

## **Compost and the Growth Mindset: A Pathway to Enrich Our Sense of Place**

**Zoë A. Nelsen**

Prescott College

Zoe.nelson@student.prescott.edu

**Abstract:** This personal narrative illustrates the role composting has played in the author's connection to place throughout her adult life, and informs her scholarship today. Over the past twenty-something years she lived in close to twenty different homes, and yet always found space and time to create a compost/planting pile. The outcome is that between her efforts, kitchen scraps, and dishwasher the soil gained fertility, and she too connected more deeply with each element. The essay proposes that home and community composting practices can inform our view of learning, shift educational paradigms, and help address the complex environmental and social concerns we face today.

**Keywords:** soil, compost, experiential education, growth mindset, place, regeneration

*Zoë A. Nelsen is a Ph.D. student in Sustainability Education at Prescott College. Her focus is on community resiliency, leadership, and education for sustainability. She currently works as an educational consultant in Southwest Colorado.  
Zoe.nelsen@student.prescott.edu*

Beneath sandstones cliffs I began to cultivate my relationship with soil and embarked upon a lifelong journey to connect with and care for the ground beneath my feet. In part it was therapeutic, the process of stepping into the compost pit with my shovel and bucket of kitchen waste transformed my connection to place. My technique over the years has been to dig a hole, dump my scraps, add additional organic material from the landscape, and then cover the hole with dirt. Each bucket and new hole conditioned and prepared the area for planting. The frequent turning, along with the evening dishwater helped to speed the process along.

A *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2006) embodies continued learning, and similar to the soil beneath our feet, regenerates, expands, and gives rise to new life. The relevancy of the growth mindset in the context of soil and reconnecting people to the land is supported by the idea that our actions make a difference to the health of the environment, and teaches us that we can be better stewards. Imagine if every institution of learning adopted the custom of building soil, and positioned the study and practice as a vital literacy requirement infused into all disciplines.

By coupling my experiences with compost to scholarship, I am transported to the heap near the apple trees or the house with the box turtles, and recognize my compost piles sprinkled across the southwest illustrate the significance of experiential and project-based learning (Orr, 2004; Sterling, 2001; The Cloud Institute, 2015). The house with the terraced landscape, where I lived with three others, reminds me that our personal curiosity and expertise has the potential to influence the collective, when provided outlets for expression.

Throughout my adult life a pattern of transience prevailed, so much so that over the past twenty-something years, I created more than a dozen of these compost/planting piles. However, my intent for the next twenty years is to plant myself and shift strategies for tending the soil, by letting the microbes to do more of the work. Similar to a forest floor, undisturbed land allows for microorganisms beneath the surface to build complex networks (personal communication, Glanzberg, 2015; Jackson, 2010; Ohlson, 2014). Today, the soil encourages me to act more like a forest, to settle and grow with the surrounding community.

Experiential education aims to promote connectedness, responsibility, and belonging (Dewey, 1997; Itin, 1999) and these conditions also help nurture one's own sense of place. In many respects we mirror our external environments (Berry, 2010; Gomez-Baggethun, Corbera, & Reyes-Garcia, 2013) and by actively participating in the formation we enhance the reach of our voice (Freire, 1993). The act of building soil links humans to the most important ally we have in food security, nutrition, carbon sequestration, flood control, etc. We – as a species – have the capacity to adapt environmental and cultural conditions, which will inevitably alter our patterns and daily practices. I cannot help to wonder what policy and industry shifts would take place if people across the globe focused their attention to the living soils around them.

The act of composting feels fundamental in partnering with the earth to promote health and well-being. It is a win-win scenario and can teach humans about limits to growth and methods for managing excess. Ongoing research demonstrates the undeniable importance of living soils as essential for life (Food and Agriculture of the United States, 2015; Jackson, 2010; Mann, 2008; Ohlson, 2014), and emerging awareness is mobilizing local, regional, and global initiatives to maintain the integrity of soil. My own experience with composting has served as a steady approach to connect with and care for my home landscape. It has taught me about patience and renewal, balance and nourishment, and perhaps most significantly promoted the belief that I can grow and change alongside the land that supports life.

No matter where I lived I found the space to dig, and committed to the process of composting, regardless if it was in a 2x2 corner near the university, above the empty concrete

pond, or often luckily in previous residents' garden areas. I believe we can remember how to read the world (Freire, 1993) , and to feel it (Abram, 2010) with the same discipline we have dedicated to the word, but it will take practice.

This close involvement with the process of decomposition linked to regeneration is etched in my memory, at cognitive and cellular levels. Similar to the memories made in the kitchens or bedrooms, the soil outside held my attention, engaged me physically and emotionally. Healing occurs when we plant our fingers in the Earth, and for me the consistent return to and gentle turning of the Earth, has helped me grasp my place in this world.

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