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Q&A: Educator Pedagogical Approach

Natural Connections: Embodying Relationship with the Environment

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Describe your relationship with the natural environment.

I have spent my life playing with, being held by, supported, nurtured, and taught by nature. I am from a generation where the natural world was deemed safe by adults and those in power. I learned about collaboration and patience interacting with the life that surrounded me near the Wild Rice River in rural Minnesota. I practiced respect and mutuality when interacting with my relatives from the rooted, four-legged, crawling, swimming, and flying families. There is an elder tree that still stands at my parents' farm strong and tall, yet gentle and calming. I listen to her teachings, and she has helped me regulate throughout the years. At one time, I climbed her with ease; now I am not sure how I managed to join her up in those high branches. I must accept the nurture the tree provides at her base by leaning into her strength and wisdom.

My heart learned compassion as I watched the circle of life repeat itself regularly on those lands. At times people described me as a sensitive child, often emotional, and perceived my empathy and relationship with the outdoor world as unnatural at times. As I began learning from Elders in my early 20s, how I related with the environment was normalized, as I am nature. What is not *natural* is humanity's disconnection from and objectification of the environment. As a life-giver in this world, I value all that lives. There is no single life worth more or less than another. Nibi (water) and Asinoog (stones) are as sacred to me as my son, Migizi Daabinaagozi (Zaryn). I value fairness and equity and work to treat human and *all* kind with love and respect. By taking time to humbly learn from Elders, the natural world, and the western academy, I endeavor to grow in knowledge and strength to advocate for all of my relations in hopes that humankind awakens to this essential connection.

Summarize your teaching philosophy.

I view myself as a tour guide in academia, pointing out areas of interest, engaging students about their interpretation of specific informational encounters, facilitating discourse and open query about topical landscapes, as well as ensuring safe discomfort with the unknown. My level of support in these areas varies and has depended on where and what I instruct. As a guide for students, I want the classroom experience to be engaging, challenging, and evoke shifts in consciousness surrounding micro, mezzo, and macro social work issues.

I assign equal import to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual knowledge. At times my prefrontal cortex takes control of knowledge acquisition particularly in western ways of knowing. At other times, I listen to my body for information about the safety and teachings of people, places, and other living beings. The emotional and spiritual dance with one another to make meaning of the world in indescribable ways. And yet, at the same time all components of my being are reliant on the other and playfully interact to make sense of the world around me. Needless to say, this way of knowing relies on quantitative and qualitative engagement with my surroundings, keeping in mind that human and other life forms' interaction fundamentally alters the original state of what something is. As an instructor, I value and incorporate all ways of knowing. I aim to arouse learner interest and knowledge acquisition through cognitively engaging material, physiological and sensory awareness (somatic experiences related to coursework), and stimulating emotional and spiritual connection to the course content.



[Dr. Leah Prussia](#) is a self-described “tree hugging dirt worshiper,” who has been collaborating with the natural environment for years. She integrates Indigenous teachings, Somatic Experiencing, Relational-Cultural Theory, and Cognitive-Behavioral approaches to address the biopsychosocial and spiritual aspects of individuals, groups, and communities. Her background includes knowledge and practice in mental health services, substance use, trauma, and program administration. Dr. Prussia is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker in the State of Minnesota and sole proprietor of Natural Connections LLC. She is an associate professor in the Master of Social Work Program at the College of St. Scholastica. Dr. Prussia presently serves on the CSWE Commission for Diversity, Social, and Economic Justice and the Environmental Justice Committee. She also serves on the Minnesota Department of Health’s Behavioral Health Planning Council and is a member of the [Wildwoods](#) Board of Directors in Duluth, Minnesota.