

Schools in Transition: Case Study KEVICC, Totnes. The Watershed Day

King Edward VI Community College is a Co-Operative Trust school that is local to Totnes in Devon. They are one of four secondary schools that between 2011 and 2014 took part in the Schools in Transition programme. The programme started with a weekend training residential for pupils and teachers at Sharpham House in Devon (where KEVICC's Watershed Day took place in October 2013) and continued with a year's in-school action plan to shift the culture of the schools towards sustainability. Each school chose to do this differently. KEVICC took all its Year 8 pupils and staff out into the local Dart Valley landscape and wove place-based learning into the curriculum for the rest of the school year. Any community could offer a watershed day like this to a local school.



View from the Sharpham Estate looking up the River Dart towards Totnes, Devon

A watershed (or river catchment) is also a bioregion: an area defined geographically rather than politically that has a coherent eco-system. Bioregions can be as vast as the chalk downs of southern England or as small as a coppice or stream. When human tribes first formed in Palaeolithic times they defined territory in terms of natural resources and adapted their cultures to what was locally available. In relationship to the land and its local fauna and flora those cultures shaped Nature as much as Nature shaped them.

Today the health of eco-systems is threatened by the human impact of air, soil and water pollution, industrial agriculture, extractive industries, waste, toxic production processes and the building of ever more roads, houses and factories. Out of love with place (excepting designated “beauty spots” or parks) we are no longer as shaped and contained by Nature as we once were. We seem to have forgotten that we cannot have healthy human communities, or economies, without healthy ecologies in functioning bioregions.



Finding signposts in the disregarded is a neat way to flip a problem into a solution. Recovering a sense of responsibility to our bioregions helps us to reconnect to place. Also, understanding that everything in a bio-region is interconnected: water quality, soil, energy, food, waste, economic potential, manufacturing, materials for shelter, means of transport, animals and humans is well aligned with Transition thinking. Schools in Transition was designed to get us thinking about local ecologies as well as local economies.

Appreciating a pumpkin in the Sharpham walled garden

On Friday 11 October 2013, 220 year 8 students (aged 12 to 13) from KEVICC and at least 30 adults gathered at Sharpham, the estate just down-river from Totnes on the River Dart in Devon, to spend a day out of doors in a place that is geographically home. On that sunny Friday it was a piece of our watershed, a chunk of our local bio-region, and we were getting to know it in eleven different but connected ways. Led by experts from Sharpham and the local area, and teachers from KEVICC, students divided up into groups that spread themselves across the land and went down to the river, or into the woods and the quarry.

Local poet Alice Oswald, and author of “Dart” took her group into the reed beds for a creative writing experience. Other groups did sound mapping in a range of different locations; photography of landscape and harvest, and of animal and bird tracks; landscape drawing and painting looking back up the river to Totnes; charcoal making and using the charcoal sticks to draw moths; and mapping soil types and different habitats (including the extinct volcano). One group went out on the river in a boat sent up by Dart Harbour Authority to look at life in the waters of the estuary; two others foraged for wild edible and medicinal plants and went on a food-growing trail: mapping all the food produced on the estate from beef to vegetables. Another group turned into reporters for the day and went around taking photos and collecting stories. Having arrived in coaches that just managed to squeeze down the narrow lanes almost the entire year group walked back along the cycle track that follows the river into Totnes. Released from the classroom, adults and children had an air of *joie de vivre* that rode over the inevitable glitches.



Making a food map of the Sharpham Estate

After the event teachers and workshop leaders were asked to reflect on their experience by Isabel Carlisle, Education Coordinator for Transition Network, who organised the day (and led the Schools in Transition programme).

Sophie Killock (KEVICC head of English): “Students appreciated the fact they had opted for their activity of choice and liked having a day out in the fresh air with their friends. I was thrilled by how open they were to new experiences – picking and eating stinging nettles for example – I’m not sure I would have been brave enough to do that when I was 12! When complete, we will have drawn and collaged the Sharpham estate and labeled it with our findings and our own poetry. The students were keen to walk the whole length of the river at some point.”

Looking through the window of the dairy



Beth Coombes (Sharpham, led the food-growing trail):

“They saw how grapes were crushed, turned into wine and sold. They saw how cheese is made with the people at work, tasted different types, and viewed the land and cattle, taking into account wind, sun, soil type, food source, workforce, etc. This was a great overview and inside view of the wine and cheese making at Sharpham. Students felt they were very welcomed as they listened to the stories of the workers. Eating and collecting from the walled garden, together with exploring the camp area and having beetroot cake, gave the children a sense of belonging to Sharpham.”

In response to the question “How important do you think it is to enter an engagement with place through a wide variety of “doorways”? Charcoal-maker *Jon Howell* reflected: “Very important! Places, especially natural and wild places are our community. People forget (and Western culture supports this forgetting) that community is not about people, children and adults and elders meeting for song or to eat or live together. To truly know

themselves and their place in the world (and therefore their roots, their security and in turn their confidence and creativity) it is vital to acknowledge the wider community of plants, animals and place... all of whom are interconnected and without which our lives would cease to exist. I would go so far as to say our very existence depends on children being fully engaged with the natural ‘place’ in their lives.”

Adrian Rainbow, who now teaches at Atlantic College in Wales, later wrote: “I spent the day with poet Alice Oswald. We went into the reeds down by the river and my role was to send one student at a time into the reeds so that they could connect with the space independently. What amazed me more than anything else was to see the students, most of whom ventured into the reeds with some trepidation, come out five minutes later transformed from the experience. They then wrote poetry from their experiences and I was very impressed with their output. Would they have been able to write such poetry about the Dart and this space without the experience of walking alone through the reeds? I don’t think so. I think they connected with the place in a very positive way because they were immersed in it, affected by it, and that this led the way to unleashing their creative instincts. I think it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to replicate this within the classroom, and that these experiences should be encouraged whenever possible. As an educator, this certainly made me consider the importance of getting out of the classroom...”



The following January and February 2014 KEVICC invited primary school children from six local schools to come and participate in story-telling and art workshops about the River Dart. Local storyteller Helen Sands told local legends and Celtic myths as well as the life of the salmon. The children then went to the art department and used different techniques to create a visual response to what they had heard.

All the work that Year 8 produced during the 2013-14 school year, and the pictures from the primary schools, were shown at an exhibition celebrating the Dart Watershed in the Ariel Centre at KEVICC in autumn 2014. The intent is to repeat the Watershed Day for each year 8 and continue to make that a cross-curricular experience.

Painting of Sharpham Bend by a primary school pupil

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