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Environmental education: paradox and proposition

The reflections and propositions in this brief paper are based on my immersion in the field of environmental and sustainability education for the past 40+ years. They concern the strengths and weaknesses of environmental education practice, and also of the term 'environmental education'.

These are ten propositions, which I hope will stimulate debate.

Summary slides

Environmental education: paradox and proposition

- 1) Environmental education is both a success and a failure.
 - 2) Whilst environmental education is evolving, its course is not one of continuous development and progress.
 - 3) The term 'Environmental Education' both illuminates and obfuscates.
 - 4) The term 'Environmental Education' implies boundaries: which are useful in practice, but also exclusive.
 - 5) The history of environmental education is one both of expansion and integration on one hand, and fragmentation and autonomy on the other.
 - 6) Environmental education can both reinforce dualism and counter it.
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- 7) Environmental Education discourse tends not to engage with deeper issues of Western culture and worldview—that render environmental education necessary as a remedial practice.
 - 8) Environmental education has been unable to articulate and grow a rigorous and persuasive counter and alternative to dominant educational paradigms and practices.
 - 9) After 40 years, environmental education should be confident enough to engage broadly and to drop the label 'Environmental Education' whenever it is advantageous to do so.
 - 10) The real business is not the protection or advancement of the field of environmental education but any strategy that can help shift consciousness and build positive pathways and action in this watershed moment in history.

The argument

1) EE is both a 'success' and a 'failure'

It has been exactly 40 years since the UNESCO Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education at Tbilisi, USSR (1977) which can be seen as the key international launch platform for EE, following the seminal Belgrade Charter of 1975. These meetings laid down a remarkably bold and holistic vision, albeit still focussed on 'the environment' as such, and were subsequently deeply influential as regards defining the field and lending status and momentum to its take-up. The decades since constitute a relatively short time for a movement or idea to have lasting global impact, particularly in educational systems, but its wide acceptance (if not always its implementation) appears solid, not least with current recognition of the role of education in achieving the SDGs.

On the other hand, the ambitious Tbilisi goals to 'provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment and skills needed to protect and improve the environment' and to 'develop and reinforce new patterns of environmentally sensitive behaviour amongst individuals, groups and society as a whole towards the environment' unsurprisingly perhaps, remain years later as unfulfilled ideals. In 1975, the global ecological footprint was about 0.8 Earths, today it is 1.6 Earths – we are in a position of mounting ecological debt.

2) Whilst EE is evolving, its course is not one of continuous development and progress

There tends to be an assumption - allied perhaps to the modernist myth of progress - that EE must inevitably be improving, developing greater insight, reaching more people, being more effective over time. This is partly justified. But my recent experience of going through the archives of the (now defunct) Council for Environmental Education in the UK persuaded me that many key ideas, values and issues of clarity and implementation that were articulated many years ago still ring true. We should be wary therefore of poorly-considered calls for 'new thinking' in environmental education, or more boldly, a 'new vision for education' where they overlook the building blocks of earlier insights and experience.

3) The term 'Environmental Education' both illuminates and obfuscates

The term is necessary to communicate in shorthand a field of ideas, values, and practices. But all these years later, the majority of educators either have little or no idea of what it means, its history, and its implications. This picture is complicated by the emergence of a raft of related and alternative terms over the past 30 or so years.

4) The term 'Environmental Education' implies boundaries: which are useful in practice, but also exclusive

Any term and definition suggests boundaries regarding what lies within its ambit, and what appears to lie without. So whilst 'EE' implies a set of ideas, values, and practices which has achieved a working consensus over the years, the field has nevertheless long reflected an ambiguity. On the one hand, the emergence of language and assumptions that define EE allow its practitioners to exchange ideas and develop the field within its parameters; yet at

the same time, there is a persistent and persuasive notion that ‘all education is environmental education’ (or argument that it should be).¹

This ambiguity is reflected in UNESCO documents. UNESCO remains the key player in legitimating the field, and although their preferred term is ‘education for sustainable development’ (ESD), they appear caught between asserting the integrity of ESD as such, and advocating the need for a ‘new vision of education’ as a whole (see UNESCO 2015; Bokova 2016).

At the same time, the understandable desire and tendency within the EE/ESD field to maintain identity and coherence has militated against more constructive interchange between the education community/discourse, and the sustainable development community/discourse (Sterling 2014). It took until 2016 for UNESCO to focus its annual authoritative Global Education Monitoring report (GEM) (UNESCO 2016) on the necessary relationship between education and building a more sustainable economy and society.

5) The history of EE is one both of expansion and integration on one hand, and fragmentation and autonomy on the other

If we track the emergence of this field, say from the local studies, rural studies, and environmental studies traditions of the 1940s (in the UK at least), there has been a trajectory of gradual inclusivity. The emphasis on the natural world and conservation was complemented by urban studies and a more political dimension in the 1970s, and from there a growing dialogue between environmental and development education was compounded from the time of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit onwards with the advent of ‘education for sustainable development’. Yet while the bandwidth of the field stretched outwards, a jostling of identity and ownership led to contestation and a degree of retrenchment – made more complicated by the emergence of a range of ‘adjectival educations’ such as peace education, human rights education, anti-racist education, gender education, futures education, global education, and education for global citizenship, whilst other alternative labels such as ‘education for a sustainable future’ and ‘sustainability education’ all became part of the mix (see Sterling 2004). The latest Worldwatch report (Assadourian 2017), interestingly, goes for ‘EarthEd’.

We are now in a state of bricolage - which has obvious strengths and weaknesses.

6) EE can both reinforce dualism and counter it

A very experienced Scandinavian educator wrote to me recently saying he didn’t like the term ‘environmental education’ as the label itself tended to reinforce the idea of an environment separate from, or apart from people. This touches on an issue of momentous importance which concerns epistemology and ontology. The term ‘the environment’ is meaningful and useful in everyday employment, but it tends to perpetuate the sense of dissociation, of the duality of people and environment. Gregory Bateson (1972) perhaps expressed this most powerfully in his notion of the ‘epistemological error’ - our perception of separateness - at the heart of the Western worldview and psyche. Bateson’s insight mounts a radical challenge to the individualism, egotism, anthropocentrism and dualism which still prevails in Western and westernised cultures. At the same time, immersive environmental

¹ The first mention of this I have come across is in Mark Terry (1971) *Teaching for Survival*, Ballantine Books (a book which was partly responsible for me becoming involved in EE). It was later echoed by David Orr in *Earth in Mind*, 1994.

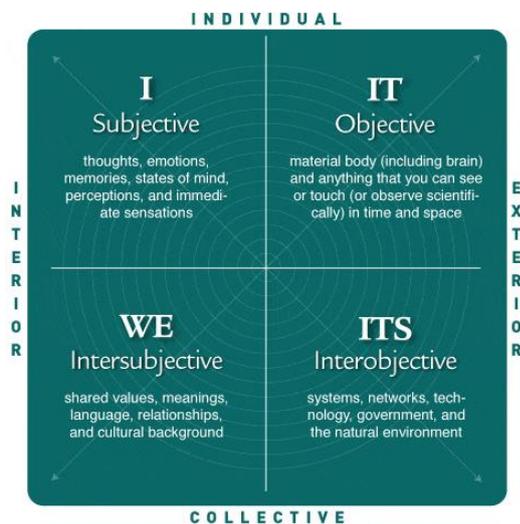
education - an encounter with the Other - can genuinely offer a transformative experiential sense of connection and even communion.

7) EE discourse tends not to engage with deeper issues of Western culture and worldview - that render EE necessary as a remedial practice

The main tension within EE, and particularly between EE and ESD, over the last 20 or so years has centred on *instrumentalism* versus *developmentalism*: either seeing education primarily as a means through which pressing environment/sustainability issues can be addressed or ameliorated, or alternatively, seeing the quality of education and learning as the prime focus, with any change in behaviour or affect on social and environmental issues as a possible but not prescribed outcome. This has been a major fault-line, but with mounting evidence of global crises, plus increasing interest in transformative learning through experience, it might be safe to say the assumed conflict here is giving way to recognition of a necessary convergence and complementarity between these perspectives.

However, on the whole, EE has been more remedial than explorative with regard to the root causes of our culture's ability and tendency to engender so many systemic problems globally. Wilber's 'integral quadrant model' of human knowledge and experience provides a helpful framework to appreciate the strengths and relative weaknesses of EE as it has been articulated and practised to date.

EE has tended to concentrate on the individual rather than the collective, and the exterior (behaviour and systems) rather than the interior domain. In a nutshell, the bottom-left of Wilber's quadrant – the intersubjective domain of collective culture, worldview, belief and paradigm – has tended to be overlooked or underplayed in EE discourse, and also by influential bodies such as UNESCO. I would argue however that it is our collective dysfunctionality in this domain that makes EE necessary in the first place.



Wilber's quadrant model

<http://personalityjunkie.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/wilber-quadrants-2.gif>

8) EE has been unable to articulate and grow a rigorous a persuasive counter and alternative to dominant educational paradigms and practices

EE has mounted a healthy critical debate over the years on the shortcomings of mainstream educational thinking, whether to do with excessive competition, specialism, transmissive pedagogies, narrow vocationalism, and more latterly the effects of neo-liberal thinking and policy-making. But perhaps because of its focus other than the cultural domain, (as noted above) EE has been poor at articulating a robustly different educational paradigm which would both give more depth to its critique and challenge, and substance to its ability to grow more ecological, holistic and humanistic alternatives. Also, and to some extent, this problem has enabled radical EE movements to be accommodated and neutered by the mainstream.

9) After 40 years, EE should be confident enough to engage broadly and to drop the label 'EE' whenever it is advantageous to do so

Perhaps the label doesn't matter as much as it did forty years ago when this seedling was struggling for life and recognition. Despite on-going issues, the EE movement should strive to encourage, welcome and interact with any education for change movement that affects environmental quality and social justice positively, irrespective of what it might call itself.

10) The real business is not the protection or advancement of the field of EE but any strategy that can help shift consciousness and build positive pathways and action in this watershed moment in history

There have been and are numerous calls for humanity, and particularly economic development patterns, to change course radically whilst the diminishing window of time still allows such change - squeezed by climate change, species loss, inequity within and between countries, resource scarcity, population pressures, global conflict and so on. The UN, launching the SDGs in 2015 notes with urgency that, 'The survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk' (UN 2015, p.5).

The theologian and environmentalist Thomas Berry (2000, 3) writes of 'the Great Work', which he says is carrying out 'out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner'.

This is immensely challenging – yet immensely necessary. Exactly 30 years ago, the Brundtland Report – seminal to the sustainable development movement – called for 'vast campaigns of education, debate, and public participation' (WCED 1986, xiv). It didn't quite happen as intended, although undoubtedly the game changed in the wake of Brundtland. Now, the new Worldwatch State of the World report calls for 'education reform on a planetary scale', but the language still tends to be 'what it would/could/should be like'.

So we are still 'not there' yet, and need to greatly accelerate educational change across formal and non-formal sectors, commensurate with the magnitude of the global challenges we face. This would involve EE being much more strongly and actively aligned to the 'Great Work', that is, to transition and well-being movements, to growing progressive and reconstructive movements in civil society, to bold futures research and redesign initiatives, and many other manifestations of life-affirming shifts and social learning, labelled as 'blessed unrest' by Hawken (2008).

This is anticipative learning, or learning by design, and is both necessary and wise. The alternative is learning by default – risking having to learn survival skills in conditions of volatility rather than having the capacity to build more sustainable communities. Forty years on from Tbilisi, time is short.

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