

Questions on Ecopedagogy
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What are some of the most important theories and practices that inform an Ecopedagogy? Specifically, how would you explicate the major discursive trends that are helping to establish Ecological Education as a contemporary field of study?

"Even the most casual reading of the earth's vital signs immediately reveals a planet under stress. In almost all the natural domains, the earth is under stress -- it is a planet that is in need of intensive care. Can the United States and the American people, pioneer sustainable patterns of consumption and lifestyle, (and) can you educate for that? This is a challenge that we would like to put out to you." – United Nations Environment Programme (October 1994).

The Rise of Environmental and Ecological Education

While education has always involved forming knowledge and attitudes about the environment, it is only within the last three decades that environmental education as a formal discipline has become solidified. Drawing upon the wide publicity and academic debate furnished by the first Earth Day -- occurring on April 22, 1970, to enhance and preserve feelings for the global environment -- the United States passed the National Environmental Policy Act, the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) was founded (1971), and the United Nations held the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden during 1972. However,

initial U.S. policy (while forming the Environmental Protection Agency and sanctioning educational strategies) involved more rhetoric than real change. Accordingly, it was not until the U.N. Stockholm conference that the issue of the environment was recognized as being of truly crucial import for the global community and that a new mode of education was in fact required, with Recommendation 92 of the Stockholm report stating:

Organizations of the United Nations, especially UNESCO, should establish an international program in environmental education, interdisciplinary in approach, in-school and out-of-school, encompassing all levels of education and directed toward the general public, in particular, the ordinary citizen living in rural and urban area, youth and adult alike, with a view to educating people as to simple steps one might take to manage and control one's environment (Hopkins 1991).

Over the next two decades the notion of “environmental education,” originally theorized by William Stapp (1969) as involving knowledge of the natural environment, interdisciplinarity, and a framework that valued using Deweyan inquiry and problem-solving as a method for overcoming intractable conflict and ideology, grew to consider ideas about place-based approach, the necessity of adequate teacher education and training, general systems orientation, ideas of holism in curriculum, conservational strategies and values, and a general commitment to “sustainability” (Klecan 1997). In 1990, the U.S. importantly passed the National Environmental Education Act and pledged governmental “support, development, dissemination of model curricula, educational materials and training programs for students of all ages” (Klein and Merritt 1994). During 1992, at the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, an attempt at a

systematic statement about the interrelationship between humanity and the Earth was conceived of and a document was demanded that would formulate environmental education once and for all in both ethical and ecological (as opposed to merely technocratic and instrumentalist) terms. This document – now known as the Earth Charter – failed to emerge from Rio, however, and instead Chapter 36 of the 1992 Earth Summit Report addressed the issue in the following manner:

Education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environment and development issues...It is critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behavior consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making. (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Agenda 21)

In 1994, Maurice Strong along with Mikhail Gorbachev renewed interest in the Earth Charter and received a pledge of support from the Dutch government. This led to a provisional draft of the document being attempted in 1997, with completion, ratification and launching of the Earth Charter Initiative at the Peace Palace in The Hague occurring on June 29, 2000. The Initiative's goal was to build a "sound ethical foundation for the emerging global society and to help build a sustainable world based on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace." The Earth Charter's announced mission was nothing short of revolutionary, attempting a bold educational reformulation of how humans perceive their cultural relationship to nature, casting

environmental and socio-economic/political problems together in one light, and demanding long-term, integrated responses to growing planetary ecological crisis.

It was hoped that at the second Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, held in 2002 – the World Summit for Sustainable Development – that the U.N. would adopt and endorse the Earth Charter, thereby providing a truly comprehensive framework for a new ecological educational agenda the world over. However, in marking the approximate anniversary of three decades worth of global environmental education programs, the Johannesburg Summit proved disappointing in many respects and most activists and critics were gravely alarmed by the neoliberal measures invoked there by the Bush administration (and others). Certainly, the “W\$\$D” (as its critics called it) articulated a central divide that had been growing within and around the environmental education movement all along – a split between large-scale corporate and governmental technocratic interests and those of the more grassroots-based theorists, activists, and environmental educators proper.

Due to the pressure exerted by corporate and state interests at Earth Summit II most feel it has now been demonstrated that the “environment” is a co-opted word and that co-optation of recent ecological trends in education is also underway. Thus, the Bush administration has brought criticism against environmental education programs early in its tenure, threatening the removal of their funding altogether if they should attempt to practice “environmental advocacy.” Likewise, while Japan suggested at the recent Earth Summit II in Johannesburg that the years of 2005-2015 be hailed and promoted by the United Nations as “the decade of Environmental Education,” under pressure from the global corporate powers, however, the United Nations instead distinguished between

environmental education as a singular field of reduced importance in comparison with the new state-sponsored agenda of education for sustainable development.

From environmental education to ecopedagogy

Upon first investigation, the emerging field of ecopedagogy may appear to be just another name for the more popular, though hardly ubiquitous, environmental education. A more specialized educator, however, might further distinguish between environmental and ecological education and thereby tether ecopedagogy to the latter, distinguishing it from the former. In fact, there are elements of truth to both statements but it is also necessary to understand the introduction of the new term “ecopedagogy” as a radical challenge to hegemonic co-optation across the board, much in the way “third world feminism” attempted to critique both patriarchy and feminism as unresponsive and totalizing vis-à-vis marginal needs.

On the one hand, ecopedagogy undoubtedly has to do with ecological literacies (Orr 1992; Capra 2000) and environmental education must be considered a pedagogical first-attempt to transform traditional curricula by integrating information and strategies that move in a more ecological direction. Thus, professionally speaking, environmental and ecological education are often intimately combined, as evidenced by the AERA SIG group for Environmental and Ecological Education. Yet, on the other hand, many educators who would themselves be inclined to become the environmental educators of tomorrow have found the field limited in theoretical scope, overly tied to governmental and corporate agendas, and non-influential in shaping larger educational policy and practice; and this has led to a re-theorization of the environmental education field to accord with ideas of “deep ecology,” environmental justice, and the sort of new

understandings of planetary interconnectedness that informs the science of global warming. While some simply rely upon the name change of ecological education to mark this critical difference, chief among ecological educators in North America has been the theorist C.A. Bowers, who has recently moved to the language of “eco-justice pedagogy” to signify an alternative approach (Bowers 2001).

Additionally, a variety of theorists have directly adopted the terminology of “ecopedagogy,” resulting in the term’s contestation and in the distinction between environmental, ecological, and other forms of education becoming increasingly muddled. Thus, some speak of ecopedagogy to connote phenomenological and spiritual investigations of reality (Jardine 2000, Woolpert 2004), others link it to strategies in accordance with the United Nations mandated Education for Sustainable Development (Ahlberg 1998), to transformative and wholistic pedagogical practices (O’ Sullivan 1999), and to the political ecology of education (Petrina 2000; McLaren & Houston 2004). The latter was arguably initiated as educational discourse by Ivan Illich, who had early on articulated ecological themes alongside his deschooling thesis and who appears to have coined the term “ecopedagogy” in his book Alternatives II (Illich 1988).

Through Illich, ecopedagogy is the term of choice for the new manner of pedagogical studies associated with the World Social Forum that synthesize economical development analyses, planetary citizenship, and Green politics (Gutierrez & Cruz 1999; Gadotti 2000) and it is through the work of scholars like Moacir Gadotti, the Director of the Instituto Paulo Freire in Sao Paulo, Brazil, that the term has become linked to the United Nation’s Earth Charter Initiative and the concept of “sustainability.” Finally, it is Gadotti’s claim that upon his death, Paulo Freire himself was finally at work upon a book

of ecopedagogy, saying, “I want to be remembered as someone who loved life, men, women, plants, animals, the Earth” (Gadotti 2002) and it is true that in his later years, environmental language begins to play a greater role in Freire’s texts and so the term has begun to be adopted by Freirean critical pedagogues.

It is in this respect that I have come to adopt the term for my own work, though I have extended it to include a critique of Freire himself – in particular, his anthropocentric humanism that tended to articulate human freedom at the expense of objectified animal and natural domains (Kahn 2003). Thus, informing my ecopedagogy is a interdisciplinary mixture of theories that draws from (as it critiques) education (Selby 2000), philosophy (Dewey 1999), anthropology (Bateson 1972), theology (Boff 1997), political science (Bellamy Foster 2002), geography (Cosgrove 2001), and various critical theories involved in projects of race (Cajete 1999; Adamson, Evans & Stein 2002), class (Kovel 2002), gender (Harding 1998; Seager 2003), and species/nature liberation (Haraway 2003; Noske 1997). As critical theory has had an interest in ending the domination of Nature, arguably from Marx, through Horkheimer and Adorno’s theorizing the Dialectic of Enlightenment and Marcuse’s envisioning the need for a new life sensibility, up to and including Steven Best and Douglas Kellner’s most recent contributions to the tradition as “critical posthumanism” (2001), I conceive of ecopedagogy as related to and functioning as a critical theory in this sense.

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