Technology and the decline of convivial practice

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Technology and the Decline of Convivial Practice

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Introduction

I first began thinking about the relationship between technology and society while working on an organic farm in Missoula, Montana. The farm had been in operation for about one year when the owners held a meeting at a local coffee house in an effort to recruit folks to help out on the farm. They were promoting their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program which asked members of the community to either buy shares in the season’s harvest or trade work for food. It was clear that the farmers were practicing a nonconventional form of agriculture, one in which the farm was inseparable from and dependent upon the community. Additionally, I was surprised by the nonconventional nature of the relationship between the producers and the consumers.

The type of agriculture practiced on the farm was labor-intensive and highly cooperative—a farm organized by the people and for the people. It occurred to me that organic agriculture was more than a method; it was a social movement.

There was something happening on the farm that was different from anything I had ever experienced. People were making conscious decisions to practice a form of agriculture that was good for the health of the land and good for the local community. The farmers believed that agriculture involves more than the mass production of food. Instead, agriculture should be perceived as a bioregional practice that requires the maintenance of a delicate social and ecological balance.

In America, agriculture has undergone profound changes that have disturbed the balance and altered the relationship between culture and nature; the same changes are
occurring in nearly all segments of society. Many of the changes are closely linked to our use of technology. The organic farmers controlled their use of technology because they wanted to preserve the practice of agriculture. Other people control their use of technology because they also want to preserve certain practices—cooking, walking, letter-writing; and quite often technology can interfere with such practices.

This paper seeks to examine the philosophy of technology in our society. Because technology interferes in our daily practices, we must determine which practices and which technologies are worthy of preservation. Technology can take things from us that we do not always want to give away. It changes the way we see the world. Technology has not only changed agriculture but it has changed the way people relate to each other and to the landscape. Technology is supposed to ease the burden of work, making more time for leisure, but I find this to be an empty promise. I find a flaw in the reasoning of those who argue that large-scale technology will improve the quality of our lives. Perhaps our standard of living may improve, but the quality of our lives is certain to decrease.

Technology, I will show, is not neutral. It can be put to work to serve the many, or it can be manipulated so that it serves a few. In either case, I will show that decisions concerning technology have far-reaching social implications. I believe we must favor technology which maintains the integrity of social and natural relationships. This objective can best be achieved by choosing convivial technology. Convivial technology employs tools that make work inherently meaningful, cooperative, and supportive of social and natural relationships.
In Chapter One I will discuss the philosophy of tools. I will distinguish between focal things and technological devices. Focal things require a context in order to exist and make work meaningful. They require skill, cooperation, and cultural knowledge. Technological devices, conversely, are only operable outside of a context, and they contain no intrinsic value. Devices are one-dimensional and only provide a single commodity. I will explain how technology--whether packaged as a focal thing or a device--impacts human work. Finally, I will offer conviviality as an alternative philosophy of technology.

In Chapter Two I will argue that the technological paradigm is destructive to convivial practice. I will describe the character of the technological device and how it weakens control over personal competence. Also, I will argue that the tools we choose reveal a great deal about how we relate to the world and about our obligations to social and natural communities. Technological devices are inherently flawed because they discourage human labor and degrade human competence. Convivial tools offer hope for independence, personal competence, and sustainability.

Chapter Three will critique the state of modern education as it perpetuates the technological paradigm. I argue that the educational system cultivates citizens who are more prepared to participate in a society governed by the technological paradigm than a convivial one. Children are taught to be individualistic and aggressive in their pursuit of technological solutions to society's problems. Further, children are growing up without a healthy understanding of social and ecological relationships, and consequently, they do not learn to make thoughtful decisions based upon the needs of plant, animal, and human communities.
In Chapter Four I offer one practical solution to the problem presented in Chapter Three. As an English teacher I created a one-month unit focused on the concepts of bioregion, sense of place, and conviviality. The unit addresses the subject of interrelationships by acquainting students with the bioregion they inhabit. Students will study literature, ecology, geography, and social and environmental issues through hands-on activities. The unit is designed to familiarize students with issues that directly relate to them and their bioregion. Ultimately, students will be encouraged to recognize a local issue of concern and take active steps to affect change through the public process.

While the technological paradigm presents an insidious threat to the well-being of our social and natural communities, I have faith that the educational system has great potential to recreate society's understanding of the nature of technology, the importance of interrelationships, and the meaning of good citizenship.
Chapter One: The Nature of Technology

As we prepare to enter the twenty-first century, we must note that we will encounter an era entirely different from any that we have ever known. We are positioned precariously between the modern era, characterized by the rise of the production, transportation, and communication paradigms—fast food, supersonic travel, and the information superhighway—and the postmodern era, which typically embraces the shift from the manufacturing of commodities to the manipulating of information. Some would argue that we are making the transition to a more clean, efficient, and humane form of society—one that does not involve the ardor of physical labor, the discipline of mastering a skill, or the necessity of maintaining socioeconomic relationships. Gradually, the promise of technology is expected to deliver us from the curses of the human condition. Surely we can expect to live cleaner, safer, longer, and more comfortable lives within the new technological paradigm, if we accept technology as a benign force designed to alleviate the discomfort and inconvenience of being human.

Technology and its implications must be examined within the context of the human experience. Technology is not something that arrived with the Industrial Revolution, for the development of a diversity of technologies has been an important part of human survival for tens of thousands of years. Technology is the aggregate of tools that a culture employs in order to cultivate a sense of order in the world and to achieve
maximum efficiency; and tools can represent anything from the primitive buffalo jumps of the Blackfeet Nation to the conventional agriculture of Western Civilization. The technology a culture chooses profoundly affects the way it approaches everyday life and can have an acute impact on a culture by establishing deeply entrenched patterns that are revealed in the tools it uses and the way it uses them. Further, a culture’s technology defines the way its citizens relate to each other and the natural environment.

In pretechnological societies tools held a much different position within the social framework than the one they do in modern technological society. Jacques Ellul, in *The Technological Society*, explains that within a pretechnological setting the technological aspect of an activity was not always uppermost. In the achievement of a small economic goal, the technical effort became secondary to the pleasure of gathering together (65). Work was a human enterprise and focused on the use of simple tools in the hands of skilled workers. The emphasis was on the improvement of existing tools and methods rather than on the multiplication of tools. Pretechnological society was not oriented toward creating new tools but toward the pragmatism of extending, refining, and perfecting the use of established tools that favored human skill rather than extraneous technology (67). High technology in place of human skill eliminated the challenge and variety that are inherent in human work, rendering work increasingly meaningless as a human enterprise.

Certain practices must reside resolutely within the realm of human activity. Agriculture, medicine, education, for example, require an immediacy and attention that can only be achieved within the context of human relationships. These practices are built upon a rich and evolving archive of cultural knowledge, which, when passed from
generation to generation tends to extend, refine, and perfect human practices. The pleasure and pain that comes with labor is the human way to experience being alive and a way citizens can remain in nature's prescribed cycle, toiling and resting, laboring and consuming with regularity (Arendt 106). Further, Hannah Arendt argues that there is no lasting happiness outside the prescribed cycle of exhaustion and regeneration, and when this cycle is interrupted what is lost is the elemental happiness that comes from living and working in the human domain (108).

Technology is far too broad and complex to address as a single concept. In some circles it is fashionable to claim that all technology is good or all technology is bad. However, such distinctions are far too simplistic. Instead, technology must be closely scrutinized in order to determine both its benefits and its shortcomings. Each society employs certain technologies so that it may accomplish a variety of tasks ranging from the growing of food to the education of its citizenry. Philosophically, the choice of technologies may be the most important decision a society can make, for the technologies a society employs have a direct and profound effect on the way people work and the way their work encourages interaction within social and natural environments.

A discussion of the philosophy of technology must address the distinction between technology that enhances the human condition and technology that does not. Ideally, technology may serve to heighten the experience of living gracefully in the world. Society benefits from technology that will allow us to participate in a vigorous daily life unencumbered by devices that impose distance between us and the world. The modern technological tools we have chosen to help us ease the burden of the modern condition have established a constraining pattern in the fabric of our lives, and it is
visible in the many inconspicuous objects and procedures of daily life (Borgmann, *Technology* 3). The constraining pattern reflects our desire to avoid direct exposure to the hazards, inconsistencies, and inconveniences that accompany the experience of daily life. We allow devices to intervene in the spaces in our lives that, in a pretechnological setting, were reserved for the experience of physical and social engagement. Such engagement is distinctly human in nature and cannot reasonably be replaced by devices.

When we permit the arbitrary encroachment of devices into the refined procedures of daily life we must ask what traditional activities and practices those devices replace. Such an inquiry questions what Albert Borgmann refers to as the *device paradigm*, and it investigates our understanding of the way a device appropriates and conveys its commodity or service (4). With a device the commodity is completely alienated from the process in which it was produced. Petroleum-based fertilizers, for example, estrange the relationship between the farmer and the natural cycles of birth, death, and decay by introducing synthetic fertility in place of wisdom, skill, and good practice. The counterpart to devices and the device paradigm is focal things and practices. Focal things, unlike devices cannot be separated from their context. The good that is constituted by a focal thing is firmly embedded in a process which produces more than a single commodity. Using fertility as an example, an organic farm or garden would be a focal thing because it sponsors its own fertility, provides healthy food, and cultivates a cooperative spirit among workers.

More important than the physical dimension of a commodity provided by a device is the moral dimension that is derived purely from being engaged in the process that brings about the physical commodity. Traditional accounting is not inclined to
acknowledge anything other than the linear process of production and consumption of a commodity, and the aesthetic or convivial dimensions of a thing or practice cannot be figured into conventional economic equations. How can a value be placed on the experience of employing natural processes to generate an entire farm's energy inputs? From the perspective of modern agriculture such an enterprise is considered inefficient and romantic, but to a practitioner of organic agriculture the cycle of production, consumption, and return is inviolable and cannot be quantified.

There is much danger in loyalty to the device paradigm. When we allow the pervasiveness and consistency of the technological paradigm to deny focal things the ability to provide depth and principle to our lives, we have effectively cut ourselves off from the fourfold—what Heidegger describes as the interplay of crucial dimensions of earth and sky, mortals and divinities (43). Devices tend to weaken our relationship to social and natural communities and discredit the cultural knowledge and skills that have evolved within society for centuries. Devices cannot replace focal things and practices. Focal things are concrete, tangible, deep and they have no functional equivalents; they have tradition, structure, and a rhythm of their own. Most importantly, they engage us in the fullness of our capacities. They sponsor discipline and skill which are exercised in our daily incursions into the world—working and playing (Borgmann, Technology 219).

It is within the realm of work that devices exact the greatest toll on the dignity of human engagement with the wisdom, skill, and discipline that make good work a focal practice. The pretechnological citizen was able to maintain some dignity because work required personal energy under personal control (Illich, Tools 12). The ability to utilize
personal energy in cooperation with a cultivated skill is the truest manifestation of the dignity of a focal practice.

Highly technological cultures have traditionally been associated with extravagantly high energy use while pretechnological societies believed that a person was born with the potential to use most of the power he would need if his organism was well maintained (Illich 26). Focal things are designed to act as a channel through which wisdom, skill, and discipline are translated from a human being into meaningful work. In *Small Is Beautiful*, E.F. Schumacher explains that meaningful work serves three primary functions: 1) to give man a chance to utilize his faculties, 2) to overcome egocenteredness through cooperation with others, and 3) to create goods and services needed for a becoming existence (54).

When we are able to place our personal energy under personal control through the use of our technology we are effectively enacting skill and demonstrating practical competence within a local social and natural framework. Possession of skill signifies a devotion to the nuances of local ways of life—it is local life aware of itself in the most profound sense (Berry, *Harmony* 67). Skill conveys the most genuine understanding of the interrelationships and intricacies of social and natural dynamics; it is the enactment or the acknowledgment of the responsibility to other lives.

The opposite of skill, however, is not merely incompetence, but ignorance of sources, dependencies, and relationships (Berry, *Unsettling* 91). Skill must be perceived as a qualitative value, for it reflects the ability of a worker to perform a task as if it were an art form or the concrete realization of accumulated local knowledge. Hence, a small, organic farmer relies upon skill to a greater degree than a farmer who farms using
conventional methods including pesticides, herbicides, and petroleum-based fertilizers. The organic farmer cannot carelessly soak his fields in chemical insecticides or inject his soil with synthetic fertilizers, so the farmer must demonstrate an insightful understanding of the relationships and dependencies of the diversity of organisms that occur on his farm.

Viewing the practice of skill as a qualitative value is contradictory to the modern understanding of skill as a quantitative value. A practice, according to Jacques Ellul, becomes a function of rationality and artificiality. In place of human energy under human control, technological devices are required in order to standardize practices and eliminate the human tendency toward spontaneity and irrationality. In essence, technology intervenes in social practices in such a way as to reduce facts, forces, phenomena, methods, and tools to a schema of logic (78-9). When technological devices intervene in a practice it reveals a breach in the symbiotic relationship between people and nature. All practices require a union of human skill and nature's energy in order to occur, and technology may interrupt the conduit which connects the human body with sources of energy.

The technological paradigm degrades a person's dignity by replacing wisdom, skill, and discipline with the artificiality of a technological device. The substitution of devices for human energy and skill enslaves people to their tools and erodes the overall satisfaction that is derived from practicing with independent, self-directed efficiency. Psychologically, humans need to use tools which have a focal quality to them. Within a pretechnological setting tools defined the way people perceived themselves, their relationship to others within a social system, and their relationship to the landscape.
These relationships continue to be interrupted as the technological paradigm standardizes practices, institutionalizes values, and centralizes power—turning people into mere accessories of bureaucracies and machinery (Illich, Tools xxiv).

One pragmatic alternative to the subjugation of skilled practice by dehumanizing technological devices is the adoption of a cultural philosophy that recognizes the social value of convivial practices. Conviviality is a way of looking at the world that transcends the economic pragmatism of the technological paradigm. Conviviality illuminates the interrelatedness and complexity of living inextricably within social and natural systems. To adopt conviviality as part of one's way of taking up with the world encourages graceful participation in something larger and more important than the mere instrumentality of the technological paradigm.

A practice is convivial if 1) it is inherently enjoyable as a creative process and not merely a means to an end, 2) it encourages and rewards companionship and self-directed cooperative interaction between citizens, and 3) it employs tools that enhance the social and natural environment.

First, conviviality entails engagement in a practice that is not solely based upon rationality, specialization, and standardization. Convivial work enlarges and illuminates the range of personal competence and control within a local setting and gives a practice a uniqueness that is created by a mixture of individual skill and local sources of energy (Illich, Tools xxiv); and a convivial practice fosters a high degree of independence because conviviality requires that tools and skills be firmly within personal control. Tools must be accessible and comprehensible by all who wish to use them. Third party control of tools is inconsistent with the principles of conviviality because it leads to
centralization and radical monopoly, both of which create dependency upon a body of managers and specialists that is philosophically incompatible with the goals of a convivial practice.

Second, conviviality applauds social relationships and dependencies that are built around mutual participation and exchange of skill and energy within an intimate social environment. People have the necessary independence to exercise skill while also maintaining a cooperative spirit and working to achieve a high level of personal satisfaction rather than impressive production statistics.

Third, conviviality breeds dignity and well-being within society because practices are meant to enhance social and ecological relationships. The attractiveness of a convivial practice is closely linked to the use of tools which allow a person to be conscious of the way he utilizes personal wisdom, skill, and discipline or cooperates with another to perform a practice.

Conviviality is simply one way of taking up with the world. While the technological paradigm proposes to intervene in our lives and do things for us, conviviality argues for the preservation of practices which require personal accountability. Convivial practices are true to social and ecological processes and do not lend themselves to shortcuts, as the desire for shortcuts is the wellspring of the technological paradigm. Further, the technological paradigm erodes our physical and intellectual capabilities and renders us incompetent to think and act for ourselves. The social and ecological implications of the technological paradigm are frightening and must be given close examination.
Chapter 2: The Implications of the Technological Paradigm

The technological paradigm, while infinitely expanding our scope of capabilities, has aggressively diminished our range of competencies. Citizens of modern times combine high energy with high technology to make the far corners of the earth accessible within a day's travel, yet a deep understanding of the local tools and practices of conviviality—horse logging, bicycle maintenance, organic gardening—continues to erode. Convivial practices exist primarily on the margins of the technological paradigm where people have managed to escape the pressure of third party control—owners of capital or highly trained managers—to shape a livelihood grounded in skill, personal energy, and local knowledge. It is highly characteristic of the modern industrial setting that third party control over the modes of production is the dominant influence that shapes the expansion of global capabilities at the expense of local competence.

Of industry and the technological paradigm, Ivan Illich explains that we have begun to save time, shrink space, augment power, and multiply goods while overthrowing organic norms and displacing real organisms with mechanisms that are designed only to magnify some singular function that they perform (Tools 30). The displacement of organisms with mechanization and the quantification of work is a result of the excessive capitalization of the modes of production. Modern industrialism is not consistent with conviviality, as the tools, energy sources, methods, and products of
modern industrialism are not designed to involve a large segment of the local population
or employ local resources in the most efficient manner possible.

Technology can be democratic or authoritarian, sustainable or self-destructive, convivial or discouraging. If we accept this premise then it is clear that technology is invested with cultural value. Technology is not neutral. The type of technology a culture chooses to employ tells a great deal about what a culture values, as technology exposes the hierarchy of values within a culture. What is technology meant to do for us? What are the social or political implications of using a technology? Does a technology invest life with value? The way we use technology tells us about how we relate to the world, how we perceive our obligations to natural systems and human communities.

Technology defines the character of a civilization as much as its literature, architecture or sport, as technology is composed of those artifacts which combine the skill of a worker with his energy in order to produce a thing of value. Technology presents a person with a forum to display skill while expressing and confirming his identity within the context of society. In society a person is defined by the skill which he cultivates and presents to the people of his community. A person relates himself in action to his society through the use of technologies that he actively masters, or by which he is passively acted upon. To the degree that he masters his technologies, he can invest the world with his meaning; to the degree that he is mastered by his technologies, he allows the technologies to determine his own self-image (Illich, Tools 21). The fate of a person's social relationships, then, is linked to his ability to distinguish between convivial technology and technology which advances the technological paradigm.
The nature of the tools of the technological paradigm is such that an individual is fully divested of responsibility for making thoughtful decisions. When a person chooses to rely upon a technological device he renounces his responsibility and accountability, and decreases his capacities as a citizen (Berry, *Unsettling* 24). As a person's circle of responsibility contracts so does his sphere of competence. To competently handle a convivial technology it is necessary for a person to be familiar with local sources of energy and natural resources. So, relative to convivial tools, technological devices are inherently flawed because they discourage familiarity in the use of local energy and natural resources. Technological devices remove energy from a personal realm where familiarity with local sources of energy—wood, sun, water, animal—governs wise and efficient practice.

However, the industrial setting favors technological devices that feature capital intensive and energy intensive practices. The technological paradigm promotes devices that are highly practical strictly in terms of the costs of production but are grossly impractical as a convivial practice. When technological devices are applied to intervene in person's relationship with social or natural systems, they can destroy the balance between people and those systems. Essentially, technological devices corrupt the relationship between what humans must do for themselves and what they must have done for them.

It is here that Ivan Illich marks the rise of radical monopoly, and defines a radical monopoly as the dominance of one particular type of product rather than one particular brand. Specifically, a radical monopoly is present when one industrial process exercises an exclusive control over the satisfaction of a pressing need, and excludes convivial
practices from competition. Radical monopoly exists where a technological device overrides the need for exercising practical competence (Tools 52).

Conventional farming, for example, with all of its mechanization and use of chemical and petroleum based fertilizers illustrates a radical monopoly of a variety of technological devices. Because conventional farming relies upon technological devices to plant seeds, harvest crops and fertilize soil, farming is no longer a predominantly convivial practice. Except for a few examples of convivial farming that flourish on the margins of society, farming is a destructive industry driven by an elite circle of capitalists who maintain firm commitment to the technological paradigm.

Radical monopoly represents a most imposing threat to the pursuit of conviviality within society, but this does not necessarily mean that conviviality and the industrial setting are not compatible with each other. The argument for convivial technology is not an argument for a return to archaic technology but an argument for the restoration of practical competence and the appreciation of convivial practices.

The radical monopoly that technological devices have over convivial practices breeds discouragement in people, as devices erode people’s innate desire to shape society through their creativity, independence, and competence. The ultimate result of the radical monopoly is the transformation of the social environment that occurs when basic needs can longer be met by local competence because people give up their native ability to do what they can for themselves and each other in exchange for something that can be done better by a technological device (Illich, Tools 54). Convivial practices, conversely, subvert radical monopoly rather than promote practices that restrict humans from participating in important social and ecological processes.
The failure to contain advanced technological machinery to appropriate arenas--mass transportation, communication, or medicine, perhaps--not only facilitates the advancement of radical monopoly but leads to the growing disenfranchisement of citizens who are losing their sense of importance and autonomy. This disenfranchisement is occurring as people relinquish their hold on things and actions that are distinctly human--farming, cooking, walking--which people desperately need to do for themselves. Radical monopoly over distinctly human activities exiles convivial tools and practices to the margins of society where only small pockets of dedicated citizens are practicing conviviality and enlarging their spheres of competence. Many citizens who find themselves trapped in the industrial setting have abandoned their personal aptitude for the things, activities, and responsibilities which belong firmly within the human realm and have chosen, instead, to endow a small circle of specialists with these competencies. In The Unsettling of America, Wendell Berry finds the relinquishing of responsibility to a panel of experts to be a disease of the modern character, where a system of specialization is in place that requires the abdication to specialists of various competencies and responsibilities that were once personal and universal (19). Specialization is a distraction from what Kirkpatrick Sale describes as communal places of memory where those close to the land remember the ways and traditions of a bioregion, and specialization in the name of efficiency seeks to replace this community of memory with the uniformity, standardization, and conformity that are characteristic of the technological paradigm (115).

Once again, conventional farming serves as the most conspicuous example of the incursion of specialization and radical monopoly into the realm of convivial practices.
While convivial practices are life-affirming practices, conventional farming practices are noted for their disregard of the social and ecological dimensions of a farm. E.F. Schumacher points out that those who encourage substitution of conventional farming practices for convivial practices are arguing for the elimination of living substances from the agricultural process. Under conventional farming practices man-made materials are preferable to natural materials and convivial tools because we can make them to a standardized measure and apply flawless quality control. The ideal of the technological paradigm is to eliminate the human or living factor, and to relinquish all productive processes to machines” (110). Modern agriculture, then, fails to provide work which is inherently enjoyable as a process because the human element--wisdom, skill, discipline--has been eliminated from the process. A convivial agricultural setting is not going to relieve the worker of the burden of labor, but it will focus upon the interrelationship of nature and civilization.

Because the technological paradigm promotes the disregard of the human element, convivial practices are able to thrive on the sharing of knowledge, energy, and skill within society. While the technological paradigm looks for the most efficient way to utilize technological devices, convivial practices aim to incorporate the greatest number of people possible in the process of creating and recreating society on a local level.

Additionally, convivial practices are most likely to thrive when operating on an appropriate scale—a local or bioregional level. At the right scale human potential is unleashed, comprehension of interrelationships is magnified, and accomplishment of cooperative tasks is improved. Kirkpatrick Sale believes optimum scale is bioregional
because at the bioregional level human potential can match ecological reality, so people are more likely to live within sustainable limits (55). At a bioregional level people are more aware of interrelationships. It is easier to see cause and effect relationships when they occur bioregionally since practices are more closely monitored and accountability is more easily established.

In order for convivial practices to take place it is necessary for them to be cultivated within an environment that is supportive of the principles of conviviality. Clearly, the technological paradigm does not provide a setting suitable to the advancement of convivial practices. Convivial practices can best flourish at the grassroots level. Conviviality makes the most sense when viewed in the context of homes, neighborhoods, communities, and bioregions because on a small scale interrelationships are both more apparent and more easily cultivated.

As the technological paradigm continues to dominate the modern landscape, the pursuit of conviviality becomes increasingly complicated. Citizens learn to value and demand the commodities provided by technological devices. Cheap food, rapid transportation, and instantaneous entertainment can make people lazy—physically and intellectually. Technological devices make for an easy and comfortable existence, but they do not enhance the quality of daily life, and they do not provoke people to contemplate the implications of their behavior. Surely, people must learn to think critically about the role they play in perpetuating the technological paradigm and the impact that their behaviors have on the fabric of society.

It is not uncommon for social critics to claim that our crises of ecology and society are actually crises of character. We are mired in a host of ecological and social
dilemmas because we have not been able to police ourselves or learn from our mistakes. As a society we are at a crossroads and we must make some decisions concerning the path we will take. One path is the well-worn path of the technological paradigm, and the other is the path of conviviality. The former requires no change in lifestyle, no critical thought about technology, and no awareness of the interrelatedness of social and ecological systems; the latter requires conscientious behavior, thoughtful use of technology, and education concerning the awareness of interrelationships.

In order to achieve conviviality on a societal level we must seek help from the educational system. The technological paradigm is pervasive, consistent, dominant, and so deeply rooted in the educational system that it does not make room in society for conviviality. Sadly, our crisis of character may reside principally within the philosophy of modern education, as modern education does more to promote the principles of the technological paradigm than to encourage the practice of conviviality. If we are going overcome our crisis of character we must first evaluate the state of modern education to see how it perpetuates our destructive fascination with the technological paradigm.
Chapter Three: Education and the Technological Paradigm

As I have shown in the previous chapters, the pattern of technology is pervasive and consistent throughout our society. The choices we make regarding the use of technology imply a deep commitment to tools which are not convivial. The evidence is overwhelming that a society such as ours cannot create a sustainable and satisfying existence while relying on technology which 1) does not have any intrinsic value, 2) does not encourage cooperative interaction within a community, and 3) does not enhance the quality of the social and natural environment. Instead, we often select technology for its ability to circumvent established social relationships and override natural processes. As a society we fail to recognize that our trust in non-convivial technology serves to create a future which is unable to be sustained either socially or ecologically.

As an educator I have genuine concerns about the philosophy of contemporary education and its tendency to perpetuate the myths of the modern technological paradigm. Children grow up learning that the world is full of obstacles and inconsistencies that need to be overcome by scientific thought, aggressive individualism, and technological innovation; so presenting the world as an adversary teaches children to want to conquer the world rather than to live cooperatively within it. Because we live in a world that is threatened by overpopulation, pollution, scarcity of natural resources, and loss of biological diversity we are faced with an insidious threat to our ability to sustain ourselves on a finite planet.
Perhaps the single greatest obstacle to sustainability is the failure of education to provide children with a sense of ecological literacy which, quite generally, is the ability to think broadly about the interdependent relationship of human and natural systems. But ecological literacy must also extend a child’s ability to think about his relationship to technology. Technology occupies a prominent position within the majority of schools, and the technological paradigm is the standard by which children learn to understand their relationship to the world. For example, modern education rarely teaches children to examine problems within the context of their relationship to other things. Instead, children learn that a technology always offers a solution or a method for circumventing the problem.

The concern should not be with the use of technology in the schools, or even with the introduction of technology as a legitimate means for engaging with the world and solving its problems; but technology must be put in its proper place. Educators must regard technology as a secondary solution to solving problems which first must be addressed by human skill, creativity, and cooperation.

As we near the end of the twentieth century, we continue to live in the midst of a profound ecological crisis which is undoubtedly linked to the widespread use of technology that is not convivial. The educational system has failed to recognize that an ecological crisis actually exists, so we can assume that it has not recognized the dangers of indoctrinating generations of children into the technological paradigm. A host of educational critics would agree that we are experiencing a cultural crisis which may be linked to educational failures, but few will argue that our cultural crisis is derived from a failure to recognize a greater ecological crisis. Conservative educational critics like
Allen Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and William Bennett believe public education is failing to provide essential knowledge needed for a rational understanding of the problems we face as individuals and as a nation (Bowers 35). However, the essential knowledge these critics are espousing can be traced to the great thoughts and great books of Western civilization—precisely the ideas that serve as the foundation of the ecological crisis.

When thinking about a solution to the ecological crisis, educators should be asking themselves a very simple and direct question, What do people need to know in order to live a responsible, sustainable, and convivial life in a world of diminishing resources and antisocial technologies? First, it is worthwhile to answer this question by discussing some patterns in education that reflect the thinking of educational critics but do not address the ecological crisis as a legitimate educational concern.

The ecological crisis is intimately related to the way children are taught to relate to the world, and the technological paradigm dominates the terms of our relationship. By relying upon the technological paradigm to facilitate interaction with the world, children learn to be passive participants in the learning process. Technology promises to relieve the burden of encountering the world, and children fail to understand the world as a complex relationship of things that exist in interdependence. Technology replaces the need to acquire skills for a practical understanding of the world outside of the classroom. Because schools are concerned with imparting standardized knowledge of individual subjects, they fail to frame the knowledge within the context of a practical understanding of the real world. David Orr complains children learn *practical incompetence* because they are seldom required to solve problems that have real life consequences (104).
Technology makes practical competence obsolete because technology simply intervenes in the places where practical competence is called for.

Practical competence requires ecological literacy. In order to be ecologically literate one must have the ability to think about interdependencies. To have an understanding of interdependencies is to see one's place within the context of a larger community which includes air, water, soil, animals, people, and society. Further, an individual must know that his actions are going to have far reaching implications for other members of the community. Such an understanding implies that a person is able to perceive the world as a whole organism. But to see the world in its wholeness, according to Orr, is threatening because to see things as whole is to see both the wounds we have inflicted on the natural world and those we have inflicted on ourselves (88).

The ecological crisis is also intimately related to the way we understand our relationship to the places we inhabit. We continue to inflict wounds on the world and ourselves largely because schools do not teach us about our place in the world. In order to have a sense of our place in the world, we must first know what it means to be a citizen of a particular place. Orr argues that schools do not equip children to live well in a place, and children grow into citizens who are educated to be temporary and rootless occupants of a place (102). These unrooted citizens learn to define their knowledge of a place according to a commercial landscape of strip malls, banks, and superhighways, not geographical features or cultural mythologies. Hence, a concern for relationships is nearly impossible to cultivate under such circumstances when we do not know who we are because we do not know where we are.
Orr argues further that schools do a serious injustice to children and communities when schools teach the lesson of indifference to the ecology of their own place (103). Children grow up thinking that places are interchangeable, and they develop an ignorance of the social and ecological complexities that are responsible for shaping their lives; and by failing to teach children about the concept of relationships, schools teach children that one place is no different from the next. The result is that places are not perceived as being socially dynamic and ecologically diverse communities in which to dwell. Instead, communities tend to be perceived as a collection of generic commodities and technologies assembled for consumer convenience.

Additionally, the failure of education to promote ecological literacy can also be linked to C.A. Bowers' observation that schools want the individual student to be perceived as the basic social unit and center of rational activity (77). As a consequence, schools place very little emphasis on developing a sense of the importance of the cooperative nature of social or ecological relationships, and schools advance an anthropocentric way of thinking that places each individual student at the top of his own hierarchy—to the detriment of the members of the larger community of life. Such an approach to learning instructs the student that he is, most importantly, an individual. Certainly, this philosophy of education can be rather empowering because children are taught that they have the power to impose their will upon the world. But it also defeats the foremost principle of ecological literacy—the understanding that all things are interdependent.

Another way that schools promote socially and ecologically irresponsible behavior is by perpetuating a host of dangerous cultural myths. One of the most
destructive cultural myths perpetuated by schools concerns the benevolent nature of the technological paradigm and its role as a progressive force in shaping society. From an early age children are indoctrinated with the idea that technology can divest them of the responsibility of being ecologically literate and thoughtful citizens, so children learn that their behavior does not have a direct impact on the social or ecological health of the community. Meanwhile, children learn that ecological problems such as pollution, depletion of old growth forests, energy shortages, and soil erosion are all problems which reside beyond their individual realms and will be solved by someone else’s creative use of technology.

Consequently, the myth of technology tells children that it is appropriate to live a highly consumptive and unrestricted lifestyle because technology will continue to overcome the earth’s shortages and provide a livable world. The belief in the omnipotence of the technological paradigm devalues the importance of perceiving oneself as a responsible member of a larger community and seeing the world as a whole organism. The myth of technology communicates the idea that we do not have to impose any limitations on ourselves because technology will dutifully accept and mitigate the consequences of our actions. In essence, the root of our ecological problem is that children are not taught to think of themselves as responsible citizens who must be willing to impose limits on their behavior. Instead, schools want children to develop a sense of individual freedom--the right to act with complete autonomy. However, acting with complete freedom implies a disregard for the interests and concerns of other members of the community and demonstrates a profound ecological illiteracy.
An ecologically literate citizen, conversely, might agree with Alexander Solzhenitsyn's understanding of freedom as merely self restriction for the sake of others (136). The ability to restrict one's behaviors for the benefit of others requires a very important and traditional type of knowledge—a knowledge of interdependencies—which is different from the type of knowledge taught in schools. Ecologically literate citizens must be able to assess the potential implications of their actions and determine whether their actions should be restricted in order to suit the best interests of the community.

Schools emphasize the teaching of scientific knowledge, a type of knowledge that furthers the interests of the technological paradigm and downplays the importance of interdependencies. Scientific knowledge is the dominant form of knowledge encouraged by schools because it encourages the rational thought of the individual. Scientific knowledge is based upon the Cartesian worldview that sees the world as being dualistic. Dualism is the opposite of interdependence since dualism seeks to show the separateness of things in the world, particularly the separation between man and nature.

Because scientific knowledge serves the technological paradigm, it tends to impede people from acquiring diverse and specialized knowledge that contributes to the appreciation of interdependencies within the social and natural environment. Instead, scientific knowledge is based upon standardization of information and serves the technological paradigm well as a tool for the manufacturing of widespread consent concerning the methods of consumerism. Standardization of information atrophies the authenticity of experience that comes from directly engaging reality through social cooperation or the use of convivial technology. Jacques Ellul argues that standardization creates impersonality, relies more on methods and instructions than on individuals and
programs each student with an abundance of institutional knowledge—knowledge which has been prescribed because of its utility within the social setting (12). Institutional knowledge, like scientific knowledge, usurps traditional knowledge as the tools of society grow increasingly authoritarian and citizens become more reliant upon information which has been processed and learned for them by the institution itself. Ivan Illich furthers this idea and argues that the educational system aggressively uses scientific knowledge in order to indoctrinate children into the culture of consumerism (Deschooling 35).

Conversely, traditional knowledge represents a personal response to local circumstances and is derived from interaction with other people, intimacy with the landscape, and utilization of convivial technology. It is a type of knowledge that embodies the nuances and interdependencies of a place—politics, geography, climate, religion, and economy—reflecting a person’s ability to make sense of the world on a personal and community level. With the use of convivial tools a child experiences greater freedom to exercise his skill, engage orally and physically in cooperative problem-solving, and employ the type of knowledge that is generated from experience.

The development of traditional knowledge plays a more important role in the creation of ecologically and socially literate citizens than does scientific knowledge. Paulo Freire’s philosophy of learning advocates the acquisition of traditional forms of knowledge through convivial practices in the classroom. Freire supports classrooms where children may disregard institutionalized scientific knowledge in favor of knowledge which is acquired through thoughtful engagement in word, work, and action-reflection (107). Freire uses the terms word, work, and action-reflection to describe the
types of activities that are carried out in the context of life beyond the classroom. They reflect the actions expected of a productive, contributing, and literate citizen.

If schools are teaching children to value scientific knowledge rather than traditional knowledge, then what are the potential social implications? As long as schools continue to favor the teaching of the scientific worldview rather than a worldview which features the concept of interdependence, then we can expect schools to maintain a steady production of citizens who do not have the knowledge necessary to contribute to a sustainable and convivial society. A sustainable and convivial society requires citizens who are able to distinguish those categories of knowledge which promote life from those which retard it or jeopardize it altogether (Orr 134). While schools have the opportunity to teach the two distinct types of knowledge mentioned above—scientific or traditional—and while both types serve specific purposes, the overwhelming tendency is toward scientific knowledge.

What a child has the potential to learn in school springs directly from the classroom practices he encounters. Convivial practices—cooperative learning, field trips, storytelling—are most suitable to the acquisition of traditional knowledge and require no indoctrination in order to use them effectively. The tools of the technological paradigm favor intensive programming of children, thus ensuring that a culture's most scientifically complex tools will eventually be in the hands of a few—a system which reinforces and promotes radical monopoly. In a society that teaches traditional forms of knowledge and supports convivial technology knowledge is shared quite equally among most citizens. All people know most of what everybody knows. But in a higher or industrial civilization, new tools come into being according to the patterns of the technological
paradigm, and the result is that more people submit to accepting new tools, but not all are equal in their ability to execute them (Illich, Tools 58). Therefore, in an industrial setting, mastery of a particular skill implies a monopoly of understanding that excludes most people from executing or comprehending society’s technologies. Albert Borgmann explains that our society’s technology is becoming so dense and complex in structure that it is beyond direct intervention or modification by anyone which makes the parts of the technological machinery ever more intellectually and physically remote from the practical competence of the common person (Technology 55).

The challenge for the educational community is clear. Society’s inability to recognize the importance of interdependencies, its failure to convey the importance of living well and gracefully in a place, its tendency to cultivate in children a radical sense of individuality, and its commitment to perpetuating the myths of science and technology have contributed to create a society of ecologically illiterate citizens who will be unable to achieve social and ecological sustainability. Educators must work to achieve a collective awareness that the educational system has helped to create a modern world which has destroyed the sense of belonging to a larger order (Proctor 174).

Education is a moral act in addition to a practical one, and educators have a responsibility to society to prepare citizens who are able to engage in practices which promote a sustainable world. The nature of the challenge, however, is such that it must be attempted on a grass roots level. While visions of sustainability encourage us to think globally, it is the educator’s responsibility to act locally.
Chapter 4-Practical Model

I. Introduction

Recently, I completed my first significant teaching experience. I taught English to both eighth and ninth grade students in Lewistown, Montana. Lewistown is a town of roughly six thousand residents located in central Montana's Judith Basin. Lewistown has a unique character which is a function of its favorable location. Central Montana is noted for its expansive agricultural lands and rugged island mountain ranges, and Lewistown is fortunate to be comprised of both types of geography. Unlike most Montana towns the landscape around Lewistown possesses all of the qualities that make Montana famous—wild mountains, rivers, and badlands; endless acres of productive agricultural land and prairie; and legendary hunting and fishing grounds.

The people of Lewistown are characteristic of the people who inhabit most of Montana, particularly those who inhabit the land east of the Continental Divide—conservative and individualistic. The people give Lewistown the distinctive feel of an agricultural community where ranching is the primary economic and cultural focus; the people are largely descendants of farmers and ranchers who have inhabited the Judith Basin for several generations. Lifestyles have changed very little over the generations, and value systems tend to reflect a pattern of homogeneity.
In many ways the people of Lewistown are a product of the landscape they inhabit. Since Lewistown is an agricultural community much of the land is held privately. Public lands are conspicuously absent except for small pockets of grasslands and the higher reaches of island mountain ranges. Because most of the land surrounding Lewistown is private there is a large and vocal community of private property rights advocates who fiercely defend their rights to *laissez-faire* land management practices. Unfortunately, such philosophy and practice is largely responsible for the genocide committed against Native American populations, extermination of predators including the grizzly bear, wolf, mountain lion and coyote, overgrazing of delicate grasslands, and poisoning of water and soil with industrial pesticides and herbicides.

Lewistown is the kind of place that should take great steps to preserve the quality of life that exists there, and with significant private land holdings one might expect a fierce loyalty to the land and its resources. Lewistown has the cleanest municipal water in the country; the water runs untreated from Big Spring Creek straight into Lewistown's homes. The air is clean, the soil is fertile, and wildlife is abundant. Yet ecological degradation encroaches upon Lewistown every day as mines destroy the Moccasin Mountains and pollute the headwaters of the Judith River, timber sales are proposed for the roadless Big Snowy Wilderness Study Area, and ranchers carry out daily extermination programs on prairie dogs, coyotes, and wolves. So, rather than actively preserving the quality of life in the Judith Basin, the prevailing value system acts to destroy it in the name of individualism.
II. Lewistown’s Curricular Philosophy

The Lewistown Public Schools (LPS) fit the pattern of thousands of public school systems across the United States. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, public schools fail to adequately address the types of knowledge that are likely to lead to convivial practices. Public schools like to create classrooms where the individual student serves as the focus of all learning. Students learn to be highly individualistic and aggressive because aggressive individualism is considered to be the American ideal. Aggressive individualism is what conquered the western frontier and led to the establishment of places like Lewistown; and the LPS adhere closely to the mainstream educational philosophy.

In Lewistown, school handbooks and curriculum guides reveal an apparent interest in interdisciplinary education. A Lewistown Junior High School (LJHS) handbook explains that interdisciplinary education enables students to see the connectedness of separate fields of study while coming “to appreciate the essential contribution each discipline makes toward creating a connected whole” (Explorative 2). The handbook further mentions the importance of preparing students to meet the challenges of the real world while becoming viable members of society; and the ultimate goal for the LPS is to create schools which are inherently student centered and seek to build educational communities which:

- help people care for each other
- enhance learning
- explore meaningful ideas
○ ensure success for all students
○ empower professionals to make decisions
○ nurture health and fitness, and
○ involve families and communities in the day-to-day life of the school

Explorative, p. 6

In addition to being vague the LPS handbook is deeply anthropocentric. Much attention is given to terms and phrases like interdisciplinary, connectedness, viability, and meaningful ideas. My experience with the LPS is that interdisciplinary education is a buzzword that has gained widespread popularity throughout the educational community, and the LPS has attempted to accommodate the concept. However, it is clear from the handbook and from personal experience that the concept of interdisciplinary education does not include the study of the interrelationship of social and ecological principles. Rather, the LPS are concerned solely with the place of human beings within the world; and interdisciplinary education simply glorifies the many facets of the human world.

Clearly, the version of interdisciplinary education offered by the LPS is insufficient to address the issues that need to be addressed. Interdisciplinary education must address not only the interdisciplinary nature of human communities but the nature of relationships between human, plant, and animal communities.

While in Lewistown I taught the type of interdisciplinary course that is necessary if students are going to develop an appreciation for interdependencies within their bioregion. The course I designed lasted three days and encompassed literature, writing, forest ecology, cross country skiing, and environmental advocacy. The course was
created from a desire to familiarize seventh and eighth grade students with the potential threats to the Big Snowy Wilderness Study Area—an island mountain range which contains the pristine headwaters that supply Lewistown's drinking water. The Big Snowy mountains have the potential to be designated as Wilderness, but a variety of industrial interests—mining, timber, grazing, and motorized recreation—wish to see the Big Snowies adopt a management plan that favors anthropocentric values.

The course was quite successful but success did not come without token criticisms. Talk of ecology in Lewistown guarantees a reaction from the educational community. Once the plans for my course became public I received some critical comments from students, faculty, and parents. I was labeled as an environmentalist, and some people made efforts to communicate their disdain for the principles of environmentalism. Essentially, they believed that they have been managing themselves and their land for generations, and they do not want any regulations or need any advice. The Judith Basin is theirs and they intend to manage it as they please.

**III. Realization**

My experience with the Lewistown Public Schools convinced me that a great need exists for a curriculum that sincerely addresses the relationship of human, plant, and animal communities. Students must learn to see themselves as part of a larger pattern which can be profoundly altered by thoughtless practices. Thankfully, schools have begun to recognize the importance of interdisciplinary education, but they do not do enough to make students aware of social and ecological interrelationships. Consequently,
students are unable to understand the nature of their relationship to the world and the implications of their practices.

I have determined that public school curriculums are very rigid and difficult to change, so any attempt to bring the study of social and ecological interrelationships to the classroom must be done at the classroom level. As an English teacher, addressing ecological principles in the classroom may seem doubly difficult, as few public school English curriculums include the conspicuous study of ecology. However, I feel that my classroom will always contain a strong element of social and ecological advocacy. In addition to infusing the English curriculum with the theme of interdependencies, I wish to teach a one month unit that encourages students to consider their relationship to the place they inhabit, the social and ecological principles that create their place, and the implications of their actions.

IV. Bioregion, Sense of Place, and Conviviality

The following is a sketch of the objectives, principal concepts, readings, and activities that would comprise a one-month unit on “Bioregion, Sense of Place, and Conviviality.” The unit is designed to include literature, composition, verbal communication, critical thought, and hands-on activities as students investigate the physical and cultural features that define their bioregion. Additionally, students will develop an acute awareness of their bioregion that will ultimately shape personal behavior.

A. Unit objectives
1. To develop an awareness of social and ecological relationships within a place.

2. To develop an awareness of a place as a bioregion rather than a series of political boundaries.

3. To develop the ability to make thoughtful decisions based on principles of ecology, justice, tolerance, and sustainability.

4. Assist students in identifying ways in which they can apply what they know about their place to influencing the local public process.

B. Focusing Questions

1. What are the unique physical features—rivers, mountains, natural resources, parks, historic buildings—that characterize my place?

2. What are the unique social characteristics of my place? Who lives here? What niches do they fill? Consider cultural diversity, alternative lifestyles, religious differences.

3. What are the principal economic forces that shape my place? How do they enhance or detract from the bioregional environment? Is the economy sustainable?

4. How do my personal actions affect the physical, social, and economic character of my place?
C. Students should be able to:

1. Communicate a solid understanding of the defining characteristics of their place.

2. Critically evaluate bioregional issues as they affect the character of their place.

3. Understand the cause and effect relationship of their actions and impose self-restraint when necessary in order to secure bioregional sustainability.

4. Consider the needs of diverse groups—including plants and animals—within a bioregional place.

5. Recognize local issues and participate effectively as a citizen in the public process.

D. Readings

The following readings have been selected for their ability to stimulate critical thought regarding the relationship of people to their place or bioregion. Good citizenship requires thoughtful behavior and concern for the myriad dimensions of bioregional systems. Further, good citizenship requires that people consciously restrict their behavior for the benefit of others. Each reading addresses a different dimension of bioregional citizenship and asks very important questions of the reader.

Leopold, Aldo. “The Land Ethic” from Sand County Almanac
Essentially, this unit attempts to cultivate a land ethic within each student.

Like Solzhenitsyn, Leopold explains that an ethic is simply a limitation on personal freedom for the sake of achieving sustainability (238). Leopold presents an easy-to-follow formula for determining when a practice is ethical: a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise (262).

**Berry, Wendell. “Think Little” from *A Continuous Harmony***

In “Think Little,” Berry encourages the reader to think globally but act locally. Social and ecological crises are presented as problems that have their roots in private, not public, behavior. Often the world seems so huge and unwieldy that citizens develop a sense of hopelessness when contemplating the scope and breadth of such crises. Berry brings these crises home to the personal level and simultaneously, breeds a feeling of empowerment in the reader.

**Turner, Jack. From “The Abstract Wild.”***

In “The Abstract Wild,” Turner questions our willingness to accept violence, poverty, racism, nuclear weapons, and environmental destruction as reality. Turner asks us why we must always tolerate, accept, forgive, and forget the atrocities perpetrated upon the public by government and business. As an alternative, Turner suggests that, as citizens, we must refuse to forgive, cherish our anger, and remind others.

**Thoreau, Henry David. From “Civil Disobedience.”***

Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience had a profound impact on the lives of both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. “Civil Disobedience” offers several
opportunities for students to contemplate the role of the thoughtful citizen.

Following upon Turner's "Abstract Wild," Thoreau offers the reader insights into the power of the citizen to affect change while acting in accordance with his conscience.

Abbey, Edward. From "Coming Home."

Abbey offers one of the most poignant voices in defense of the American landscape, and his writings have been known to influence the course of the environmental movement. "Coming Home" is a beautifully written description of the place that Abbey's family once inhabited in Appalachia. Abbey's writing pays close attention to the details and nuance of a place. Abbey makes an appeal to each sense in order to help the reader make full use of his imagination and perhaps, inspire reflection about one's own place or bioregion.

E. Activities

The following is an informal sketch of classroom activities that are well-suited to a unit dealing with bioregions, sense of place, and conviviality. In some cases the activities will follow closely upon themes addressed in the readings; in other cases the activities will have an independent life of their own. The overriding purpose of the activities is to assist students in thinking, writing, and speaking critically about the places they inhabit. The activities are designed to proceed from general "get acquainted with your place" activities to advocacy-oriented activities. All activities are meant to focus attention on the immediate needs and concerns of the bioregional community.
1. Local Speakers.

Early in the unit students will listen to visiting speakers who represent the diversity of the bioregion. Speakers may include a representative of the city council, an environmental or social activist, an organic farmer, an historian, and a small business owner. Speakers will talk about the niches they fill within the bioregion and the importance of good citizenship.

2. Local Mythology

Students will be introduced to the mythology of the indigenous cultures that inhabited their bioregion. Mythology often offers interesting perspectives on the people that inhabited a particular landscape. My previous experience has shown that students love to read Native American mythology because it often explains unique local geography, weather patterns, or animal behavior. In Lewistown, for example, students read the mythology of the Blackfeet and Crow because it offered interesting myths that explained the presence of the grizzly bear, elk, and wolf—all animals that appeal to the imaginations of central Montana kids.

3. School-yard Geography and Ecology

Students will spend time examining closely the geography and ecology of the school-yard or neighborhood. Students will be expected to utilize their full array of senses in order to map and describe unique features, relationships, and points of interest that occur in the school-yard environment. This activity is likely to achieve one of two outcomes. Either the student will discover an abundance of life inhabiting the school yard, or the student will realize that the environment is extremely disturbed and fragmented. Both realizations will offer rich material for
classroom discussions and provide an opportunity for looking critically at historical and current uses of the bioregional landscape.

4. Myth-Making and Storytelling

Following the previous activities, students will be expected to reflect upon the relationships and patterns that they have observed and create their own myth to explain a bioregional phenomenon. Students will be encouraged to be creative and expressive in the presentation of “cultural artifacts”—tools, art, or sites—that can validate their myth. In the past students have explained mountain ranges, river systems, or thunderstorms. The myths will be told orally in a small group setting.

5. Convivial Field Trip

The convivial field trip is designed to acquaint students with both the diversity of the bioregional landscape as well as the threats that face the health of the bioregion. Students will participate in a field trip to a local site featuring biological diversity or social conviviality. Sites may include local forests, wetlands, wildlife sanctuaries, organic farms, public gardens, or public projects. Ideally, the field trip will help to cultivate a sense of civic pride that may develop a greater degree of literacy or even bring about social advocacy.

As mentioned above, I had success with a field trip that took students on a day-long hike into the Big Snowy Wilderness Study Area. Students studied forest ecology, wilderness issues, and haiku poetry while becoming informed on the threatened status of the Big Snowy WSA. The field trip culminated in a successful letter-writing campaign as well as a heightened awareness of a local environmental issue.
6. Bioregional Familiarity

If the field trip is successful then students may be interested in following-up on something they learned or observed. This activity asks students to become intimately familiar with one thing from their bioregion. The thing does not need to be a living thing, but may be a cultural landmark or a local event. The point is to require students to research, observe, or interview something or someone that is a part of the bioregional community. Students will be expected to find unique information that will be of interest to the classroom community. Findings will be presented orally in a small group setting.

7. Student Advocacy

For the unit’s final activity students will be divided up into small groups of two or three according to shared interests. Once in groups students will determine a local issue of concern, research the issue, and prepare a strategy for dealing with the issue publicly. This activity is designed to empower students to play an active role in creating change through the public process. Most people feel a lack of power to affect change—even on the local level—but this activity will demystify the process and empower students. Student projects may range from well-written letters-to-the-editor to neighborhood campaigns to protest.

V. Conclusion

This unit on sense of place, bioregion, and conviviality is rather nontraditional in purpose, approach, and intended result. Consequently, the success of this unit is difficult to evaluate. The unit offers no examinations to
determine mastery of the concepts explored. Instead, success will be measured according to the level of enthusiasm that is generated over the course of the unit, as enthusiasm is the most important ingredient in any grass-roots campaign. And this unit is a grass-roots campaign. It is an attempt to reclaim the imaginations of young people from the destructive influences of a dysfunctional society.

With each passing generation Americans become increasingly disenfranchised and alienated from both the social and ecological processes that govern their lives. Meanwhile, communities experience unprecedented destruction of the means of sustainability--ecosystems and local economies. Citizens need to become reacquainted with their bioregional places and their convivial practices--immediately. Teachers must be prepared to seize every opportunity to place learning within the context of things that really matter--our communities depend on it.


