

Bio: I'm Glen Thielmann. I taught Social Studies, Geography, some English, and some other stuff in SD57 Prince George from 1996 to 2018.

I've had deep connections to nature in my past, before I became a teacher, but on the whole I did not make that a focus of what I taught. However, when I got the chance to teach Geography 12, almost a dozen times I think, it motivated and afforded many opportunities to get my classes outside and make some land-based connections to the things we learned about in class. Over the years we did various field trips, including downtown walking tours, trips to the local museum, some "geography" walk & talks with guest instructors from UNBC, river walks at local parks, tours of the wastewater facility in Prince George, and a trip to the Ancient Forest (now a provincial park) about 115km east of town. But what stands out as I recall those days was the little hikes up Cranbrook Hill, which we managed to do most years that I taught the course.

Cranbrook Hill is an embankment at the western edge of Prince George, a transition from the river-carved terraces of the "bowl" and the glacier-carved features above the city. There are a few small stream channels that have cut small gullies from the top of Cranbrook Hill down to Foothills Boulevard, which is a 10 minute walk from the school at which I taught. The stream courses were typical of the area, not spectacular in any way, but they were wild enough to feel like one had stepped out of the city and into the forest. The smell of moss, ferns all around, and rocks.

Almost every year, I would take my Geography 12 class for a scramble up one of these gullies to identify plants, inspect the impact of streams on soils and rock, take in the feel and smell and sounds of a streamside ecosystem, and just generally muck about and see what came of it. Walk to the place where the stream plunged into a what resembled a huge storm drain at the base of the hill along Foothills, climb up the stream bed for a half hour or so, then head back down and walk back to school. I recall filling in some field trip permission forms to make these outings legit, but to be honest I banked on the fact that they would not be read too carefully, not because the trip involved any serious risks, but because the access to the stream beds was technically off limits. I told the student that the Do Not Enter signage did not apply to school field trips. My understanding was that the signs were there to prevent folks from falling into the collection pool before the streams entered the storm drains.

Every year the outcome was different. Some students had literally never walked on a rough trail before, never wandered into a forest, gotten muddy feet, or messed around in a stream. A subset of these "new-to-nature" students allowed themselves to truly play: getting dirty or wet in the stream, moving stones around to alter the flow of water, or tossing sticks and leaves into the stream to see how they moved. I tried not to make too big a deal of this, but I was elated. Others went as fast as they could, wanting to reach the top of the hill in the time we had allocated to the upwards journey. Some took their time and tried to notice things, either in response to my prompts the day before, or in response to whatever it was that bound them to the landscape in the moment.

I was a teacher out there, I suppose, but so much of what was happening was out of my control. The matter of what was to be learned, or even taught, was up in the air, and seemed to be a negotiation between me, my students, and the hillside itself. I don't recall having new learning outcomes or items to assess attached to the trips up the hill, just a way of reinforcing outcomes and discussions in class with their own sense and feelings, and a chance to get out of our tired old school building.