

## More Important Rs<sup>1</sup>

### Cetan Wanbli Williams<sup>2</sup>

What three Rs are important to your education? Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic, one might rightly proclaim, although it is my belief that three different Rs are more important to an individual's education. Using these three alternative Rs I will explain my environmental education philosophy. The three R's I will address are: Respect, Relations, and Responsibility.

#### Respect

Matthew King, a sun dance leader of the Oglala Lakota, has stated that the first law of all things is, simply, respect. My philosophy is that respect must be the foundation of everything that happens in environmental education and that initially one must learn to respect him or herself before others can. Respect can be an ethical value or an attitude that manifests into a behavior. Most importantly, respect is something that must be earned and exhibited, in my philosophy of environmental education.

When respect is not the foundation of environmental education, failure is inevitable. As a case in point, take my experience as a tutor at Ferndale High School, in Ferndale, Washington. My duty was to tutor students associated with the Upward Bound Environmental Science Program based out of Northwest Indian College in Bellingham, Washington. The students I tutored were only members of the Upward Bound Environmental Science Program because of their exhibition of respect toward extracurricular educational activities, in this case those which related to the environment.

The students and I were able to engage in structured tutor time both in class and out, although I never felt that my services were respected, initially by the students, but ultimately by the faculty. Unfortunately, I believe that my youth might have caused this disrespect. Regrettably, this disrespect led to the failure of all but one of the thirteen students who originally exhibited respect for extracurricular educational activities and caused the prohibition of an Upward Bound Environmental Science tutor program at Ferndale High School. I truly believe that respect was present in this education system but, unfortunately, the respect was focused on pieces of paper in the form of report cards, diplomas, and paychecks.

My philosophy is that when respect is utilized as a foundation of environmental education the habitat for success can be created. For instance, at the Native American Fish and Wildlife Summer Youth Environmental Awareness Practicum, held annually in Evergreen, Colorado, respect is the basis for all the Practicum activities.

The Practicum annually selects 35 students from the 7 national regions of the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society to ensure a unique and diverse group. Students spend 10 days in the majestic Rocky Mountains learning initially to respect themselves and others, but ultimately learning respect for all elements of their environment.

Utilizing respect as a foundation for the Practicum has led to its many success stories. Every year, upon completion of the program, Practicum coordinators are flooded with phone calls and letters from parents proclaiming a change for the better in their children. In fact, of those eligible for participation in the 3 years the Practicum is offered to them, more than 80 percent reapply for all 3 years, and more than 60 percent are selected to return for the duration. This evidence supports the profound respect which underlies the Practicum's success.

Respect is an essential component of my environmental education philosophy, and I have provided examples to exhibit this importance. Respect is the first R and serves as a foundation for the following components of my philosophy. This is accomplished by allowing the student to gain an individual respect for all things in their environment, including themselves. When a student respects him or herself and all the things around him or her, the groundwork is laid for that student to unearth relations and discover their personal responsibilities.

#### Relations

When David W. Orr stated, "only that which can be measured is true knowledge," he reflected the philosophy of the Greek sophist, Protagoras, who proclaimed that "of all things the measure is man," because ultimately, as written by John Lienhard, "the gauges and meters we use to measure things usually begin by copying our own senses."

Within my environmental education philosophy is the belief and understanding that all knowledge is relative because each individual can only measure new knowledge against what they already know. In other words, the individual must find a relationship with the fresh information while respecting their own database of knowledge.

One element of my environmental education philosophy is the theory that, as human development occurs, a psychological gauge develops to sense and measure the awareness of self or individual. Variance in the psychological gauge measures age in years, stage of maturation, level of education, and social status, which are also all valued as forms of respect in an individual. This is usually accompanied by an awareness of the individual's relationship to other humans and other natural phenomena which is gauged and measured by the intensity of emotions and the levels of interaction (how the individual feels about the relationship). The measurements then can be calculated using a value system based on the individual's ethic. In other words, the sense of self, when added to the individual's sense of relationships, develops into personal ethics. As personal ethics and relationships increase, the formula for culture is born.

My environmental education philosophy is that relations and culture are essential; they set the standards by which one can calculate human development and, ultimately, serve as a foundation for human reproduction and survival. Basically, without relations and culture, humans could not exist. It is also the human culture and sense of relation to everything in their environment which forms a sense of responsibility in the individual.

### **Responsibility**

It is my philosophy that environmental education should not focus on an individual's sense of his or her personal rights because it causes the individual to lose sight of his or her personal responsibilities. Imagine what the outcome might have been if the turbulent 1950s and 1960s had spawned a civil responsibilities movement, or if citizens had demanded that the law uphold equal responsibilities for all people, or if the public were read their responsibilities by policing authorities.

It is my philosophy that environmental education is foremost an individual responsibility best supported by a personal right. In my philosophy of environmental education a sense of personal responsibility can be

equal to an understanding of an individual's place and purpose. When students gain a sense of personal responsibility for their education, any environment or place can provide the context for learning the meaning or purpose of things. Appropriate to my philosophy of environmental education, this scenario is best supported by an instructor who has also gained a personal sense of responsibility for the education of an individual student in any environment.

Individual responsibility is an essential component of my environmental education philosophy as it is fundamental to the support and success of the first and second Rs. My environmental education philosophy is that students must learn that it is their personal responsibility to earn and exhibit respect for themselves and all things in their environment. In doing so the students must also understand how personal responsibility relates to their individual relationships and own environmental knowledge. The students must exhibit personal responsibility in the interactions of their environmental relations and responsibly apply their knowledge in a method respectful to all things to which they are related in their environment. Ultimately, this provides the student with an environment in which to live, or a place (environment) and purpose (life), and is why I believe that responsibility is an essential component of an environmental education philosophy.

Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic have been traditionally been held up as the three Rs fundamental to education. Three different Rs are vital to my environmental education philosophy; Respect, Relations, and Responsibility. Each are essential and important to an individual's education. What three Rs are important to your education?

### **Notes**

1. This paper was submitted as partial credit for ESTU 371, "Environmental Education Philosophy," at Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington.
2. Cetan Wanbli Williams is an undergraduate in the Huxley College of the Environment at Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington. He is a member of the Flandreau Santee and is also Oglala Lakota, Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe, and Northern Cheyenne.