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The Why and What of ESD

A Rationale for Earth Charter Education (and Naming Some of Its Difficulties)

NOEL PRESTON

Abstract

This article explores Earth Charter education as a form of values education that is integral to education for sustainable development. Initially, it outlines how Earth Charter education rests on an ecocentric worldview and a social analysis of ecojustice—terms that are defined and explained. Moving from this rationale, the article explores issues in implementing Earth Charter education in affluent societies and concludes that the contradiction between the values and vision of the Earth Charter and the culture of affluent societies must be confronted. Some pedagogical strategies for meeting this challenge are introduced.

Keywords: values education, ecocentrism, ecojustice, consumerism, pedagogy

Albert Einstein once reportedly said: ‘You can’t solve problems with the way of thinking that led to their creation’. Einstein’s opinion that new ways of thinking are necessary to problem solving clearly has an application to education for sustainability. However, my present interest is to identify his assumption about

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how modes of thinking relate to social change. Einstein certainly meant our thinking about problems must be scientific, but he was really implying something more, something that comes from the human capacity to reflect: our ability to think about our thinking, something philosophical. The potent idea in Einstein's assertion is that fundamental to human problems is how we see things and how we think about them, that is, our worldview and our real values.

As human beings (especially those who are professional educators) we need more than a program or policy direction or even behaviour modifications, if we are to build societies whose culture is centred on the sustainable development of life on Earth. We need a 'why' which points to a 'what'; we need 'reason', 'belief', 'commitment', a 'set of values' if we are to fashion and nurture development that is sustainable and just. The cultivation of such a process is essentially educational. This is why the UNESCO documents on the UN Decade for Sustainable Development (DESD) cite that a key objective of this decade is to incorporate values inherent to sustainability into education.

A TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY

The Earth Charter is a manifesto that informs an educational process of a kind to be promoted in the DESD. However, the methods for embedding the Earth Charter in a truly transformative pedagogy, and the rationale underpinning them, represent a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. This article focuses on the rationale, but because of the praxis style of education the Earth Charter requires, issues of pedagogy cannot be ignored.

The Earth Charter is a value-based document that presumes virtuous action by individuals, schools, corporations and nations, wherever humanity creates society. That virtuous action, in turn, presumes personal and collective formation, which emanates from who we really are: beings interconnected with all life forms. The virtues that support this formation include compassion, cooperativeness, intergenerational justice and stewardship. These are the underpinning values of the document, though it also uses value-laden terminology such as 'respect for life', 'democratic participation' and 'ecological integrity'.

AN ECOCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE

Although more than adherence to values is required, wherever an educational context aims to cultivate these virtues/values, congruence with the Earth Charter's vision is possible. That vision rests on a particular worldview through which those values may translate into policy, behaviours and action. The vision of the Earth Charter, implicitly and explicitly described in its many clauses, derives from an ecocentric understanding of reality and a social analysis that assumes that ecojustice is necessary for global sustainable development.

The ecocentric perspective challenges anthropocentric priorities that have dominated relationships in the community of life. Ecocentrism challenges a human-centred approach to ethics, economics, religion and culture. Ecocentrism lies behind the moral sentiment named by Albert Schweitzer as 'reverence for life'. This truth has been expressed in James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which suggests that the Earth is best understood as one organic body, a biosphere in which all species of beings, animal and nonanimal, contribute to the whole. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail almost 50 years ago Martin Luther King Jr. named the ethical implications of this perspective: We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all.

Ecojustice embraces a double-edged urgent challenge: to achieve environmental sustainability on the one hand and a fairer, more equitable distribution of resources and life opportunities in the human community on the other. The double-edged call of ecojustice is premised on the view that the human degradation of nature (of which climate change is but a symptom) is fundamentally linked to the social patterns and social institutions that oppress human beings. We cannot address one without the other. Poverty may result in ecological problems, just as violations of nature's biodiversity and the biosphere have exacerbated the extent of global poverty. So, ecojustice assumes that to address environmental degradation, we must also challenge the exploitation of the poor. In other words, one part of the world cannot live in an orgy of unrestrained consumption while the rest destroys its environment just to survive.

The implication of these assertions is that no simple and didactic educational approach will suffice. That implication may be an overstatement, for the powerful ally of authentic teaching and learning, guided by an ecocentric and ecojustice commitment, is the observable evidence of the planetary life systems and their struggle to survive. The truths of that evidence, for example, global warming, are unavoidable, even if they are inconvenient. That said, facts alone will not produce the changes envisaged in a pedagogy for sustainable development. There is more than a half-truth in the call of Pope John Paul II for 'ecological conversion'. The simple but complex challenge of Earth Charter education therefore is to facilitate encounters for teachers and learners that not only increase awareness (conscientisation) but also bring about sympathetic change, new ways of being in the world.

VALUES EDUCATION

It is often asserted that one's ethical framework is 'caught' rather than 'taught'. Values education, or cultivating the ethical life—a life of responsibility, wisdom and integrity—requires integration of multiple dimensions of the self: the intellect (the cognitive), the emotions (the affective), the will (the conative) and what has been called 'the inner life' or 'the life of the spirit'. So, education in ethics is a lifelong process, inevitably passing through different stages of development.

If values inherent to sustainable development are to be transmitted educationally, then attention to the research about values education is essential. Briefly, the

research suggests we learn our ethical behaviour in a variety of interlocking ways. For example, morality is learned experientially, in communal settings, through modelling by significant others in significant encounters. Sound values education respects the autonomy of the learner because a well-developed moral formation requires owning and acting on a value system that is internalised rather than merely adopted because it is prescribed by an external authority. For this very reason, a generalised and informal values education across the curriculum (or across communal relationships) is insufficient. Ethics must be accorded a discreet place if we are to promote ethical literacy. As with other disciplines, there is a need to learn and experience in a structured setting the language of ethics and modes of ethical decision making in order to facilitate the ethical conversation through which discovery and learning takes place.

Furthermore, just as we might claim that education is an inherently ethical enterprise (there is no such entity as value-free education), so ethics educators must be attentive to the ethos of educational institutions and organisations generally, for they subtly mould the ethical responses of the persons who inhabit them. In schools, for instance, not only does values education need to be embedded across the curriculum but into every aspect of a school's life. Indeed, in the instance of ethics education allied to the Earth Charter, this whole-of-school (or church or business) approach is imperative. This is the case because the Earth Charter's vision and values are so challenging to prevailing worldviews and ways of organising our collective lives. Because it is counter-hegemonic, values education informed by the Earth Charter must be especially sensitive to pedagogical challenges. Moreover, it is apparent that among the challenges is the need to express and promote the political implications of such values education.

EARTH CHARTER EDUCATION

Earth Charter education (ECE) has an extensive record in many nations and cultures in both formal and informal educational settings. The story of some of these programs has been recorded though the Earth Charter has been an informative and inspirational tool in many more educational contexts that have not been documented.

Various themes of social studies related to the content of the Earth Charter have produced substantial curricula such as environmental education, peace education and human rights education. More than 40 years of educational philosophy—often termed 'socially critical'—has supported these developments. The Brazilian scholar, Paulo Freire, is a 'father' of this movement which stresses the need for pedagogy to engage with social reality and to be an agent of social transformation and distributive justice.

In the Australian context, Brian Hoeppe (2007) observes that in affluent and Western societies, despite all the work done in the name of global education from a socially critical perspective, the world does not seem to have changed in the hope for direction. He rightly asks: 'What chance is there that ECE will help produce the peaceful, just and sustainable world envisaged by the Charter itself?'

ECE has some promising features, such as the exhaustive grassroots process by which it was drafted and its comprehensive ecojustice content. Therefore, it may be more successful than earlier initiatives. At the same time, ECE faces some substantial obstacles, one being the contradiction between Earth Charter principles and the commodified consumer culture within which most young people in wealthier countries are immersed. Another Australian educator, John Fien, acknowledges this difficult challenge: 'How can you bring this message to students who are growing up in a consumer-oriented, materialistic world, in which...identity is defined not by who you are but by what you wear, the house you live in, the car you drive, the holidays you take?' (Earth Charter International Secretariat 2005).

In the face of this dilemma, those who teach and promote ECE must continue to employ experiential strategies that combine the hopes of the young with the wisdom of a generation of elders, or strategies that build on unsettling experiences that may awaken idealism and knowledge about the world we live in, or those that immerse learners in wilderness prompting spiritual and ethical awakening. The goal must be to touch both 'heart and mind', facilitating a confrontation that reframes our passions, developing an ecocentric self-understanding and an enhanced understanding of connectedness leading to a sense of global citizenship.

Brian Hoeppe (2007) speculates about the key to breaking the cycle of cynicism, apathy and unenlightened self-interest, which too often defeats the goals of socially critical education. He suggests the key lies in individuals and societies coming to experience (through ECE) 'a different set of pleasures—the pleasures of conviviality and cooperation, of immersion in environments, of altruistic action, of "living lightly" on the land, of helping anonymous others on the other side of the globe to be safe and fulfilled (providing) a new ethical sense of self, of others and of being in the world'. Rather than being a painful imposition, life lived in harmony with the Earth Charter vision is fulfilling and enjoyable, allowing enlightened self-interest to prevail. In this way the challenge of ECE may be reframed as a possibility for the affluent.

A POSTSCRIPT FOR EDUCATORS

Teachers of ECE need more than the array of strategies and skills of experiential learning, which are at their disposal. Above all, they need to find a resource that sustains their faith in education for sustainable development and enables them to see beyond the deceptions of their surrounding culture and enables them to celebrate the limited impact of their teaching. They may be nourished by the many success stories that can be told; they will need alliances with transformative activists; they must be constantly grounded in an ecocentric philosophy of life that supports a social analysis of ecojustice. At the end of the day, teachers of ECE will find strength in the collegiality of like minds. But, more than a meeting of minds, what nurtures 'the heart and soul'? Teachers of ECE need what I can only describe as a spirituality that appropriately connects with the sustaining force of life itself releasing a sense of belonging to, or love of, all life, and thus confirms the vocation (the calling) that educators for sustainable development share.

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