

Using the Earth Charter as a thinking
tool and a talking point:
**Reflections on environmental
education courses**

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Introduction

Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, has been a 'hub' of environmental education, teaching and research in southern Africa since 1990 when the first Masters Degree in Environmental Education was established. In recent years, the Rhodes University Environmental Education and Sustainability Unit (RUEESU) has established an *Environmental Education, Ethics and Action research programme* which seeks to better understand the relationship between environmental education, environmental ethics and action. This research programme was established through the teaching of an environmental ethics module in the Masters Degree in Environmental Education (see Lotz-Sisitka, 2004) in which we collaborated with Bob Jickling from Lakehead University in Canada, and drew on the work of Johann Hattingh from the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa (among other resources).



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In this research and teaching programme we articulated a theoretical framework for teaching environmental ethics which is based on an ethics-based epistemology, environmental pragmatism, situated learning and deliberations in socio-ecological context (Lotz-Sisitka, 2004). In teaching this module we found that we had inadequate practical tools for generating thinking and research into environmental education, ethics and action. This led to the design of a workbook with activities to support indepth engagement with environmental ethics issues in education (Jickling, Lotz-Sisitka, O'Donoghue & Ogbuigwe, 2006). This booklet is based on, and it sets out a methodology for engaging with, environmental ethics questions in education, which guides all of the teaching and research activities associated with ethics in education in the RUEESU. Its main contention is that there are many different ways of working with ethics and that "ethics is a *process of inquiry and critical thinking*, it is not about 'preaching', 'indoctrinating', or 'inducting' learners into 'rules of behaviour' or 'codes of conduct'" (Jickling et al, 2006:2).

This methodology has influenced our work with the Earth Charter as we have been reluctant to view the Earth Charter as a fixed 'code of conduct' or a set of 'rules' to govern behaviour, and we have had to examine our pedagogical practice critically and carefully to avoid 'inducting' our students into adopting the Earth Charter. We have also had to work at avoiding indoctrinating our students with the values contained in the Earth Charter, as this would be unethical, and would amount to little more than social engineering (which South Africa rejected with its new democratic dispensation in 1994). We discuss this further in the context of two of our adult education courses in which we have adopted a process oriented, critical thinking approach to working with the Earth Charter over the past few years in accordance with this methodological framework. In both cases, the Earth Charter has been used in small but effective ways as a 'tool' to stimulate deeper and more careful thinking about environment and sustainability concerns, to promote critical thinking and to help make connections between global initiatives (such as the Earth Charter) and local environmental education practice.

Working with the Earth Charter in the Gold Fields Participatory Certificate Course

The Rhodes/Gold Fields Participatory Certificate Course in Environmental Education is a 10-month, part-time course for South African educators working in a range of settings, such as school teachers, community development officers, conservationists working at the interface of rural communities and conservation projects, and municipal managers needing to address public health and sanitation issues related to water provision, among others. As an introductory course in environmental education, it guides students firstly to investigate local and global environmental issues and risks and, secondly, to think critically about the educational orientations and methods currently being used to educate others about these concerns. Within the course curriculum, the assignments were developed to be as relevant as possible to each student's workplace, so that the knowledge, skills and values developed through the course have direct application to the organisation or community where the student works. The course orientation also emphasises active participation and the significance of history and context in educational processes. It thus encourages students to bring forward rather than deny their own cultural and political orientations, historical influences, values, ethics and priorities, so that they can be re-examined through (but also in relation to) the course deliberations.

Students meet in small regional tutorial groups every six to eight weeks to share ideas, discuss the course readings, and to receive support for the four assignments that make up the final Portfolio of Assessment. The second of these assignments requires students to begin by reviewing the policies and principles of their organisation in terms of environmental and educational practice. This is a valuable exercise for most students who might otherwise not get to take a critical look at their organisation's mission statement or vision, or the detailed policies that guide it. After this exercise, students are introduced to three different sets of international guiding principles of relevance to environmental education: The Tbilisi Principles of 1977, the NGO Forum Principles of 1992, and the Earth

Charter. All three sets of principles are included in the course materials and are discussed in a tutor-led session. By introducing *three* sets of principles, students are immediately confronted with the need to assess these, deliberate them in relation to each other and in relation to their own organization. This provides a mechanism for fostering *critical thinking* when working with the Earth Charter, and avoids 'induction' or 'indoctrination' as outlined earlier.

The follow-up assignment requires students to select one of these documents and consider it more carefully in relation to their workplace: "Discuss how these principles could be used to strengthen the work of your organization. Explain clearly **why** you believe they are significant to your work."

In the 2007 revision of the course we have loosened-up the focus of the assignment by asking the students to select any guidelines or principle documents which they consider significant in their work. This was done with the intention of placing more responsibility on students to seeking and selecting policies, principles and guidelines of most relevance to their own work instead of having to work with only three sets of principles that have been pre-selected by the course developers. The assignment now requires them to identify such a set of principles. **The following are the guiding questions posed to students:**

1. Which other guidelines (examples might be the Millennium Development Goals, Agenda 21, the Earth Charter, the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development implementation plan etc.) are relevant to environmental education in your work context? What do they say you should do?
2. Which ethical frameworks or values should apply to your work, in your view? Are there any tensions between these and the policies/guiding frameworks described earlier?

Here is an example from one student's assignment in which he begins to show evidence of making connections between the principles of the Earth Charter and his own work in a government

programme on forestry, alien plant clearing and community development:

In our work we teach our workers to respect earth and life on it in all its diversity, to secure the present resources for the future generations, and to protect and restore, where possible, the integrity of the ecosystem. All herbicides we use won't harm the environment or the lives of any species, which might come in contact with it, but only the plants it was designed to target. Best operating practices are set in place and are monitored very closely.

Reflections on working with the Earth Charter in this way suggest that, especially at the undergraduate level, it may be more beneficial to ask students to select only one of the Earth Charter principles and analyze it in terms of its relevance to their work/community context. By reducing the scope in this way, the depth of analysis might be increased and students will need to replace generalized comment with more specific analysis.

Working with the Earth Charter in the Advanced Certificate in Environmental Education course

The second environmental education course at Rhodes University in which the Earth Charter has been used is the Advanced Certificate in Environmental Education. This is a full qualification for educators already in possession of a three-year professional qualification (such as a teaching diploma, nature conservation diploma, BSc. Degree, etc.) wanting to specialize in environmental education. The course is offered part-time over two years with students having to attend 10 contact sessions of five days each. Between contact sessions, students work on a series of assignments and a small-scale action research project. Similar to the Rhodes / Gold Fields Participatory Course in EE, the curriculum of the Advanced Certificate Course is designed to be practice-based, responsive and relevant to each student's unique work context. The course orientation also emphasises the fostering of critical thinking skills, active participation and improved professional practice among environmental educators.

In this course, the Earth Charter is used *as an ethical lens for exploring contemporary issues* with students. A typical exam question at the end of year one of the Advanced Certificate Course, which requires students to reflect critically on the Earth Charter, is as follows:

Analyse one of two issues:

Agribusiness, Biotechnology and Food Security

OR

Landscape Change and Biodiversity Loss

- Identify how this issue manifests in your local environment, by giving an example of these problems in your local environment.
- Discuss the current status of the issue in your own country (this can include regional and national perspectives).
- Discuss the significance of this issue at an international level.
- Comment on the relevance of the 16 principles of the Earth Charter to the issues emerging from your discussion.

And from ACE (EE) Module 3:

Consider the principles and value orientations of the People's Earth Charter. How will these influence your choice of environmental education methods and approaches?

These assignment briefs show how the Earth Charter can be used as a reflective tool. It provides capital to critically reflect on contemporary issues, and pedagogical processes in education. The case shows how the course tutor avoided simply 'inducting' learners into the contents of the Earth Charter, or from 'indoctrinating' learners into the values of the Earth Charter, but rather expected learners to consider the ethical framework provided by the Earth Charter and its implications for engaging with environmental issues, and for teaching practices in environmental education.

Lessons learned and challenges

In the case of both courses described here, the curricula are very full and time is always a major limitation to discussions and to the extent of students' reading. Consequently, discussions seldom get to the depth that course developers and tutors anticipate. The Earth Charter alone can easily generate a day's worth of activities and discussions, but when it is one document among several, within a much wider course that also includes modules on teaching methods, educational materials, assessment, and so on, it becomes difficult to dedicate that time only for the Earth Charter.

However, as the Earth Charter covers such diverse aspects (from the knowledge systems and rights of indigenous peoples to principles of ecological integrity) that we, as course developers, are challenged to rethink how, in future courses, it might be possible to weave the Earth Charter like a strand through several other modules of the course, thereby deepening students' engagement with it in various ways at different stages of the course.

We are also considering in more depth how we might encourage our students to explore these dimensions of working with the Earth Charter: "What teaching orientation(s) might complement the ideas contained in the Earth Charter?" and "What teaching methods and activities could be relevant in your work context?" We think these might provide additionally useful starting points for considering environmental education, ethics and action. We also think that the Earth Charter could again be critically re-examined in the courses, this time from the perspective of policy formulation and implementation. These are some of our reflective ideas after our three years of experience of working with the Earth Charter in adult education courses.

As shown in these cases, we have, primarily, used the Earth Charter to foster *critical thinking* about environmental ethics questions as they relate to organizational strategy, environmental issues and pedagogy. We have identified the potential to further

this *critical thinking* in relation to policy analysis and teaching methods. In this sense, it has been used to encourage critical engagement with dominant ideas and ethical perspectives in the field of environmental education and in society in general, and to seek contextual relevance and opportunities for application in educational practice.

We have found this approach to the Earth Charter to be successful as we have managed to avoid 'induction' and 'indoctrination' approaches to working with codes of ethics such as those represented in the Earth Charter. In returning to our methodological framework provided by the *Environmental Education, Ethics and Action workbook*, we can still do more to consider how the Earth Charter might be used to strengthen environmental ethics *processes* such as ethical actions and practices.

References

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