

# The Heart of the Matter: Infusing Sustainability Values in Education

## Experiences of ESD with the Earth Charter



Celebrating the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development



United Nations  
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UNESCO Chair on Education  
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# Beyond Cognitive Learning: Facilitating a Reconnection between the Community and Nature, The University of Granada, Spain

Alfonso Fernández Herrería

*"I paused to take in the breathtaking landscape surrounding me, and encountered a divine creation of Mother Nature: a mesmerizing tree that enchanted me to stay. When I reached out to touch the tree's dazzling wood, I felt something profound jolt through my entire body. I closed my eyes while caressing the majestic wood and immediately felt at ease. A combination of the fresh mountain air, natural floral aromas and recognizing the simplistic connection between humans and nature brought me into a state of harmony. This tree has the capacity to provide so much for the forest; shelter, companionship and beauty"* (student from the science department, University of Granada during his first experience with the Earth Charter).



## Introduction

The Earth Charter (EC) has as its central premise that we are not only one human family, but part of a community of life on Earth, our home, with a common destiny, which is to live in interdependence, interconnection, and universal responsibility. This can be fulfilled through the ethics of care: caring for ourselves, each other, and the planet. But by only understanding this, we have not truly entered the educational field because the mere knowledge itself is ambiguous. Knowing something does not necessarily lead me to a practice consistent with that knowledge. Thus, why do most institutions utilize curricula based primarily on cognitive approaches? True education cannot exist without engaging students emotionally and, above all, fostering action with the possibility of realizing these values. This is where the ambiguity ends.

Therefore, the key question at the foundation of the educational experiences that are outlined below is, "What can we do to feel part of the community of life and act accordingly?"

"How can we get to have the experience of interconnectedness, feeling that we are another fiber (the ethical fiber, which is care) in the complex fabric of the community of life?" Knowing this is not enough; we need to go to the root; we need to make the leap to a global empathic consciousness in less than a generation. We need people to experientially learn that biophilic connection to respond to serious global problems.

The education system possesses two serious problems among various smaller issues, one being the absence of an integral educational perspective. Thus, Hargreaves (2003) elaborates on the necessity of "deepening" educational change; education has focused on a cognitive learning approach, neglecting the other "intelligences" (social, ecological, and emotional intelligence from Goleman; the "multiple intelligences" of Gardner, such as visuospatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, and naturalistic). The other shortcoming of the education system is the need to open schools to the community, bringing this approach to the schools so they will join the struggle if significant changes are truly the intention. Schools cannot remain isolated from their community and their environment.

As a result, we have chosen to present specific examples from a group of faculty members of the education department of the University of Granada that have utilized the Earth Charter as a guiding framework. A common goal between the Earth Charter and the University of Granada is to carry out the development of these additional intelligences, such as emotional, social, ecological, proposed by Goleman, as well as spiritual components. We have also used the eco-education practices established by the Center for Eco-literacy, co-founded by F. Capra.

Additionally, we have raised spiritual intelligence in the classroom, and instead of speaking of eco-education, we speak of eco-pedagogy and the pedagogy of care with its triple dimension of care for oneself, others, and

nature (Fernández and López, 2010). We conceive spiritual intelligence as L. Boff describes the concept as “the attitude by which human beings feel linked to everything” (Boff, 2001, 90). This is to say that it is the experience of connection, interdependence, rootedness with life, with nature, with others, and with our deepest identity. This communion with the community of life is what we consider to be the central experience of the ethics of care and the pedagogy of care, and it is the concern that is at the heart of all the experiences to be presented. Spirituality understood as such is not then explicit in specific Earth Charter texts, but it is implicitly found throughout the Charter.

The pedagogy of care should have as its primary objective the learning of this essential experience: our reconnection and interdependence with the community of life. Today we live disconnected from ourselves, others, and nature. We have lost our points of reference and so we live broken inside and distraught. This spiritual crisis has evolved into an ecological crisis, a multifaceted crisis at the civilization level that is also an ethical crisis. Because of this, we have become ill in many ways, individually and socially. These illnesses stem from the lack of a sense of life. Many people feel lost and they fall into states of relativism, cynicism, apathy, and individualism.

## Context

The Faculty of Education of the University of Granada offers four undergraduate programmes: Childhood Education; Primary Education; Pedagogy; and Social Education. It also offers several Masters and participates in others. Further, it has several doctoral programmes, with more than a dozen subsidized research groups. With a staff of over 320 teachers organized in 10 departments and more than 5,000 students, open all day from 8 to 21:30, with more than 60 academic activities including meetings, workshops, and conferences, it has an organizational, spatial, and temporal complexity that prevents it from undertaking a project that could bring major changes to the dynamics of the Faculty. However, this context encompasses a great depth and enormous quantity of topics and areas of research.

## Implementation

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The two examples set forth below have in common that they attempt to produce an experiential learning experience of connection to nature with an impact on emotional and spiritual dimensions. This is the goal. Although these have been published (see reference below), every year we repeat these exercises, which has allowed us to complement not only the theoretical framework but the activities we do as well, but in essence, they remain the same.

### **1. Development of the Sensory Awareness of Nature (Fernández and López, 2007).**

After explaining the Earth Charter, the educational objective is established: a change in perspective, in seeing, that leads us to reconnect with nature. Then, the characteristics of the practice are discussed and clarified. Students are asked to spend a weekend outside of the city and spend time in nature observing. But do we really see?

An individual's outlook is conditioned by an entire conceptual world, by language, past experiences, emotional baggage, automatic and habitual behaviors, hurries, memories, and images that function as filters that interpose themselves between us and what we see, making what we see not reality but instead a filtered version of reality.

The achievement of sensory awareness implies an interior change that will allow us to truly see. Sensory awareness is not an intellectual awareness, but rather sight that is derived from the silence of the mind, speech, and memories; sensory awareness is not concentration, with the focus on one's mind on a single thing, but rather an attention that excludes nothing. It is the flow of attention to the experience that one is having, permitting it to be what it is, without assessing or judging it as these would not imply a silent mind. When a person fully employs this attention on all senses and its internal effect on us, that we are mere observers, it allows a flourishing of the senses that is sensitivity in which all the senses are completely awake. This leads to a condition of high vulnerability in which there is an extraordinary feeling of beauty, of energy and passion, of awe and reverence in the face of nature.

This perspective breaks stereotypical perceptual habits that bog our sensory awareness down and impoverish it. When one can see with a consciousness bathed in nothingness the experience can never be forgotten. It is akin to having the pure perspective of a child who sees the world for the first time. This is seeing truly and explains how these texts below can be written (the report is written after the experience).

*"I feel complete, at ease and relaxed with a clear mind. I look into the sky through the tree branches. I close my eyes and listen and smell the sound and aroma of nature; it is fantastic."*

*"When I opened my eyes I felt internally at peace, and I even felt a bit ashamed that I had not experienced such a state of tranquility before. Then I observed everything that surrounded me in a different manner. I was amazed by the beauty."*

*"...I felt so comfortable in there that I did not want to leave; I could have stayed there forever, feeling free and as one with nature. I felt as if the tree was my best friend...how happy I felt."*

*"I have walked on numerous beaches and I felt as if this was the first..."*

*"I couldn't absorb the abundance of beauty surrounding me and I began to cry, but my tears were tears of joy. I wish I could be so simple-hearted, like I am in this instant, and fill myself with the harmony surrounding me at this very moment... it is then when I realize that I am Earth that walks and that I am part of everything that surrounds me, that I must join with every part of nature because it is what I am made of. I have learned a valuable lesson, but do I have the capacity to maintain it?"*

*"We should be more considerate of our planet and change our actions; the experience was worthwhile. Now I see the world in a different way. It makes us feel, if only for a few moments, that we are brothers and sisters of everything that surrounds us."*

2. An Encounter With the Archetype (K. Jung) of Mother Nature: A Guided Meditation through relaxation and imagination directed as a form of meditation

After the study of the Earth Charter's principles and values and the justification of the necessity to enrich intellectual learning with emotional and experiential components, the following practice is executed in the following sequence:

1. Profound Relaxation: A guided relaxation accompanied by appropriate background music (duration: twenty minutes).

2. Guided Imagination:

a) The ideal resting place once found

b) Encounter the archetype (Jung) of Mother Earth.

In this state of deep relaxation, the guided imagination begins with the "creation of an ideal place of rest" with the following instructions:

*"Imagine yourself in a beautiful natural environment ... It can be anywhere that appeals to you: a forest, a meadow, a beach, a mountain ... but where you should feel well and be at peace ... Explore this environment, awakening your senses fully (visual details, sounds, smells, temperature, landscape, animal life ...) ."*

To continue, an instructor reads the following text to facilitate an encounter with the Mother Earth archetype:

*"Now a woman appears from a nearby path. Take in her appearance and observe her characteristics: how she is dressed, her face and her gaze. She is at your side now. She represents Mother Nature and is the incarnation of planet Earth. Observe her, listen to what she says to you, ask her how she feels. Now you can now feel what she feels. You can put yourself in her place... you intensely experience how Mother Earth feels... you are her. How do you find*

*yourself...how do you feel... Now return to being yourself...now tell this woman what you desire...and then bid her farewell." (Own text)*

After a few minutes, release them from the relaxation by counting from one to ten. The total time for this activity is approximately 25 minutes. Afterwards, ask them to, in silence, write a personal reflection of the experience. Below are several responses from various students:

*"I enjoyed Mother Nature's presence; she made me feel peaceful but the moment she left I sensed a feeling of sadness wash over my entire body, something I had never felt before with anyone who I had known for such a short period of time. It was a strange situation."*

*"(...)  
From the top of the large dune a brunette, tall, dressed in white and wrapped in a bright light appears. Upon touching my shoulder a strange thing happened, suddenly I could feel everything that this woman could feel; and the truth is I could feel pain and sadness; terrible images began to appear in my mind, every natural landscape that I could remember began to disappear (...) After coming back, one message remained clear to me, that I have to take care of my environment if I want it to endure."*

*"(...) When I saw the woman arrive (...) I asked her how she was and she told me that she was doing very badly, almost dead, that we humans were to blame and she told me that I had to help her to survive. When she hugged me I could feel and see everything that she was experiencing and suffering; I couldn't imagine such despair. I wanted to scream and I started to cry. When we stopped hugging I told her she could count on me and that I would help to make everything better. The Earth is in danger and we live on her; if we don't help her to survive, all humanity will disappear with her. When I was again alone I was aware that my whole body was shivering and my eyes were in tears (...)"*

## Lessons learned

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The following reflects the level of impact of the educational experiences that occurred with students at the University of Granada:

The days following the experience there is a special window for this type of learning, as students find themselves with a special sensitivity and ease of learning, with high motivation and true surprise that they have had an experience of this type, especially in a formal education setting. It is very important to take advantage of this opening, because if you do not, it is quickly lost.

Taking into account the importance of this opening of consciousness following the educational experience, we have collected the experiences with a standard of continuity and complementarity. The two previous experiences refer to the relationship of the person with nature. The internal dimension of the students' relationship to nature comes into play. We complete the experience with an additional one that helps to develop the social dimension, the care of others. This consists in journaling for several months of the school year, writing about activities that are carried out in consonance with the principles and values of the Earth Charter, and writing final reflections (Fernández y Conde, 2010). After all of these activities the results are very positive and we notice a significant change in a large number of students.

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