the conditions for alternative ways of knowing to thrive in institutions that have traditionally supported a monoculture of knowledge?*
- *How can we sit with the paradox that our global challenges require polycultures of knowledge, but our current monoculture limits what it is possible for us to know and imagine? What kind of education might help to make these limits more tangible and to gesture beyond them, without assuming we can transcend them?*
- *Can we 'learn to learn' differently than we have been socialised to learn within western education?*

If you are curious about the influence of hegemonic western education on people and systems around the globe we recommend watching a documentary *Schooling the world* available [here](#).



Source of the photo: [American Progress](#), Wikipedia.