Cultivating Transdisciplinary Collaborations and Pedagogies in Sustainability Studies

Presented on Friday, February 27, 2015, at Indiana University of Pennsylvania by

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Workshop Purposes:

- Understand the goal (faculty collaboration for transdisciplinary sustainability education) and why that goal is important for colleges and universities.

- Explore both the challenges and the means to meeting that goal.

- Engage in collaborative work to transcend challenges and build upon current opportunities.

Note on images in this presentation.

Agenda:

- Session introduction (9:00-9:10)
- Individual written reflection (9:10-9:20)
- Presentation of the Sustainability Studies minor proposal (9:20-9:40)
- Overview of transdisciplinarity by Tina Lynn Evans (9:40-10:30)
- Break (10:30-10:40)
- Ground rules setting activity in groups (10:40-11:00)
- Group work on the following: 1) individual course or assignment development, 2) strategizing for collective professional development and building of common ground, or 3) brainstorming strategies for advancing Sustainability Studies at IUP (11:00-11:30)
- Groups report 2-3 highlights of their discussions (11:30-11:45)
- Closing comments, questions, and moving forward from here (11:45-12:00)

Outcomes to be Compiled and Shared with Attendees:

- Suggested ground rules for establishing common ground for IUP transdisciplinary efforts
- Compilation of ideas for collective professional development and building of common ground
- Brainstorming notes on advancing Sustainability Studies at IUP
- My PowerPoint slides

Opening Thoughts: Reflective Writing
Note: you will not be asked to share these notes with others.

1. Picture a typical university professor. Describe this professor's presence and what s/he is doing.

2. Picture a typical university researcher in action. What exactly is this person doing? What does it look like for this person to conduct research?

3. Picture a good student in action. What is this person doing?

4. Where does new knowledge come from? And what makes it valid?

5. If you were to work at your ideal institution, what would be the mission of that institution? And in what kinds of activities would you be engaged?

Purpose of this Exercise

My Institutional and Scholarly Work Relevant to Transdisciplinarity (1997-present)

- Educational Purposes Statement Task Force at Fort Lewis College
- Thematic Studies Program leadership and teaching at FLC
- FLC Education for Global Citizenship Program leadership and teaching
- FLC Integrated Learning Program leadership and teaching
- Co-development of the FLC Environmental Studies Program

- Faculty Senate Presidency
- First Chair of Environmental Studies at FLC
- Interdisciplinary Programs Task Force at FLC
- Ph.D. work in Sustainability Education at Prescott College
- *Occupy Education: Living and Learning Sustainability* (2012)
- Teaching and leadership in the B.A. in Sustainability Studies program at Colorado Mountain College: http://coloradomtn.edu/programs/sustainability_studies/

- Continued theoretical/practical inquiry, publishing, and presentations
- Program review lead for Sustainability Studies at CMC
- Continued course and program development and teaching

Methods of Inquiry for My Recently Published *Policy Futures in Education* Article on Transdisciplinarity

- Review of the theoretical and research literature internationally

- Self-reflexive analysis of my own experiences initiating and leading inter- and transdisciplinary education programs and projects

Much has been written about transdisciplinarity and its application to education and social reform … but little has been published on … exactly how faculty can best collaborate in service to transdisciplinary sustainability education.

Evans, T. L. (2015). Transdisciplinary Collaborations for Sustainability Education: Institutional and Intragroup Challenges and Opportunities. *Policy Futures in Education*, 15(1): 1-27.

Reflections on My Experience

The Good and Inspiring!
This work suits me because I:
- Am interested in everything!
- Am focused on meaningful work and right livelihood.
- Am committed to clear-eyed hope.
- Take a creative, integrative approach to my work and love learning.
- Love synthesizing concepts and making historical connections!
- Love being part of new endeavors!
- Believe in inclusive leadership for change.
- See value in applying knowledge to social change in communities.

The Bad and Disheartening...
This work has been a challenge for me because:
- In this time and place, even though the situation is urgent, this work is not for everyone.
- Sometimes I have been badly misinterpreted and misunderstood. I have learned that this is part of being a paradigm shifter, and that the fallout can be difficult to handle.
- I have had to learn to be patient in the midst of crisis and to loosen my attachment to outcomes.
- Grassroots change is challenging.

The Goal: Transdisciplinary Sustainability Education and Praxis

James Pitttman's conceptualization of "living sustainability":

The long-term equilibrium of health and integrity maintained dynamically within any individual system (organism, organization, ecosystem, community, etc.) through a diversity of relationships with other systems.

What is Praxis?

Theory

Praxis

Practice

Reflection
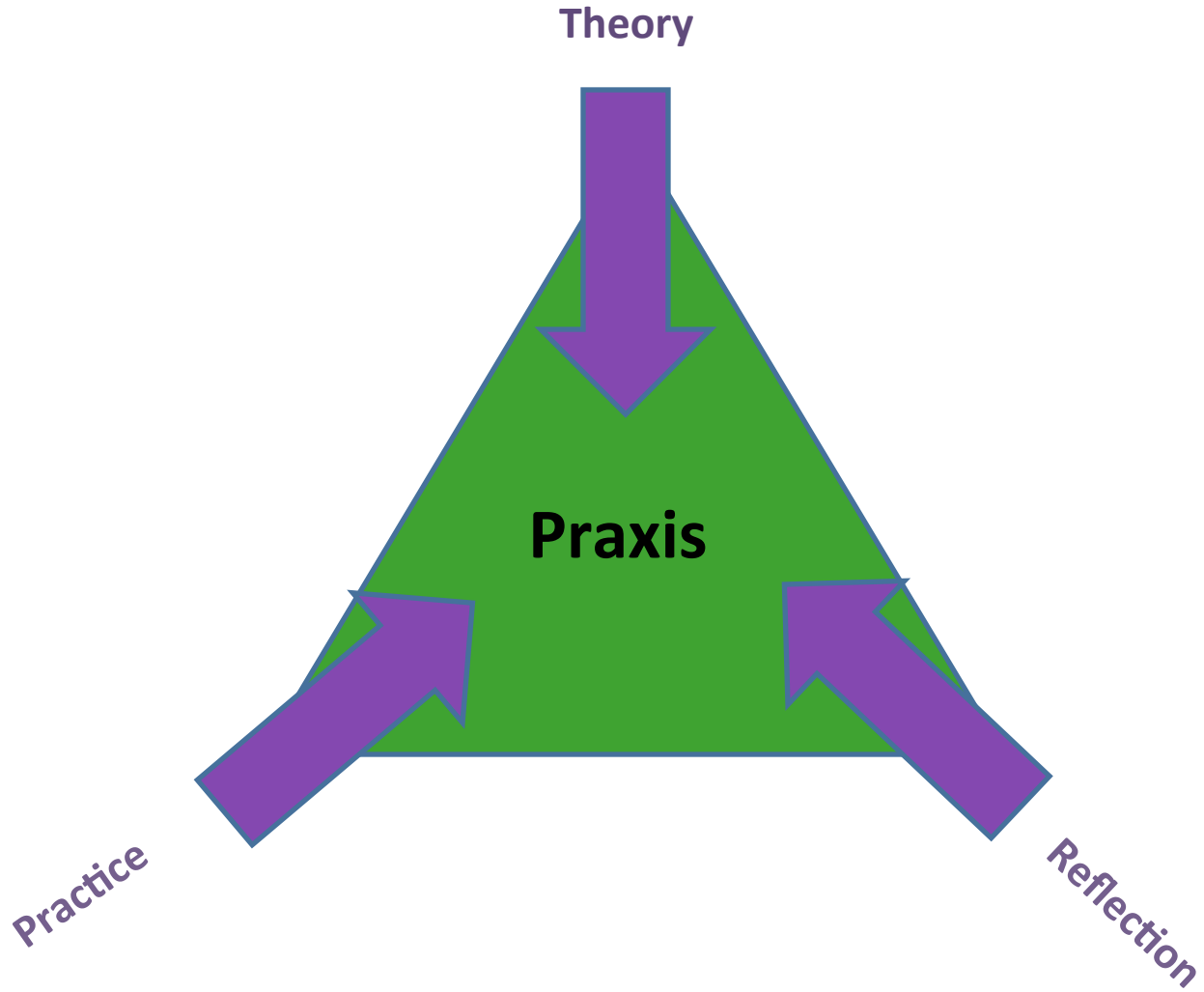
Purposes of Transdisciplinary Courses and Programs

- To engage students in academic work that both integrates and transcends disciplinary knowledge in an effort to both comprehend and directly address complex problems.

- To serve as a vehicle for students and faculty members to engage in actions that address complex social, ecological, technical, and other problems.

- To connect students, faculty members, the program and the university with the mission of service to society.

Transcriptionarity, Continued

As Compared to:

- Multidisciplinarity
- Interdisciplinarity

In comparison to graduates of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programs, graduates of transdisciplinary programs should **demonstrate heightened abilities to engage with and evaluate knowledge drawn from multiple contexts both in- and outside the academy and to participate effectively in problem solving work**. This difference derives from the highly integrative and explicitly purposeful orientation of transdisciplinary programs relative to multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programs.
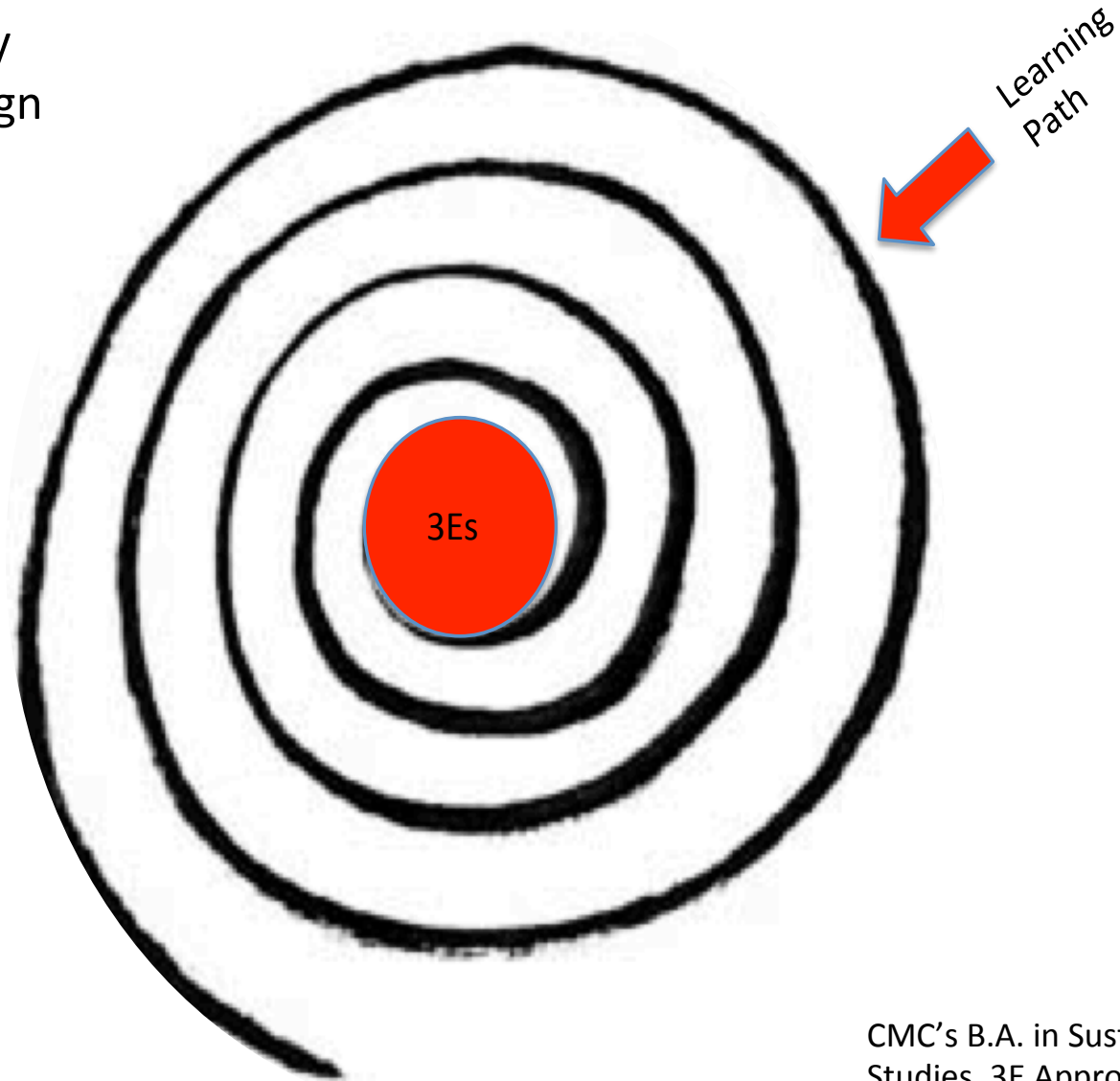
Why is Sustainability Studies transdisciplinary by its very nature?

- It's about social change and is therefore normative in nature.
- Knowledge and facts are far from the sole bases for decision making.
- Social power structures, values, priorities, and worldviews are often the biggest influencers for social change (or lack thereof).
- Emphasis on agency.

Transdisciplinarity is a process of contextualizing our academic work and making it relevant to and engaged in benefitting broad segments of society.

One Model for
Transdisciplinary
Curriculum Design

Learning
Path

3Es

CMC's B.A. in Sustainability
Studies, 3E Approach to
Sustainability (Environment,
Equity, Economy).

Institutional Barriers to Transdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration

The interplay of structure and power within higher education and the societies within which institutions are embedded produces considerable inertia, propelling institutions and faculty members alike along a seemingly **depoliticized trajectory of knowledge fragmentation and service to powerful economic interests**. *This inertia transects scales of activity: it is evident in the interests of faculty members, the priorities of departments, and the resource allocations of entire institutions.*

—Tina Evans

Higher education curriculum is a complicated cultural artifact *that reflects emergent epistemologies, intents, interests, and values driven by history, geopolitical ideology, nationalism, globalization, transnationalism, and national social engineering.*

—Eunsook Hyun

Institutional Barriers to Transdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration

Dominance of the Disciplines

- Rigid division of knowledge into discrete disciplines
- Hyper-specialization
- Administrative advantages: clear cut academic norms with regard to faculty preparation and evaluation; ease of management compared to more complex structures
- Institutional drive for competition within the well-defined paradigm of the research university rather than institutional differentiation
- Budget competition with regard to FTEs and out-of-department work
- Faculty preparation: socialization into disciplinary identity and loyalty → adherence to disciplinary norms

- The power of the status quo: some disciplines have been served well by current configurations of prestige and power

Institutional Barriers to Transdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration

Higher Ed Budgets in a Vise

- Institutional focus on maintaining basic operations together with traditional identity and purpose
- May exacerbate departmental competition → calling faculty members home, resisting the development and support of new programs
- Administrator career building in a time of privation → focus on efficiency and accountability rather than creativity
- New areas of teaching and work more vulnerable to cost cutting than established disciplines

Intensified by budgetary austerity, the Balkanization of the disciplines is occurring in the same historical moment when the sustainability crisis calls for transdisciplinary integration of knowledge.

—Tina Evans

Institutional Barriers to Transdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration

Threats to One's Career

- New faculty members faced with a choice: whether to risk one's career by engaging in transdisciplinary pursuits or to pursue well-established avenues for advancement within the bounds of the discipline
- Difficulties of learning more than one discipline
- Typical effect of transdisciplinary work on one's career is negative, with some important exceptions: positive effect for some whose careers are well underway; positive effects for those working in a quickly upcoming interdisciplinary area (Murdoch, 1992)
- Career suicide and career assassination

Perhaps most distressing for individual faculty members and destructive to the development of transdisciplinary sustainability education is the academic repression faculty members may face when they seek to bring the problems of the world into the classroom, especially when doing so leads to critique of powerful interests.

—Tina Evans

Institutional Barriers to Transdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration

The Hidden Curriculum (David Orr)

*When the institution **privileges highly specialized, abstract knowledge** over integrated and applied knowledge, students often internalize these same values. When student success in courses depends, not on critically examining complex socio-ecological problems and working toward mitigating their deleterious effects, but **on passively receiving information and returning it virtually unchanged to the professor on tests**, students may adhere to the cult of the expert and resign their own agency in a world that desperately needs their active and informed engagement. When **service to the community is something relegated to volunteerism taking place during the "free time" of students and faculty members**, students may come to see community work as secondary to personal advancement and professional success.*

—Tina Evans

Fostering Transdisciplinary Collaboration at the Institutional Level

- AASHE STARS program and the ACUPCC as multifaceted drivers for institutional change
- Inclusive, developmental leadership for transformation
- Top administration must acknowledge, support and create a "safe zone" for transdisciplinary integration (Hyun)
- Support for transdisciplinary professional development
- Special opportunities in teaching-focused institutions → need for reassigned time for transdisciplinary innovation
- Hiring of deep generalists

Transdisciplinary sustainability education can be initiated by the faculty, at times in response to student demand, but these efforts must soon meet with high level administrative support, or they will become vulnerable to sabotage by resource hungry departments.

—Tina Evans

Intragroup Barriers to Transdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration

- Experts entering unfamiliar terrain
- Going against lived experience and academic training
- The need to develop new commitments, conceptual frameworks, and skills: wide ranging content knowledge, empathic connections to diverse others and nature, foresight, critical self and social consciousness, community praxis
- Unwillingness to engage with values
- Rigid academic identities built upon mastery of a body of knowledge

Fostering Transdisciplinary Collaboration at the Intragroup Level

Educational Philosophy and Theory

- Explicit exploration of the concepts of cross-disciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity
- Explicit engagement with diverse epistemological frameworks
- Shaping the group's shared expectations, shared knowledge, and goals

Building Common Ground

- Avoiding use of specialized language
- Anticipating the outsider perspective
- Developing shared knowledge, assumptions, attitudes, and convictions (shared readings and/or films, discussions following speaker events, interdisciplinary guest lecturing, team teaching, sitting in on others' classes)
- Building transdisciplinary identity and competence

→ **Building trust and a group culture that includes collective validation of each member's contributions and perspectives**
→ **Developing your collective conceptual and theoretical core**

Fostering Transdisciplinary Collaboration at the Intragroup Level

Creating Safe Space

- Challenge: differences in perceived disciplinary efficacy → power gradient within the group
- Demystification of perceived power gradient through collective exploration of social inequities and of the processes of paradigm change (see Thomas Kuhn, 1962)

Hiring/Training Deep Generalists to Serve as "Connectors"

- Strong ability to take on others' perspectives
- Make connections across departments, among faculty, with administration, and in the community

Ground Rules for Group Communication

- "Discuss ideas, not the person"
- Adopting a stance of mutually assumed competence
- Importance of listening
- Anticipating the outsider perspective

Fostering Transdisciplinary Collaboration at the Intragroup Level

Engaging with Values

Because the ultimate purpose of sustainability education is social transformation, it is not, by its very nature, value-neutral. Any faculty collaboration for sustainability education must explicitly recognize this fact. Doing so can be especially challenging for faculty members who conceive of their work as the objective pursuit of value-neutral knowledge.

—Tina Evans

While values remain contested terrain, the work of faculty and students engaged in sustainability education can coalesce around widely agreed upon values while remaining open to diverse understandings and applications.

—Edmund O'Sullivan

Fostering Transdisciplinary Collaboration at the Intragroup Level

Exploring Generative Themes, Altering Academic Identities

Generative themes transect multiple realms of human existence and endeavor: economic, political, and cultural. Once engaged, they reveal many linkages among ideas and practices that converge in ideas and constructs highly important to learners in terms of potential praxis.

—Tina Evans

Sustainability is perhaps the ultimate generative theme, the study of which reveals a complex of interrelated ideas and practices that manifest in the pressing social contradictions of our time.

—Tina Evans

Personal Attributes and Stances that Foster Transdisciplinary Collaboration

- Humility
- Patience
- Willingness to live with ambiguity, recognizing that sustainability is a process and not an end
- Willingness to learn from others
- Personal identity that does not hinge on one's authority as an expert

We must recognize that all windows on knowledge and the world offer only partial views.

- Open-mindedness toward oneself and others
- An open orientation to a rapidly changing world
- Ability to accept advice or criticism
- Generosity
- Willingness to accept insights derived from other disciplines
- Willingness to be vulnerable
- Creativity
- Personal integrity
- Personal initiative
- Endurance and resilience in working with others
- Ability to take on others' perspectives

One Key Goal:

Building your shared vision for sustainability education.

This effort can evolve from building common ground, collective professional development, and program development.

CMC mission, vision, values, and learning outcomes:
http://coloradomtn.edu/programs/sustainability_studies/program_mission/

There is much at stake, and now is the time for academic leaders to commit their institutions to advancing what is nothing less than an evolutionary transformation in our collective consciousness.

——Michael Crow

It's all about relationships!

Relationships are key to sustainability itself and to your educational endeavor. Give relationships the attention they need to grow and thrive.

Further Information

- My Academia.edu site: http://coloradomtn.academia.edu/TinaEvans.

- My website: http://tinalynnevans.com/

- My book: ***Occupy Education: Living and Learning Sustainability*** (2012). Peter Lang.

Back Cover

Occupy Education is motivated by the sustainability crisis and energized by the drive for social justice that inspired the Occupy movement. Situated within the struggle for sustainability taking place amid looming resource shortages, climate change, economic instability, and ecological breakdown, the book is a timely contribution to community education and action. It opens a whole realm of integrated theory to educators and sustainability activists—and demonstrates how that theory can be moved into practice. *Occupy Education* is an excellent text for courses in sustainability studies, social philosophy, globalization, social justice, food system praxis, sustainability education, political economy, and environmental studies.

"Our minds, and education which shapes our minds, have been colonised with false categories of separation, fragmentation, competition, scarcity, and greed. We have to free our minds in order to free life on earth and all people from the threat of destruction and extinction. *Occupy Education* is an important book for our finding our way to an inclusive freedom, to Earth Democracy."

—VANDANA SHIVA, FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE NAVDANYA PROJECT; AUTHOR OF *EARTH DEMOCRACY* AND OTHER BOOKS; WINNER OF THE RIGHT LIVELIHOOD AWARD

"With the social and environmental fabric of our world wearing down, and the time in which to act rapidly dwindling, along comes a book that offers us a sense of grounded hope and the tools to educate ourselves for a sustainable future. In the timeless tradition of radically engaged scholarship, Tina Lynn Evans not only illuminates the nature of the crises in our midst, but more importantly casts our collective gaze toward the faint beacon of light that is emerging on the horizon of human resiliency and innovation."

—RANDALL AMSTER, GRADUATE CHAIR OF HUMANITIES, PRESCOTT COLLEGE

Tina Lynn Evans is Associate Professor of Sustainability Studies at Colorado Mountain College and a member of the advisory council for the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. She earned her Ph.D. in sustainability education from Prescott College, and is a founder and member of the advisory board for the *Journal of Sustainability Education* (JSE). She is also a contributor to *New Clear Vision*, and her NCV articles have been republished by other prominent news outlets such as *Truthout* and *Counterpunch*. She lives in both Steamboat Springs and Durango, Colorado, where she engages with students and community members in praxis toward sustainability-oriented social change.

GLOBAL STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Spine

22

OCCUPY education

EVANS

PETER LANG

Front Cover

OCCUPY
education
living and learning sustainability

Balance / Reciprocity

PERMACULTURE — EXTRACTION
"GARDEN CITIES" — SPRAWL
LOCALIZATION — DISCONNECTION FROM NATURE
LONG TERM THINKING — SHORT TERM THINKING
RESILIENCE — ECOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN
DIALOGUE — CONCENTRATION OF POWER
EMPATHY — HIERARCHY
RENEWABLES/RECYCLING — GROWTH ECONOMY
INTERDEPENDENCE — FRAGMENTATION
RESPECT FOR LIFE — MATERIALISM

giving back | taking

tina lynn evans

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Ground Rules Setting Activity:

Two Rules:

1.   Use positive statements describing what you want, not what you don't want.
2.   Avoid states of being.

And a Suggestion:

Encourage depth and collective exploration of gray areas.