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Exploring the Benefits of Eco-Therapy Based Activities at an Urban Community College

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Abstract

Ecotherapy-based experiences have been shown to provide multiple benefits such as improved cognitive functioning (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008), increased overall well-being (Calkins, Szmerekovsky, & Biddle, 2007, Howell, Dopko, Passmore, & Buro, 2011) and improved mental and physical health (Bolen, 2012, Korpela & Kinnunen, 2011). Few, if any studies have considered the benefits of providing these types of experiences for urban community college students. This pilot study introduces an eco-art based workshop and an animal-assisted therapy interactive presentation as case examples to demonstrate the potential benefits that these types of experiences can have on this population. Based on these preliminary findings, the benefits of these activities can be grouped into three themes: (1) General satisfaction with experience, (2) Opportunity for self-expression, and (3) Awareness of stress-reduction.

Exploring the Benefits of Ecotherapy-Based Activities at an Urban Community College

Educators are becoming more aware of the field of ecopsychology which is based on the widespread understanding that humans are part of nature, not separate or dominant over it (Greenberg, 2011; Roszak, 2001; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner 1995). One concern from the field of ecopsychology is that human beings are becoming increasingly separated from the natural world (Roszak, 2001). The applied practice of ecotherapy is aimed at reducing negative consequences from this separation. Examples of applied practice ecotherapy activities include nature meditation (e.g., mindfulness walking), physical exercise in a natural environment (e.g., hiking or beach yoga), eco-art experiences (e.g., creating art with natural materials), horticultural therapy (i.e., gardening), or animal-assisted therapy. Only recently have some researchers studied the benefits of ecotherapy-based activities. Noted benefits include improved mental and physical health (Bolen, 2012; Calkins, Szmerekovsky, & Biddle, 2007; Mayer, Frantz, Bruehlman-Seneca, & Dolliver, 2009; Ottosson & Grahn, 2005; Sackett, 2010), reduced stress (Korpela & Kinnunen, 2011), improved cognitive functioning (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008), and increased overall well-being (Bolen, 2012; Calkins et al., 2007; Howell, Dopko, Passmore, & Buro, 2011; Korpela & Kinnunen, 2011; Lambin, 2009; Mayer et al., 2009; Metzner, 1995; Ottosson & Grahn, 2005; Sackett, 2010).

Considering these benefits for urban adolescents, the students who are often the most separated from natural settings, some urban high schools are including ecotherapy-based activities, such as planting community gardens and nature field trips, into the curriculum. For instance, over 10 public schools in New York City have collaborated with Outward Bound to provide experiences such as urban expeditions and adventure retreats to students (NYC Outward Bound Schools, 2019). Such wilderness expeditions have been shown to increase self-esteem

and nature connectedness in adolescents (Barton, Bragg, Pretty, Roberts, & Wood, 2016). A Boston high school has also partnered with a local nature reservation to address the nature gap that low-income urban students face by implementing a semester long 11th grade expedition learning program that incorporates outdoor exercises, nature, and personalized academics (Hale Reservation, 2019).

The importance of connecting college students with nature has been briefly discussed in the literature (Windhorst & Williams, 2016), but few, if any, studies have considered the benefits these types of experiences specifically for urban community college students. It has been noted that “adolescents in urban settings rarely experience environments that enable states of presence and serenity” (Gabrielsen & Harper, 2018, pp.411-412). And yet, applying the practice of eco-therapy to community college students can address the multiple stressors researchers tell us many college student face. Those stressors may be related to academics or relationships (Ahern, & Norris, 2011), developing new coping strategies for managing stress (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012), or dealing with mental illness (Eisenberg, Goldrick-Rab, Lipson, & Broton, 2016). Researchers also note that people living in urban areas face additional stressors such as increased prevalence of specific mental health disorders, especially mood and anxiety disorders (Stephenson, 2011) and schizophrenia (Lederbogen, Haddad, & Meyer-Lindenberg, 2013); exposure to noise, toxins, and light (Lederbogen et al., 2013); violence-related stressors (Teitelman et al., 2010); anxiety about policing policies (Sewell, Jefferson, & Lee, 2016), as well dealing with the aftermath of disasters such as the attack on the World Trade Center (Adams & Boscarino, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to introduce how ecotherapy might address this increasing stress urban college students face. This article presents specific ecotherapy-based activities in an

urban community college setting in New York City, their results and recommendations for ways higher education faculty, administrators, and staff might integrate similar experiences.

Method

Participants

Via email and in-class announcements, students in a human services program at a midtown New York City community college were invited to participate in two ecotherapy-based activities. Students in four non-human services courses were also invited via in-class announcements. A total of 19 students participated in these two ecotherapy-based activities. Nine students ($n=9$) in an eco-art workshop and ten ($n=10$) in an animal-assisted therapy workshop. No students attended both workshops. While demographic information was not collected for this pilot study, participants were representative of the College's overall population. The population is primarily traditional age college students (ages 18-22), from Hispanic and Black/African-American ethnic backgrounds, from low-income households, and residents of the five boroughs of New York City.

Procedure

Two ecotherapy-based activities were presented to students on two different occasions. The activities selected were based on the background of the author and the opportunity to invite representatives from an animal-assisted therapy organization to campus.

Eco-art workshop. As a trained art therapist, the author ran this 90-minute eco-art workshop. The workshop was scheduled to be held in a local park, but due to inclement weather, it was held in a classroom on campus. Due to scheduling restraints, the workshop was not rescheduled for a different day. Providing an alternate date will be taken into consideration for future planning. The goals of the eco-art workshop were for students to learn about the two

emerging fields of eco-therapy and art therapy and for them to gain the experience of creating and reflecting on their own eco-artwork.

The workshop began with a 15-minute power-point presentation on the core principles of art therapy, the various populations that art therapists serve, and the benefits of this type of therapy. Next, students learned about the field of ecopsychology and how applied ecotherapy techniques are utilized for multiple benefits with a variety of populations. The presentation portion concluded with how these two separate fields merge into what is referred to as eco-art therapy. Student questions were answered. Many of the questions were related to the training requirements for professionals in the two fields.

Next, students were given a directive: *Create a visual representation of yourself using the provided art materials.* The art materials included feathers, seashells, glue, paint, leaves, pastels, sticks, nature magazines, twine, markers, and colored paper. Nature sounds were played in the background while the students used the allotted 45 minutes to complete their artwork at desks. Some students chose to sit in pairs or small groups, but each student created an independent project. Participants were asked to create a title for their piece of artwork. Students then had the opportunity to share their artwork verbally with the workshop participants if they chose to; all students shared to varying degrees.

Animal-assisted therapy workshop. A second eco-therapy-based activity was a 60-minute interactive workshop presented by a New York City organization that provides animal-assisted therapy in city healthcare facilities, libraries, and schools. The Executive Director and three therapy dog teams, who presented to the students, began by sharing the origin of the organization and the needs of the multiple populations it serves. Personal stories and experiences were shared by the presenters about clients they have worked with and the benefits

they have witnessed. Students engaged in dialogue throughout the presentation sharing stories about their own pets and asking questions about the therapy dogs. Some students were called on to participate in three role-playing activities with the therapy dogs so all participants could gain insight into what happens during an animal-assisted therapy session. Students had the opportunity to role play as a client or as the animal-assisted therapist. At the end of the workshop, all participants had the opportunity to openly interact with the four therapy dogs by holding, petting, brushing, or playing with them.

Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were developed by the author based on the goals of the workshops, and distributed at the end of each session by the author. The following was included on the questionnaire: (1) What was the title of your artwork, (2) Describe the process of creating your artwork, (3) Describe your collage, and (4) How was this overall experience for you? The goals of the animal-assisted therapy workshop were twofold. The first was for students to learn how animal-assisted therapy can be beneficial to multiple populations and to have the experience of interacting with therapy dogs. The animal-assisted therapy feedback form included the following questions: (1) What were your thoughts about the presentation? (2) What did you learn that can be applied to your major of study? (3) Additional comments you would like to share. Eighteen students completed the questionnaire. One participant had to leave early and did not complete the questionnaire.

Results

Student responses from both questionnaires were collected and underwent thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). All responses were read by the author and notes were made about the first impressions. Responses were re-read to identify common elements, color-coded, and frequency noted. Emergent themes were identified and once again reviewed to validate the groupings. Based on these preliminary findings, the responses can be grouped into three themes: (1) General satisfaction with experience, (2) Opportunity for self-expression, and (3) Awareness of stress-reduction.

General Satisfaction with Experience

Student feedback from the eco-art responses within the *general satisfaction with experience* theme includes reported benefits of participating in the activity such as having fun, meeting new people, or learning something new. For example, in response to the question, “How did you like this experience?” for the eco-art directive some of the responses included “The experience was great because I got the opportunity to meet new people,” and “I loved, loved, it!” In response to the question, “How was the process of creating your artwork?” feedback included, “It was good! I will like to do it sometime some more” and “It was fun!” Examples of the animal-assisted therapy workshop responses under this theme include “It was very informative, gentle, and educational. Highly recommended,” “It was really amazing to learn what they do for the people.,” “It was great, I love something new in my life.,” and “It was fun!” Another participant stated, “Hopefully they will come back soon!” The majority of student of responses fell under this theme.

Opportunity for Self-Expression

Responses under the *opportunity for self-expression* theme demonstrated the participant’s personal connection to reflection on the experience. For example, in response to the eco-art

question, “How did you like this experience?” responses in this category included “It was a way of expressing a few things about myself and it felt great.” In response to the process of creating the artwork, one participant wrote, “I took my time to create it, putting myself in the artwork.”

One particularly insightful response to “Describe your collage” is as follows:

My collage is a tree without leaves and a bleeding golden eye, because I feel people want to be perfect, but I have to get rid of the pain to look beautiful on the outside. The blue in the collage represents the rain and the ocean, which is somewhere I can feel at peace. The swirls and shells are because I love to dance and I love nature.

Examples of self-expression can also be seen through some of the artwork titles such as “Me” and “Lifeless Tree.”

Awareness of Stress-Reduction

Responses in the *awareness of stress reduction* category demonstrate a participant feeling less stress or more calm or peaceful. Examples of these eco-art responses include, “It was relaxing.”, “The process was calming and I felt peaceful.”, “The experience was really fun and helped me get rid of some stress.”, and “It was very informative and it made me feel so calm.” Stress-reduction can also be seen in one person’s artwork title, “Serenity.”

Discussion

The overall positive responses that were received from this pilot study suggest further exploration into the benefits of providing ecotherapy-based activities for urban community college students. Based on these initial findings, we can predict that urban community college students may discover ecotherapy-based activities to be beneficial in three areas: (1) General satisfaction with experience, (2) Opportunity for self-expression, and (3) Awareness of stress reduction.

General Satisfaction with Experience

Community college students are less likely than other full-time students to become involved in college activities outside of the classroom (Coley, 2000). Making social connections and being involved in activities on campus can be important factors for student success at community colleges (Schmid & Abell, 2003). Since participants in this pilot study reported positive outcomes, such as “meeting people” from these two ecotherapy based activities, they may be more likely to attend similar types of events in the future. Keeping students engaged and feeling part of a community is a vital challenge of community college’s faculty, staff, and administrators. Providing eco-therapy-based activities may be a way to help address this challenge.

Opportunity for Self-Expression

The self-expression theme included responses that provided individual insight into the process of creating the eco-art and the final art product. Additionally, some of these self-expressive responses included references to personal connections to nature. For example, one participant self-identified as the tree in her art and shared emotional connections between color, aspects of nature, and her feelings. Making a personal connection to nature speaks to the core of ecotherapy, which is to lessen the human-nature separation. This nature-based approach to self-expression has been described as includes “the basic concepts of expressive arts work and expands them to include and emphasize the human relationship with the more than human world” (Atkins & Snyder, 2018, p.116).

Incorporating opportunities at urban community colleges for student self-expression, especially expression that integrates nature connectedness, may prove beneficial for students. The term nature relatedness describes “individual levels of connectedness with the natural

world” (Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2009, p.718) and studies have found a positive correlation between an individual’s level of nature relatedness and subjective well-being (Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2011) and an individual’s level of nature relatedness as a predictor of happiness (Capaldi, Dopko, & Zelenski, 2014; Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014). Supporting or providing opportunities for students to explore their own connection to nature might provide similar benefits.

Awareness of Stress Reduction

Some of the self-reported responses did identify factors that are related to increased stress reduction. Stress reduction is a frequent benefit reported with spending time in nature and eco-therapy-based activities (Berto, 2014; Jiang, Chang, & Sullivan, 2014; Razani, et al., 2016). With college students’ stress levels on the rise, college administration and student services need to seek alternate ways to support the mental and emotional well-being of their students (Windhorst & Williams, 2016). Eco-therapy and eco-therapy-based activities may be a viable option.

Limitations

It is important to note that some individuals do not find enjoyment in natural environments or participating in eco-therapy-based activities. Others even have what is referred to as a nature phobia or biophobia, where individuals have fears related to natural environments or aspects of natural environments such as animals or weather (Davidson & Smith, 2003). No participants in these pilot studies however indicated this type of aversion.

Because the workshops were simply opportunities to introduce ecotherapy-based activities to urban community college students, another limitation of this pilot is a very small number of students participated. Future activities should include more student participants and

additional feedback on what they found beneficial about the ecotherapy-based activities and what they learned about themselves after participating in the activity should be collected. Thus, it will also be important to include questions that support reflective critical thinking on the questionnaires. Examples of these type of questions could be, *How can you apply what you have learned in this experience to your own life?* or *What would be an example of how you could use the information presented today when working with others?* These types of questions can help to enhance student thinking and also provide the opportunity for them to reflect more meaningfully on their own experience engaging in the eco-therapy-based activity.

Implications for Practice

Examining the potential benefits of offering eco-therapy-based activities at urban community colleges is a new area of inquiry. These preliminary eco-therapy-based activities provide promising results. College faculty, administration, and staff should consider offering these types of experiences on urban community college campuses to help support these students as they navigate the world of higher education. Further research is needed to evaluate potential benefits as well as the type of eco-therapy-based activities that are the most effective for student engagement, for college counseling centers, and for supporting learning outcomes.

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