

Journal of Education for Sustainable Development

<http://jsd.sagepub.com/>

Living *in* the Earth : Towards an Education for Our Tim
Stephen Sterling
Journal of Education for Sustainable Development 2010 4: 213
DOI: 10.1177/097340821000400208

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://jsd.sagepub.com/content/4/2/213>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Centre For Environment Education

Additional services and information for *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jsd.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jsd.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://jsd.sagepub.com/content/4/2/213.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 14, 2010

[What is This?](#)

Living *in* the Earth

Towards an Education for Our Times

STEPHEN STERLING

Abstract

The importance of recognising the mismatch between a shared perception of separateness in Western thinking and the systemic and inevitably participative nature of the world is outlined. The article then traces the development of forms of 'education for change' that seek to address sustainability issues that stem from dissociation, and notes that diversity of forms has led to a degree of fragmentation, while calls for an integrative and coherent approach to educational reform are becoming stronger. Less attention and loyalty should be paid to labels, and more to meaning and values informing educational thinking and practice. Whilst diverse forms of education for change have value, an imperative remains to rethink education more widely so that it is fully responsive to the times we live in. A plea for 'sustainable education' denoting a change of educational culture that is at heart relational and in accord with the Earth Charter, is made.

Keywords: Perception, dissociation, labels, sustainable education

There is a notice in the bus that I use. It says, 'No eating or drinking on the bus'. It is a curious use of words, because nobody is *on* the bus. The passengers are

Stephen Sterling is Director of the Centre for Sustainable Futures at the University of Plymouth, and Senior Advisor to the UK Higher Education Academy ESD Project. His interest is in ecological thinking, learning theory and systemic change, particularly in higher education institutions. Email: stephen.sterling@plymouth.ac.uk

in the bus. Another time, I was in a plane taking off from London. The plane passed over a fire, and the smoke was drifting upwards. On the ground, we see smoke rise up away from us and we forget about it, but on this occasion, it was coming towards me, as I was perched in the sky in the plane. It reminded me of one of Commoner's Four Laws of Ecology, that 'everything must go somewhere' (Commoner 1971: 29). Another of Commoner's laws is that 'everything is connected to everything else'.

The difference in perspective that such experiences invoke is this: we are not on the Earth, we are *in* the Earth, we are inextricably actors in Earth's systems and flows, constantly affecting and being affected by everything natural and human, in dynamic relation (Metzner 1995). We are unavoidably participative beings. And yet, deeply embedded in the Western psyche, although we know participative reality to be true, there is a powerful operative myth of separateness. We still perceive, think and talk in dualistic terms of economy and ecology, of people and environment, of social and natural, and them and us.

The shift of perception that my bus and plane experiences suggested reflect an integrative and relational view of reality, which, taken seriously, has profound implications for educational thinking and practice. The Earth Charter is similarly born of, and expresses, an integrative or holistic ethic, based on an essentially relational and participative view of the world. In this article, I will look at some ideas emanating from this view and their implications for education.

HOLISTIC WORLD—REDUCTIONIST PERCEPTION

It is difficult to articulate an understanding of the world that is fundamentally holistic rather than reductionist, relational rather than compartmentalised just because every-thing is related to everything else, whilst our language tends to demarcate and separate. Educator and systems thinker Donella Meadows (1982: 101) made a brave attempt with the following:

The world is a complex, interconnected, finite, ecological-social-psychological-economic system.

It doesn't read elegantly, but the essence is captured. She then goes on to describe why this matters:

We treat it as if it were not, as if it were divisible, separable, simple, and infinite. Our persistent, intractable, global problems arise directly from this mismatch.

According to Bateson—and to many others since—our worldview is founded upon an 'epistemological error', a perception of and belief in separateness that renders it dangerously inadequate. As Bateson (1972: 463) states:

I believe that (the) massive aggregation of threats to man and his ecological systems arises out of errors in our habits of thought at deep and partly unconscious levels.

Similarly, Wilber makes an important distinction between ‘differentiation’ and ‘dissociation’. As he suggests, it is one thing to *differentiate* between culture and nature, for example, but quite another to *dissociate* them: ‘One of the most prevalent forms of evolutionary pathology occurs when differentiation goes too far into dissociation’ (Wilber 1997: 73). Further, we tend to believe in and reify our conceptual boundaries and ‘confuse the map with the territory’.

Let’s take the concept of ‘sustainable development’. The common wisdom is that sustainable development consists of three dimensions, the ‘economic’, the ‘social’ and the ‘environmental’. Yet these are mental constructs. A glance out of the window at the real world will not indicate where any of these categories stops and another starts: the boundaries are in our heads. Even the Brundtland Report, written in the late 1980s, recognised that:

compartments have begun to dissolve. This applies in particular to the various global ‘crises’ that have seized public concern...These are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis, an energy crisis. They are all one (WCED 1987: 4).

Yet, and despite the eloquence and influence of the Earth Charter, we still tend to ‘bound’ our understanding, whether it is of human rights, climate change, migration, health, biodiversity and so on, rather than see issues primarily in terms of dynamic relation and interconnection.

COHERENCE AND INCOHERENCE IN EDUCATIONAL MOVEMENTS

This problem extends to our educational discourse and structures, and also to the educational movements that have emerged ostensibly to address the sustainability issues that concern us, many of which, it could be argued, stem from a dissociative mindset. If we look at the history of the movements, it is possible to discern two apparently contrary but simultaneous trends. The first is increasing inclusivity and the second is fragmentation, or what might be termed ‘coherence’ and ‘incoherence’.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the boundaries of what was meant by ‘environmental education’ (EE) expanded and became more inclusive. By the 1980s, the term ‘EE’ encompassed environmental studies and field studies, environmental science, environmental interpretation, urban studies, heritage education, conservation education and global environmental issues education, where different interests promoted different aspects, often through separate organisations and groups. At the same time, the boundaries of environmental education became less distinct and gradually more permeable. Various groups interested in aspects of ‘education for change’ and equity interpreted the transformative role of education differently. Hence the spectrum of what was sometimes referred to as ‘adjectival educations’ also included such emphases as development education, peace education, human rights education, antiracist education and futures education, whilst global education made a bid to represent them all.

Within this apparent fragmentation and incoherence, there was, at the same time, some growing—perhaps intuitive—sense of commonality, of parts within a

greater whole. Whilst environmental education and development education arose from separate roots and traditions, the growing equation of ‘environment’ and ‘development’—notably first argued in the World Conservation Strategy of 1980 (commissioned by the IUCN, UNEP and WWF)—meant that the two parallel educational movements inevitably became more closely associated. This became an important trend in the 1990s as environmental education became increasingly re-defined as ‘education for sustainable development’ and development education as ‘education for global citizenship’ and both were widely seen as sister movements. In some developing countries, however, the Western distinction between ‘environmental education’ and ‘development education’ was greeted with incomprehension because, there, environment and development issues were widely viewed as two sides of the same coin, and therefore environmental education was inevitably also development education.

Brundtland and the Rio Summit (1992) had a profound effect on subsequent debate concerning education for change, and from 1992 the terms ‘education for sustainability’ and ‘education for sustainable development’ (ESD) emerged internationally (Hesselink et al. 2000: 12). However, the tension between inclusivity, echoed in the aims of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD)—which suggest that education as a whole needs to respond to the challenges of sustainable development and ensuring a liveable planet—and fragmentation where various education-for-change emphases assert their distinctiveness remains. Viewpoints include:

- Those who say EE is synonymous with ESD
- Those who say ESD is a component of EE
- Those who say EE is a component of ESD
- Those who wish to do away with ESD altogether
- Those who feel ESD is a better term than EE and the latter should be dropped.

The importance of labels is that they carry meaning. This is double-edged. Whilst labels serve to simplify and communicate, they can also confuse through implying either more distinctiveness or shared understanding than may in fact be the case. Intended connotation and actual interpretation can differ markedly. So the undoubted utility of these names as shorthand in communication is countered by the possibility of misunderstanding between parties and this danger is increased by the proliferation of similar labels. Further, they can fragment: labels are banners around which acolytes gather and develop their common identity and often, an exclusive lexicon and literacy. Therefore, we need to look beyond the label, and it is here that in a deeper sense, labels do not matter.

SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

I am much less concerned about the label than I am about the manifested values and philosophy in any educational policy or practice. The proliferation in recent decades of ‘adjectival educations’—each concerned with some aspect of social change—seems

ironic (if understandable), given that many of those working in these areas seek a more holistic education than that offered by the compartmentalised and reductionist mainstream. This is why I have suggested 'sustainable education' (Sterling 2001) not as yet another adjectival education, but to suggest the need for, and bases of, a changed educational paradigm. Any closed definition of education for change, whether EE, ESD or other manifestation, involves drawing conceptual boundaries. This carries the danger that all other educational policies, theories and practices appear to be outside or beyond these boundaries—and therefore actors outside the boundaries assume or perceive that this manifestation of sustainability education is not their concern.

There is a direct parallel with sustainable development: either it is an add-on area of theory and practice, that is, a sectoral interest, or—to a greater or lesser degree—it involves all aspects of social, economic and political organisation. So it is with education in the service of sustainable development. My argument is that we must avoid sectoralism and rather suggest, explore and develop what I have called sustainable education as a change of educational culture as a whole, commensurate with the contemporary conditions of complexity, uncertainty, stresses and unsustainability that are increasingly familiar to all.

Sustainable education implies four descriptors: educational thinking and practice which is sustaining, tenable, healthy and durable.

- Sustaining: it helps sustain people, communities and ecosystems
- Tenable: it is ethically defensible, working with integrity, justice, respect and inclusiveness
- Healthy: it is itself an adaptive, viable system, embodying and nurturing healthy relationships and emergence at different system levels
- Durable: it works well enough in practice to be able to keep doing it.

I have elsewhere suggested an outline of what such a paradigm implies (Sterling 2001), and have argued that it needs to be an ecological or relational one, because of the systemic nature of the world we inhabit. A sufficient and whole-learning response to sustainability is required at three levels—personal, organisational and social—and in the three interrelated areas of human knowing and experience. These are (1) perception (or the affective dimension), (2) conception (or the cognitive dimension) and (3) practice (or the intentional dimension).

In each of these interrelated areas, higher-order learning towards an ecological consciousness and competence involves greater responsiveness, that is, movements towards:

- 'respons-ibility' an expanded and ethical sense of concern/engagement;
- 'co-rrespondence' a closer knowledge match with the real world; and
- 'respons-ability' the ability to take integrative and wise action in context.

In essence, this type of learning entails an extended and participatory epistemology, a connective ontology and an integrative praxis, affording a deeply relational sense of what it is to be human at this most challenging of times. It resonates with the

underlying values and philosophic orientation provided by the Earth Charter which articulates an ecological or relational ethos, necessary in a systemic and participative world.

This argument does not seek to negate the good work of those who work within aspects of EE, ESD, development education, human rights education and so on. There is real value in diversity and in distinctive contributions, but it is essential that education for change movements collaborate openly rather than work defensively. The unsustainability clock is ticking and there remains a real danger that 'safe' and neutered forms of ESD and EE are accommodated into the mainstream, which otherwise remains largely unaffected.

To counter this, sustainability education as a whole needs to both mount a deeper critique of the culture of mechanism, modernism and instrumentalism that largely still informs most educational policy and at the same time, achieve greater coherence and persuasion through embracing the profound educational potential in the emerging ecological and systemic paradigm that is already influencing sustainability discourse and practice in the wider society. Such a 'sustainable education' would help us engage as members of the whole community living *in* the Earth system of all life.

References

- Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- Commoner, B. 1971. *The Closing Circle*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Hesselink, F., P. van Kempen and A. Wals. 2000. *ESDebate: International Debate on Education for Sustainable Development*. Gland: IUCN.
- Metzner, R. 1995. The Psychopathy of the Human-Nature Relationship, in T. Roszak, M.E. Gomes and A.D. Kanner (eds), *Ecopsychology*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books 55-76.
- Meadows, D.H. 1982. Whole Earth Models and Systems, *The CoEvolution Quarterly*, Summer, 98-108.
- Sterling, S. 2001. *Sustainable Education—Re-visioning Learning and Change*, Schumacher Briefing no. 6. Dartington: Schumacher Society/Green Books.
- WCED. 1987. *Our Common Future, World Commission on Environment and Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilber, K. 1997. *The Eye of Spirit—An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.