

Deschooling Environmental Education

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Abstract

If "education" is problematic *as such*, as radical critics such as Illich and Holt argue, then environmental education is problematic too. Despite the seemingly uncontroversial character of the goal of "ecological literacy," for instance, I argue that this notion is deeply flawed: it replaces a living sense of connectedness with a mandated and technical set of skills - perfect for schools, but that is just the problem. In its place I suggest a broader understanding of what we are about as environmentally-concerned citizens and educators: reconstructing the larger lifeworld in a way more connected to and consistently engaged with the more-than-human world. Schools have a role to play within this reconstruction, but the essential process is much larger and must engage all of us.

Résumé

Si l'«éducation» elle-même est problématique, tel que l'ont révélé des critiques radicaux comme Illich et Holt, l'éducation relative à l'environnement est certes également problématique. Par exemple, malgré le caractère apparemment incontestable de la finalité de l'«alphabétisation écologique», je soutiens que cette notion est essentiellement inadéquate: elle remplace le sentiment d'appartenance au réseau de la vie par un ensemble d'habiletés techniques prédéterminées - sans doute adapté au contexte de l'école actuelle, mais qui de ce fait, pose essentiellement problème. Je propose le développement d'une conception plus globale de notre mandat en tant que citoyens et éducateurs préoccupés d'environnement: reconstruire ce monde où nous vivons de telle sorte qu'il devienne véritablement symbiosynergique - un monde-plus-qu'humain. L'école a certes un rôle à jouer dans cette

reconstruction, mais il s'agit d'un processus beaucoup plus vaste, qui doit impliquer tous et chacun de nous.

This paper is an attempt to bring the radical critique of education – the work of people like Ivan Illich and John Holt – into the discussion of environmental education. Contact has not yet been made: there is not one word about the radical critique of education in the *Journal of Environmental Education*, for example, from its inception twenty-six years ago until now. Yet the critique is crucial. We environmental educators ourselves, for better or worse, are perceived as radical in many quarters, but it does not follow from this that we are free of all the conventional assumptions that shape – and perhaps also deeply debilitate – education generally. Despite the seemingly uncontroversial and unproblematic character of the goal of “ecological literacy,” for instance, it seems to me that this notion – this metaphor, really – is deeply problematic, and so ought to be controversial, from both an environmentalist and an educational point of view.

The radical critique is not merely negative, either. It turns out to be profoundly suggestive and constructive too. My goal, then, is not to oppose environmental education, but rather to open up the possibility of another and broader understanding of what we are about as environmentally-concerned citizens and educators. We arrive finally at a broader focus for reconstructive action as well.

1

According to Illich and Holt, school itself – the institution and its practices – has a meaning too, a “hidden curriculum” as Illich (1970) calls it in *Deschooling Society*, something in fact far more powerful than its “manifest” or official curriculum. Content hardly matters. For Illich this “hidden curriculum” is the ranking and grading system and all the social certifications and (more crucially) de-certifications that go with it. Holt (1976) argues in *Instead of Education* that school is corrupt from the start fundamentally because students have to be there. How could a compulsory institution be liberatory?

Both Illich and Holt also challenge the assumption that everything important must be learned in school. In fact we learn constantly, and in a variety of ways, most powerfully when we become engaged by some project of our own. As Holt says, “learning for its own sake” (that sacred mantra!) is precisely what necessitates compulsion. Learning for the sake of keeping your boat afloat or winning the heart of an Italian or starting a revolution needs no compulsion, if those goals engage us. But school (says Holt) is structurally antithetical to learning in this sense: to self-determined and self-scheduled learning: in short the kind of learning that actually does contribute to competence and self-confidence.

Illich stresses the opposite side of the same point: that the reduction of learning to something that happens in schools, and something that people usually must be forced to do, delegitimizes all other forms of craft, skill, and wisdom, everything that takes place or could take place in the normal course of life. It also engenders a profound *dislike* for learning. The social critic Katha Pollitt recently argued for prayer in the public schools on the grounds that it will alienate children from religion (Pollitt, 1994). This is the outcome she favors, though of course it is just the opposite of what its normal proponents intend. Maybe she’s serious; anyway, one sees her point. The “hidden curriculum” may override and defeat everything else – no matter how congenial.

Looking at environmental education in this light is not encouraging. Perhaps school is exactly what we should *not* wish upon the values we care about?

There are many creative ideas in the environmental education literature. Barbara Robinson and Evelyn Wolfson suggest trying to get students back into their senses, and to perceive the lifeworld as many animals do, by rubbing an “onion trail” around some of the objects in a yard and having the students get down on all fours and sniff out the track. They have students role-play other animals, in a kind of mini-Council of All Beings. Students do an ecological inventory of, and then begin to take responsibility for, their own school grounds (Robinson and Wolfson, 1982).

It seems ungentlemanly to complain. Yet there is a problem. The problem is that these projects – entirely laudable as they are – are not projects that emerge naturally out of children’s or students’ own

lives, especially in contemporary culture. They *might* so emerge, of course, but whether or not they do, children/students are being told that this is what they must now learn. The wheel of course requirements grinds on. That's Pollitt's point too, I think, beneath the irony: even the most delightful thing can turn grey if entrusted to a clumsy and mandatory institution.

Introducing projects like the onion rub, Robinson and Wolfson note that:

young children are naturally curious and sensitive and are eager to become involved in first-hand experiences in the world around them. However, as the learning process advances and children develop cognitive skills, they often lose their sense of wonder and involvement. By the time many are adults, the barriers to receiving information from their senses may be so great that they trust the written or spoken word far more than their own sensory information. Today many adults either intellectualize about environmental problems or feel completely removed from them. (1982, p. 9).

Robinson and Wolfson trace the environmental crisis itself in part to this profound sensory alienation. They introduce exercises to counter it. But they are surprisingly incurious about where it comes from. Surely this loss of wonder and the connection to the senses does not just *happen*. What have the kids been doing all this time? Well, we know the answer: going to school (and, to be fair, watching TV). And when growing minds and bodies spend eight hours a day sitting in classrooms with books – away from the more-than-human world, reduced to one sense or less, running through a *curriculum* (literally, “a course to be run”) that others have chosen for them, and when the world of higher education and work is essentially more of the same, what else would we expect?

2

There is a deeper worry too. It is not just that the schools' “hidden curriculum” can subvert the official curriculum. The hidden curriculum also shapes the official one.

The kind of religion that Pollitt imagines the schools naturally inclining toward is hierarchical and authoritarian, not notably

open-ended or pantheistic or social-action-oriented. Not Zen Buddhism or Quakerism, but patriarchal Christianity, with God as a supernatural version of the Principal. And this parallelism is no accident. It arises precisely from the deep affinity between the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of patriarchal Christianity and the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of school. Not just in terms of disciplinary power, either, but in terms of course content too. Knowledge and power go together here. Principal/God is effectively both omnipotent and omniscient; the teacher/priest is His local representative. Both institutions preclude independent action and egalitarian community. It is this parallel structure, this collusion in practice, that Pollitt wants to expose.

So what sort of environmentalism would the schools naturally incline towards? Schools' structure remains hierarchical and authoritarian; knowledge is presented as an already-codified, unified, expert-certified system. We might therefore expect something similar in the forms of environmentalism and environmental ethics officially approved for use in environmental education programs in school. Furthermore, despite what some conservatives say, schools remain profoundly conservative social institutions, and so remain profoundly human-centered as well. We might expect a significant degree of anthropocentrism.

Are these fears borne out? Take the anthropocentrism charge first. A survey by J. F. Disinger recently concluded that "[environmental] educators generally favor the dominant social paradigm, placing greater emphasis on 'wise use' than non-use perspectives" (Disinger, 1990, p. 5). David K. J. Withrington defines environmental education as follows: "Environmental education is essentially a practical process for equipping man with the knowledge, skills, and commitment to improve his environment" (Withrington, 1977, p. 33). Here it's not just the anthropocentrism that's a little shocking (and "man" too is finally beginning to make us uneasy), but also the managerial/technocratic shape it takes, as if the relevant knowledge was already well-established, and as if it were the most obvious thing in the world what constitutes an "improvement." So we come to the other charge too: schools by nature tend to present knowledge as fixed and

“given.” Environmental education Withrington-style is exactly what we should expect.

Consider as well a fierce critic of certain aspects of schooling as we know it: David Orr, especially in his 1992 book *Ecological Literacy*. There are many aspects of Orr’s critique that I applaud: his challenge to the abstraction of much modern knowledge, ecological knowledge included; his mistrust of the managerial/technocratic attitude; also his recognition of many of the points made above about what he calls the “tacit curriculum”:

Process is important for learning. Courses taught as lecture courses tend to induce passivity. Indoor classes create the illusion that learning only occurs inside four walls isolated from what the students call, without apparent irony, the “real world.” Dissecting frogs in biology class teaches lessons about Nature that no one would verbally profess. Campus architecture is crystallized pedagogy that often reinforces passivity, monologue, domination, and artificiality. (1991, p. 101).

We therefore turn to Orr’s positive prescriptions with high hopes. He says a lot, much of it again entirely right in my view. Again, for example, he suggests “using campus resource flows (food, energy, water, materials, and waste) as part of the curriculum.”

But then we come to “ecological literacy.” “No student,” Orr tells us, “should graduate from any educational institution without a basic comprehension... of the laws of thermodynamics, the basic principles of ecology...” and so on through a list of eleven such requirements, including, as #11, “environmental philosophy and ethics” (1991, p. 102).

Oughtn’t we find this a little unsettling? Once again, all of a sudden, we have mandated, discrete curricular items, “given,” already established, testable. I guess this is why the literacy metaphor is so widely current in environmental education. What is startling, however, is how deeply Orr undercuts his own critique with this last turn of the screw. Most of the items on this list are abstract. Almost all of them privilege specialized knowledge over non-school-certified and non-school-stratified craft and skill. Almost all of them could fit readily into a monologic and dominating pedagogy. Yet these were the very problems Orr just complained about.

I am not against reading, I love reading, and obviously I am not against knowing something about ecology or environmental ethics. The objection lies with the assumption that school, and school alone, must “teach” these things, an idea for which the “literacy” metaphor is the perfect vehicle. The point bears repeating: literacy is a mandatable, testable, technical skill, quite apart from, and quite often at odds with, a love of reading and the willingness or eagerness to have one’s life changed and enriched by it. But mandatable, testable, technical skills are what school is all about. How tightly and quickly the circle closes!

I think that this kind of paradox is common. Almost all critiques of the content of contemporary education, even seemingly very radical critiques, when it comes round to their actual proposals for reform, still revert to talking about the curriculum. C. A. Bowers, for example, charges even radical educational reformers like Freire (1974) with anthropocentrism because they privilege critical consciousness to the point of making it the whole aim of education (Bowers, 1991 and 1992). Bowers’ alternative, however, is to use education to question and undercut this anthropocentrism. This is surely a laudable goal, but it is surely also, as Bowers himself allows, another form of critical thinking. He also proposes to incorporate “curricular activities that have the potential to expand the sense of connectedness, meaning, and thus an awareness of self as part of a larger community, [like] dance, music, and art” (1991, p. 107). Again laudable, but again, the approach is top-down: the proposal is to add to or change the impositions we make upon children. I’m puzzled that neither Holt or Illich are mentioned at all, even in this most self-proclaimedly radical of contexts. Bowers does not address the idea that reform might require not changing the structure of imposition upon children, but rather getting rid of it. School *itself*, according to this *version* of the “radical critique,” is a technocratic, Enlightenment, and anthropocentric institution – once again, everything Bowers is against.

3

So I suspect that the entire problem is wrongly posed from the start when we immediately find ourselves asking how we can *educate* for

environmental awareness and responsibility, for delight and care. I think that we must look at the whole matter in a broader context.

Quarrying with my father, as a young boy, I discovered geology: strata and sedimentation and fossils and why Frank Lloyd Wright used a certain style of masonry on his prairie houses. What I know of birds comes from a lifetime habit of watching them: the hawks and vultures that circle the freeways, always signalling what is happening over the next rise; the dozen new kinds of warblers I saw in one hour one morning around a Maine cabin in spring, migrating through; the meadowlarks and whip-poor-wills that no longer sing around my boyhood home. An old hobby of star-watching (I never “took a course” in astronomy) opened up an understanding of the great cycle of the holidays (Christmas/Hanukkah/New Year’s to Easter/Passover to Halloween/Samhain, etc.) as deeply tied to the waxing and waning of the light and the seasons, the Solstices and the Equinoxes. There are other things too: discovering edible flowers; backpacking; gardening.

As Holt would be quick to point out, none of these things has anything to do with school. We ought to take this perfectly obvious observation with great seriousness. *None of these things has anything to do with school.* So “environmental education” is not the right description of them either. I propose a different conception: “enabling environmental practice.”

Rock-quarrying and bird-watching and the like are, in the first place, *practices*: they are practical, they are things that one does, rather than things one reads about or watches on TV; activities that call for and call forth skill, artistry, craft; and that extend over time (we speak of “a practice,” of “practices” as a noun), even across generations. They are *environmental* practices, because they engage us with the more-than-human, with the larger living world. And they are *enabling* practices in a sense I borrow from Illich’s (1973) *Tools for Conviviality*: they open possibilities (“enabling” them) rather than closing them (“disabling” them), and they enable us to find connections ourselves, rather than disabling us by simply telling us what the connections are.

So instead of teaching our children about plants, for example, we could make garden spaces for them, and then let *their* questions and needs as gardeners drive whatever “study” or development we

do from there. Or perhaps they will not want to garden. Plants will eventually come up in other ways, maybe even in ways we would not have thought of ourselves, as subjects for watercolor paintings, or sources for dyes, or who knows what. My daughter is fascinated by the thought that spider webs were once used for bandaging wounds: the connection is partly that right now she's very interested in playing doctor. We can generate building projects that will carry student/participants into a working relation with the more-than-human world. Even something as simple as making a sandbox allows us to cut the trees and make the boards ourselves, to dig the sand ourselves in the dunes or on the beach, and consider how the sandbox could be shaped and used. Also how to discourage the cat from using it for a litterbox. Everything connects!

In this spirit we might re-approach some of the suggestions in the environmental education literature. Consider again the onion-rub project, for example. Above I complained that however laudable the goals of such projects ("reconnecting with our senses," here), still they are not projects that emerge naturally out of these children's or students' own lives. Thinking about enabling environmental practice would suggest that we explore more systematic, practice-based, "structural" ways to address our disconnection from the senses, so that ultimately these goals (or effects) do emerge naturally out of these children's or students' own lives. This is the key point. Of course we need to change the schools, but what we *really* need to change is our *lifeworld* – change it so that the rest of nature, the "more-than-human," is more with us, in all its endless fascination and power.

The questions here are wider-angled but still emphatically concrete. Instead of having to concoct special exercises like the "onion trail," let us for example consider something like this: how, in general, could we make our learning and living spaces more smelly? We could plant herbs all around, instead of the scentless plants (or no plants) we usually encounter. Food-preparation smells might not be instantly pumped out by kitchen fans. Bouquets, perfumes, animals, machine oils, storms, fresh bread: the lifeworld easily gets smellier. The point is that smell could surround us; orienting to smell would become second-nature, part of the setting of our lives and not some special exercise in school. Scent-tracking and smell-texturing need to become part of our everyday lives.

Or take bird-watching. Schools now put up bird posters and occasionally (very occasionally, in my experience) teach bird identification. But again this effort comes off as a contrived exercise, connected to nothing beyond school. Once again the real task is to change the larger lifeworld: here, to open an everyday awareness of bird life. We could imagine that bird feeders and bird-friendly plantings could become something of a civic duty. Bird count days, like the Audubon society sponsors in the US on Christmas, could become national holidays. Then imagine the excitement of young schoolchildren at learning the birds – yes, even in school! Perhaps this year they will finally spot that pileated woodpecker, or ruby-crowned kinglet. School may give them the tools, but it is primarily the culture that must give them the hope and desire.

Or again, taking a degree of ecological responsibility for our own buildings and their grounds – one of the ideas I have cited from the standard environmental education literature as well as from critics such as Orr – would be far more effective if it were an expectation of all of us, all of the time. After all, what messages do students get when schools are the *only* places for which one is so responsible?

On the theme of holidays, like Bird Count Day, we could imagine any number of others too. Imagine "Star Nights" on which all lights everywhere are turned out: these could be timed to coincide with meteor showers, eclipses, occultations. The poet Antler recalls Emerson's epiphany – "If the stars came out only one night in a thousand years, how people would believe and adore, and preserve from generation to generation, remembrance of the miracle they'd been shown." Antler imagines the scene:

Whole populations thronging to darkened
baseball stadiums and skyscrapertops
to sit holding hands en masse
and look up at the billion-year spree
of the realm of the nebulae! (1992, p. 92)

We might co-ordinate other festivals with the great animal migrations: whales, salmon, hawks, warblers. Every bioregion has its possibilities.

Again, it is not my aim in this paper to argue against environmental education as such. Instead, my aim is to broaden our conception of what we might be about – as environmentally-concerned *people*, not just educators – so that we might become more effective in practical action, and finally so that the true possibilities for “education,” even of the traditional variety, become clear. The crucial thing, then, to say it again, is that we act in *all* our capacities – parents, neighbors, citizens, planners, etc. as well (some of us) as teachers – to enliven the world, to invoke and evoke the manifold hidden possibilities of things, to keep our lives persistently and openly embedded in the more-than-human, so that our teachers encounter children already eager and connected, bringing their environmental passions to school rather than having to find them there. Schools are part of the story, I’m sure: but my point is that it neither fair nor promising nor even possible, in the end, to leave the job primarily to them. The challenge of cultural transformation, meanwhile, is profoundly engaging for all of us, and imperative in its own right.

Acknowledgments

Pamela Courtney Hall, Val Plumwood, and Bob Jickling offered many helpful comments and much encouragement as this paper went through various stages prior to this one. Of course they are not to be held responsible for what I say here. Pamela Courtney Hall in particular offered a Deweyesque re-appreciation of the possibilities of schools, while still acknowledging and indeed furthering many of the points made here. Perhaps the possibilities are not so bleak after all!

Notes on Contributor

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