

The Earth Charter as a Framework for
Multicultural Dialogue in Education

Melissa Elander

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Although it has been said many times in recent years, we truly live at a unique time in human history. The prodigious advancements in technology enable us to save lives, transcend national and geographic boundaries in business and communication, and determine the genetic makeup of even the smallest forms of life. Our knowledge is vast, as is our awareness of the potential to enact social and environmental change, both positive and negative. Human impact is everywhere; in fact, now that we have changed the climate, a term that encompasses the temperature and the atmosphere, our impact can be seen over every inch of the Earth. Globalization is bringing cultures closer together and simultaneously highlighting just how far apart they are. We also live at a time when meeting the most basic human needs and ethics towards others and the environment, as outlined in the UN Millennium Development Goals, are considered too far-reaching to be attainable. The juxtaposition of immense need and immense possibility is what makes this time so unique.

This time in human history is also unique for the nature of the problems the Earth faces. Problems no longer abide by state or regional boundaries, resulting in a lack of fit between the current systems and institutions and trans-boundary issues such as terrorism and pollution. The oceans and the atmosphere, those areas governed by none and exploited by all, have become “the tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 28). This unique time requires a new way of associating with these problems and developing solutions, which in turn requires a new way of associating with each other. By beginning at the level of citizen-to-citizen interaction I believe that concerted action by connected citizens will lead to global action.

There are two elements of an approach to building a “global partnership” aimed at mitigating and healing the environmental and social issues of today (Vilela 72). The first element is dialogue between people of many different backgrounds and cultures. The second element is a tool or framework that will serve as a basis upon which mutual understanding between global citizens can be built through the process of dialogue. The Earth Charter is just such a framework. In the article “The Earth Charter and the Quest for a More Sustainable and Peaceful World” Mirian Vilela points out that the charter is not a sequence of exact practices to abide by. Rather, Vilela says “the charter outlines the values and principles for a more just, sustainable and peaceful world and can also be seen as a declaration of interdependence and responsibility” (72).

I will describe the origin and principles of the Earth Charter, as well as the historical and modern concept of dialogue. In particular I will discuss how the Earth Charter, as a basis for intercultural dialogue, could foster understanding and respect. I will then discuss how the Earth Charter could be used as a tool for intercultural dialogue in education, and ways in which these dialogues have the potential to initiate global action. I will propose a structure for intercultural dialogue in institutions of higher education, and will discuss possible challenges.

Although the intention of the Earth Charter can be traced back to the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, the official document was not finalized until 2000. The process by which the Earth Charter came into being is a story unto itself, and an indication of the tremendous thought, consideration and compromise that the Earth Charter embodies. The intention of the Earth Charter was the recognition that the world is facing unfamiliar problems that will require a more

participatory and transboundary approach to problem solving; a new framework for understanding the diverse peoples of the world, as well as understanding the current situation of Earth. Although originally intended as a guide for states, the extensive and lengthy process produced a document that can serve as “a guide for an ethical life... a values framework for business or public policy... a covenant for caring for Earth” (Corcoran 16).

The Earth Charter is a product of significant scientific research, extensive collaboration at the level of nations, NGOs and citizens, and dialogue involving people from many segments of global society. In its entirety the process “involved thousands of individuals and hundreds of groups in various parts of the world” (Vilela and Corcoran 20-21). Civic participation was encouraged through the national Earth Charter committees that were established around the world, as well as through two extensive online dialogue forums. The first of these dialogues was held in English and included people from seventy-three countries, and the second was conducted in Spanish and Portuguese with participants from forty countries (Vilela and Corcoran 20).

With each word carefully and deliberately selected, the Earth Charter begins with a Preamble that broadly describes the issues facing this pivotal point in Earth’s history, and emphasizes the need for a sense of unified responsibility by stating “we are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world” (The Earth Charter). The four sections are Respect and Care for the Community of Life, Ecological Integrity, Social and Economic Justice, and Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace. The Earth Charter closes with A Way Forward,

which is a call to action and acceptance of responsibility for all individuals, organizations and states. In addition, this section states the need for dialogue “for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom” (The Earth Charter). I believe that intercultural dialogue on the values and principles of the Earth Charter can play a vital role in promoting understanding that will serve as the basis for novel ways of interacting with the world.

Dialogue is an interaction of awareness; dialogue requires awareness of our own thoughts, assumptions and judgments, and through our thoughtful interaction with others we nurture awareness and an understanding of the forces that underlie relationships. The process of dialogue does not focus on reaching a consensus or compromise, which are qualities of negotiation (Mitias and Al-Jasmi 151). Dialogue takes place face-to-face between willing participants, with participants of differing power status coming together as equals and participating equally, and this interaction takes place over an extended period of time (Schoem et al. 6-14). During the process participants are challenged to “see issues from another’s perspective and often to develop the ability to hold multiple and sometimes competing perspectives at the same time” (Schoem et al. 13). As this takes place the participants’ view of the world is broadened and one sees that there are alternative versions of reality. Importantly, although dialogue does not begin with a predetermined outcome, actions may be born of the increased awareness.

Intercultural dialogue takes place between people of different cultures. Culture can be thought of as the way in which people “feel, think, and act; that is, in the way they understand themselves and the world, realize their happiness, express their moral, aesthetic, religious, and political values, and establish particular relations as individuals

and groups in every sphere of practical living” (Mitias and Al-Jasmi 144). Culture is a fluid and vital phenomenon, with individuals ascribing to certain aspects of a culture stronger than other aspects. Intercultural dialogue may focus on the forces that dictate the actions and beliefs of the members of the culture, forces that are often invisible until a person has the opportunity to view their culture from a different perspective. This type of intergroup dialogue can lead to increased awareness, understanding and respect of people of cultures other than one’s own when participants meet as equals.

The element of intention in intercultural dialogue is similar to the spirit of intention of the Earth Charter; in both the intention is to create a new way of understanding the “other” and the world. Intentionality is a vital aspect to the approach of an interaction or problem because it implies being open to the possibility of altering ones worldview. The aim of intercultural dialogue may be, in the words of Ken Tsutsumibayashi, a “fusion of horizons...by which the interlocutors gradually come to achieve mutual understanding through the transformation or extension of their value criteria” (105). Through the process of building mutual understanding the participants develop a shared language; a language that is created by all participants and gives each a sense of ownership and inclusion (Cayer 178). Intercultural understanding is a process that takes place in incremental shifts leading to eventual action as a result of expanded understanding, and has all the more potential when it is based on shared meaning.

The Earth Charter is an effective framework for intercultural dialogue due to the emphasis on claiming responsibility for our fellow citizens, the global community and all forms of life on Earth (Earth Charter). It places as a starting point what we all have in common, that is, our dependence on the earth and the resources it provides. The values

contained in the Earth Charter, in particular the Preamble, are specific yet non-prescriptive; they provide the space for individuals to creatively adapt them to personal action and beliefs. According to Vilela, the Earth Charter is a “guideline for promoting a culture for peace and non-violence, as it offers an integrated value framework” (74).

Dialogue on the “value framework” of the Earth Charter will allow participants to experience how different cultural identities interpret the values and the concept of sustainable development, thereby providing a structure within which to increase cultural awareness.

The aspect of identity is very important when using the Earth Charter as a framework for intercultural dialogue. Identity can be defined as a set of characteristics or membership to certain groups within a culture or society (Kardia and Sevig 248). This is an important aspect because in order for participants to develop an understanding of culture there needs to be awareness of how much of the content that is being shared around the values of the Earth Charter is representative of the culture or of the character of the individual. In other words, values both cultural and individual, that are not as yet conscious, can become so when seen from the perspective of another culture, through the process of dialogue. Identity is also important because understanding another’s worldview requires one to expand their own identity to allow for multiple truths to exist. Through the process of dialogue, whether intercultural or not, we hope to make conscious the beliefs that we hold to be truths. In exploring our own relationship with these truths and how they define our worldview we may gain perspective on the importance of beliefs in defining the identity of others. This process may require a person to loosen their hold on a personal or group belief that has been held as truth.

For example, Principle 11 reads as follows: “affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity” (The Earth Charter). This principle stands contrary to some cultures of the world in which gender equality is not recognized. Dialogue on this principle does not involve negotiating or reasoning a change in the culture; the principles should not be viewed as a single and uniform worldview to be adopted by all. Rather, the principles are a tool to recognize a person’s own subjectivity. When an awareness of our subjectivity is gained through the process of dialogue, participants have a greater chance of understanding that an alternative truth exists.

The dialogue could also discuss ways in which the principle applies to the different cultures, and the reasons underlying the views held by a culture. The ultimate aim of examining the cultural views of a society through the lens of the Earth Charter is a subtle yet fundamental shift in how one thinks about cultures and peoples of the world. From this shift comes a revision in how we approach the issues facing the world, in a sense a paradigm shift arises from the collectivity of many small shifts. Mitias and Al-Jasmi refer to these shifts as “events” that happen within a person’s mind and unavoidably bring about action (149). Referring in general to a student engaged in dialogue the authors say “the truth she grasps in the process of the dialogue is formed and grasped by her own mind; it is integrated in the very structure of her thinking mechanism” (149).

The two paths for achieving a state of cultural understanding and recognition through dialogue on the Earth Charter are through an emphasis on the similarities between cultural interpretations and an emphasis on the differences between cultures. If

the structure of intercultural dialogue is such that the participants only focus on the values that they share, they risk undervaluing the diversity between cultures (Nadler 29). This can lead to a false sense of cultural homogeneity and essentially a false bottom from which to address global issues. An alternative perspective involves participants entering into dialogue with “a clear and demarcated ingroup identity” (Nadler 29). Nadler goes on to say that with this as a basis the participants achieve a more meaningful dialogue (29).

Understanding another’s identity within the framework of the Earth Charter in a way is a compromise in focus. This framework begins with the notion that although people differ in culture, we share a common overarching set of values. If dialogue then moves into inquiring about such questions as; how do I interpret the values of the Earth Charter; to what degree is my own interpretation a product of the views of my culture; are there elements of the values in the Earth Charter that I or my culture might object to; are there assumptions within the principles; what might be the repercussions of living by the principles; how accurately do the values of the Earth Charter match with the values of my own culture. These questions may highlight cultural differences but will lead to an understanding of the diversity of views that can exist in even a small group.

Intercultural dialogue on the values contained within the principles of the Earth Charter is an ambitious and necessary project. Importantly, the structures are already in place to begin this dialogue; schools from primary level through universities. Educational dialogue on the values in the Earth Charter offers a way for students to practice the values and principles in the Earth Charter. Educational systems are the ideal venue for this dialogue because they offer a way to include a large segment of the population in the dialogue. Given that culture “exists in the hearts and souls” of all

people, it follows that intercultural dialogue should take place on the most inclusive scale possible (Mitias and Al-Jasmi 146). Incorporation into educational systems would also enable intercultural dialogue to continue for an extended period of time, which is an important component of developing an understanding through dialogue.

In a sense, the practice of dialogue can be thought of as the Earth Charter put into action; both are inclusive and conscientious, and both recognize that action arises out of increased awareness. I envision this taking place at all levels of education, but in the most structured way at institutions of higher education. Drawing on the work of Mitias and Al-Jasmi who state that multicultural dialogue “should first take place at home”, dialogue will begin with students at educational institutions within as opposed to between countries (156). The authors assert that for effective intercultural dialogue to take place citizens need first to identify, and second to invite into dialogue the cultures within a nation’s borders. After all, how can global intercultural dialogue succeed if it is not built upon a strong foundation of intercultural dialogue within states (156)?

Primary schools could incorporate the principles of the Earth Charter through collaborative art, theater or language projects that would lead to dialogue at the level appropriate for the age. An innovative project in the Balearic Islands of Spain encouraged teachers to use the Earth Charter in curriculums for children as young as three years old, while older students sought to represent the principles through photography (Ramis 145). Students could formulate or be given questions related to how their culture might interpret the principles of the Earth Charter and prepare a presentation of their interpretations. This presentation could be visual, such as photography or

paintings, or literary, and could be presented to different groups of students within and between countries.

Within institutions of higher education, dialogue and activities on the Earth Charter could be organized into a structured course taking place over one or two semesters. These courses will first take place with students enrolled in one institution, and later expand to exchange programs beginning within nations and even internationally. The aim of these courses would be to influence the multicultural understanding of the political, cultural and environmental leaders of the future. This goal is parallel with the aim of higher education in general, and according to Gomez this depends “on both a diversity of ideas and the freedom to test their veracity” (13). The courses could be structured similarly to current semester exchange programs, but in this case students would engage in a course on extended dialogue on the Earth Charter.

Within this framework, the class would begin by developing an understanding of dialogue as a unique type of interaction that involves intent listening to others and ourselves. In addition, the classes would focus on the history and current applications of dialogue. Another very important aspect of the beginning stages of the course is for the class to learn about and practice group interactions that are conducive to dialogue. According to Singh, this requires “deliberate effort to create and maintain relations between participants in order to bring about relationship bonds, such as respect, trust and concern” (221). These “relationship bonds” will happen partly through learning about dialogue, but will also happen through planned activities involving art or other experiences that create a shared experience within the group. Bonds could also develop

by learning about the origin and intention of the Earth Charter, in which the values of dialogue are inherent.

The University of California Irvine Difficult Dialogues project entitled *Imagining the Future*, while not based on the Earth Charter, offers an example of extended intercultural dialogue taking place within a university. This initiative could easily be adapted to incorporate the Earth Charter. *Imagining the Future* includes three courses, each a semester long, on religious and cultural conflict and dialogue. The three courses are “*Imagining the Future: Israelis and Palestinians in the 21st Century*”, “*Difficult Religious Dialogue*”, and “*The Politics of Difference*” (Gómez 13). There are many examples in which the Earth Charter is included in classes on sustainability, literature, social justice, and environmental studies, and I propose that classes such as these be complemented by a voluntary single or multi-semester class in which dialogue is practiced.

Participants of intercultural dialogue will bring to the table the various cultural, racial, or gender power asymmetries and stereotypes that are reflected in the world today. “Since fora of discussion are likely to reflect the power relations of society, in order for fora within a school, for instance, to be just and fair they must reflect the many voices and concerns of the different groups on an equal basis” (Singh 223). These should not be avoided or glossed over, as this could derail the entire process. Rather, certain behavioral guidelines should be described and power relations acknowledged during the initial stages of the dialogue. The mediators should stress the importance of suspending judgment, respect for the opinions of others, and being conscious of our thought process (Singh 220). A primary prerequisite for the dialogue is the willingness to listen to others,

as opposed to reaching a consensus or debate. The dialogue could begin with discussion of the modes of behavior, explanation of their importance, and modification to what the group feels is reasonable. For example, the group could discuss whether to adopt confidentiality, a discussion that may lead into the qualities of group interaction that make participants feel safe to share.

During these dialogues, it is also important that students do not assume that the perspectives that they hear are representative voices of the whole culture. In other words, that the voice of one person is not representative of the whole. In addition, one should not be expected to speak on behalf of their culture. This leads to the dicey issue of how to structure the classes in terms of numbers of students that may hold different perspectives. For example, DePalma describes the experience of multicultural dialogue on racial issues in North America, in which the single African American student was silent. The student later explained that her silence was due to the fact that she was alone, and that she had experienced frustration at wanting to voice an alternative perspective but feeling insecure in her solitary voice (775). This represents an important aspect that should not be overlooked in these dialogues. Consideration will have to be given to making sure that students do not represent the sole voice of their culture in the dialogue. This is not to suggest that cultural representation needs to be equal for effective dialogue to take place, but rather that there is a risk of solitary voices not being heard.

Teachers need to be sensitive to the dynamics within the dialogue group and not just cultural dynamics but also peer. Teachers need to create an environment where each participant feels able to speak and listen openly. In order to do this I believe that teachers should engage in dialogue training sessions in which they practice and gain experience in

mediating dialogue. In addition, during the extended dialogue courses students could have the option to step into the role of mediator.

In high school, and particularly university, students could dialogue using scenarios that offer alternative versions of the future with varying degrees of sustainable development. Scenarios are a unique method for envisioning the future in which the current situation and trends are analyzed and alternative versions of the future created. Students could then examine what the future would look like without a global set of principles and scenarios of the future where citizens and cultures practice the principles of the Earth Charter to varying degrees and in different ways. Scenarios could incorporate sustainable development and environmental protection, peace, and poverty. Scenarios could also be expanded to design a hypothetical new world order (Gómez 13).

By engaging in an extended multicultural dialogue students will gain a greater understanding of the diversity of cultural views relating to the ethical values contained in the Earth Charter. Students will also have the opportunity to further their understanding of their own views. Expressing and articulating ones view to a group, effectively articulating views in such a way to make them understandable to others, can deepen the understanding of the origin and meaning of ones own view. In addition, responding to questions and hearing ones view reflected through other people will further clarify a position.

Dialogue on the Earth Charter will alone not lead to peace and harmonious resolution of the issues of today; rather, the intercultural understanding that develops through dialogue is conducive to peace when structural changes take place in the interactions of states. Of the understanding that is created through intercultural dialogue,

Singh says “when persons from a variety of cultural backgrounds understand each other, it is more likely that they can act together in harmony on projects of mutual interest” (Singh 217). The crux of the issues faced by the world at this time is that they cannot be solved by either civil society or national governments alone. Rather, addressing the social and environmental issues requires concerted action on both levels, with particular imperative placed on action on the level of civil society.

In writing on the potential of action on the level of civil society, Saunders writes that people “come together to pursue and protect what is valuable to them; it is there that they discover the power that emerges from acting in covenant with other citizens who value comparable goals” (22). The relationships that form during intercultural dialogue on the Earth Charter will become the cement upon which peace and positive change take place. Drawing on the work of Green Cross International, dialogue represents a way to redefine political practices of today. This entails a shift away from a unilateral and power-centric approach to conflict and environmental issues, to one based on “cooperation and ways to break through deadlocks by promoting just and long-term real-world solutions (Likhotal 33).

The intention in embarking on dialogue on the Earth Charter suggests a concern not only for the Earth our children will inhabit, but also the Earth that all the children of the world will inhabit. Expanding our understanding of Earth’s environment and the many cultures that call Earth home will be a lengthy and difficult process given the perceived depths of cultural differences. Manuel N. Gómez reminds us, however, that “growth is fundamentally a disruptive process. From the new shoots that displace soil as they grow towards sunlight, to the replacement of old paradigms, anything that grows

affects its environment” (16). The shifts in how a person thinks about other cultures and his or her responsibility for the Earth’s problems that take place will become global shifts in perspective when dialogue is conducted on the unifying theme of the Earth Charter. The understanding that is created through educational dialogue on the Earth Charter will serve as the foundation for a sustainable future.

Melissa Elander received a B.Sc. in Biology from Plymouth State University in New Hampshire, U.S.A. She is currently living in Costa Rica and pursuing a M.A. in Natural Resources and Sustainable Development at the University for Peace. She can be reached for questions or comments at melissa_elande@yahoo.com.

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