

Guest Editorial

Culturing Environmental Education: From First Nation to Frustration

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Sitting on a beachfront at the Texas resort of South Padre Island, a space so consumed with consuming, is probably not the most likely starting point for an Editorial on “Culturing Environmental Education,” but that is where, in late 2000, Bob Jickling and I met and became fully immersed in this exciting project. It is a privilege to be able to help shape *Volume 7* of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, but in so doing, I must put forward three caveats.

First, in order to allow “Other voices” to speak, we have silenced some who should have been heard. The vicissitudes of the peer review process are cruelly exposed in a collection such as this where “scholarly” and other academic criteria determine which voices will, and will not be heard. To those who submitted, but are not being heard, I apologize.

Second, and most importantly, I need to make a statement of positionality. Many writers (see, for example, Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Haraway, 1988; Hartsock, 1987) make the point that knowledges are always situated and structured in different ways and they are produced by actors who have a position. This makes a huge difference to the product. So, who I am, (and who you are) will influence what you are about to read. I’m a 43 year old, biracial, married, heterosexual male of African and British ancestry. I was raised by my white mother, and completed my education(s) in the British system. I now live and work as an academic in the Boston metro area in the United States.

Third, because of my own Otherness (in relation to my biracial heritage), there may be a supposition that I am in some way (more) qualified to pronounce on cultural approaches to environmental education than someone else. This is not so. There are so many aspects of this rapidly expanding terrain which I have not yet mapped (in some cases, nor has anyone). Reading our contributors’ texts and writing this Editorial has however allowed me to probe my own (mis)understanding(s) and develop something of an overview, however brief and sketchy.

Introduction

One of the first questions for discussion in my graduate class “Developing Sustainable Communities” is “Sustainable Development: Policy Change or Paradigm Shift?” In other words, can we achieve sustainable communities¹ by simply tweaking existing policy(ies), or do we need to shift the dominant social

paradigm, that is, the way we view and explain the world? This reformist versus revolution-style question is answered by Bowers (2001) in relation to his notion of an “eco-justice pedagogy” when he asserts that it “needs to be based on a radical re-conceptualization of basic assumptions rather than on the assimilation of an eco-justice vocabulary into existing progressive theories of educational reform” (p. 26). From a sustainability standpoint, my students concur.

This paradigmatic, as opposed to reformist thinking was instrumental in our choice of title for this volume of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*. Aside from the problematized and assimilationist nature of the concept of multicultural education, “Multicultural Environmental Education” (MEE), yet another “adjectival adjectival education,” was seen as being too easy to ghettoize within the flowering of competing arenas within environmental education. Most importantly however, in our minds, Multicultural Environmental Education could (and would? see Marouli in this issue) be interpreted as a (disposable) *part* of environmental education, not the whole. It would be seen as “targettable” environmental education: “remedial” environmental education. It would be seen as something “*they* do in cities,” or something “*for* diverse populations.”

We arrived at the concept of Culturing Environmental Education, which, although not perfect, speaks to the need for a paradigm shift in our approach; to a root and branch re-conceptualization of the relationship between issues of culture, environment and education. In effect, we wanted to investigate the potential for reframing environmental education around the loosely defined notion of “culture.”² This is not to disrespect the excellent “Multicultural Environmental Education” special edition of *Race, Poverty and the Environment* (Winter/Spring, 1996), which, six years on, still stands as a monument to improved theory, practice, and reflection in environmental education. Nor is it to belittle the far sightedness of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), Commission on Multicultural Education’s (1978) policy statement: “No One Model American.” In a plea for cultural pluralism in education, which rejects assimilation and separatism, the the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education argue for the teaching of values which support cultural diversity and individual uniqueness; the access of all cultures; the support of explorations in alternative and emerging lifestyles; and the support of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multidialectism.

However, despite this, the concept of Culturing Environmental Education seemed to us to better capture the zeitgeist of these times. Whereas the meta-narrative of “multiculturalism” has been used in Britain and many other countries to legitimize an essentialist “one size fits all” or “steel bands, saris, and samosas” approach; we recognize that cultural perspectives are often intensely personal mini-narratives (see, for instance, Peter Cole in this issue). They are an important, yet both an under-represented *dimension* and *resource* within environmental education. We felt that this approach would help people to speak in their own voices, about their own issues, in their own way. And they did.

Culture and Environmental Education

hooks, in her books such as *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), and *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989) articulates theories of teaching and learning that focus on the “Other”: those “multiple voices” that are not listened to nor heard. These are voices that are not part of the dominant culture and which are consequently both marginalized and silenced. In an environmental education context, Running Grass (1996) concurs. He points to Multicultural Environmental Education as a process for both personal transformation, and social change: “You are holding a powerful tool in your hands. It’s a vehicle for voices, a link in a chain, a counter-narrative, an exposé, a source of inspiration and therefore hope; it is also a continuing sign of the birth of new perspectives and values and a new field of theory and practice within environmental education: multicultural environmental education” (p. 1).

This “vehicle for voices,” argued Running Grass (1996), has four streams: environmental justice, multicultural education, environmental education, and critical pedagogy. These streams have merged to produce “a very new kind of environmental education, where content is influenced by and taught from multiple cultural perspectives” (p. 1). Schlosberg (1999), in his investigation into the theoretical underpinnings of the environmental justice movement, details the historical growth of the many environmentalisms. He notes that “the growth has been . . . in various meanings of what environmentalism is, the numerous identities and discourses that have developed, and in the expansion of actions environmentalists have taken—personally and politically—to help bring their views toward realization” (p. 3). Culturing approaches to environmental education acknowledge, welcome, and celebrate these numerous (new) voices, counter-narratives, identities, and discourses and respect the validity of their inputs.

Content and Process

However, as Leanne Simpson, an Anishinaabekwe (Ojibwe woman), reminds us in her paper on “Indigenous Environmental Education for Cultural Survival,” we must not just educate in a culturally appropriate way, rather we must educate in a culturally *inherent* way. This may seem a small point, but in cultural terms, it is of the same magnitude as the difference between waste recycling and waste reduction to environmental activists. Simpson makes another crucial point in that she argues that “employing indigenous ways of teaching and learning including ceremonies, dreams, visions and visioning, fasting, storytelling, learning by doing, observation, reflecting, and creating not only allows students to share in a culturally inherent manner but also reinforces the concept that Indigenous Knowledge is not only *content*, but also *process*” (my emphasis). In this, she acknowledges the work of Cajete whose 1994 book, *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*, detailed an

indigenous education in terms of indigenous knowledge bases: the environmental; the mythic; the visionary and artistic; and the affective and communal.

Peter Cole and Shirley Sterling probe different aspects of these knowledge bases. Cole is a member of the In-SHUCK-ch Nation of British Columbia. His paper “land and language: translating aboriginal cultures,” is a rich and revealing narrative written in a style close to the oral tradition of his Nation. It is about a conference he attended with friends at Yale University in 1998 on First Nations issues. Cole’s use of humour is evident: “we paddled up here this morning from warwick new york in our vw golf” and “it is a crime to overturn a scrupulously cleansed history as you know all rhetorical questions are accusations.” Sterling, in “Yaya’ And The Firbough: A Philosophy of Respect,” based on the Nlakapamux concept of respect, asks us “is the First Nations concept of respect relevant in the public school system and how might we apply it to classroom teaching? In view of the fact that 30,000 First Nations learners attend public schools in British Columbia, these are relevant questions.”

Crossing Borders: Cross-Cultural, Research and “Other” Perspectives

Kumi Kato’s paper, “Environment and Culture: Developing Alternative Perspectives in Environmental Discourse,” establishes the importance of developing cross-cultural awareness in environmental discourse as a way of providing alternatives to mainstream viewpoints. Through two cases relating to the dominant culture’s perception of Asian attitudes to the environment in Australia (“Backward looking barbarians”—*The Australian*, 19 June 2000), she argues that “developing a sense of cross-cultural awareness that challenges undetected assumptions in ideologies and discourse is an essential task for all environmental practitioners in politics, policy-making, management and education.”

While they don’t focus on cross-cultural issues in the same way as Kato, Heila Lotz-Sisitka and Jane Burt, in their paper, “Being Brave: Writing Environmental Education Research Texts,” ask questions about representing environmental education research. Implicit in their paper is that there are many (research) cultures in environmental education. They ask “whether the conventional ‘thesis’ with its culture, history and tradition is the only way” and make the point “if, in environmental education work we are serious about a process of social transformation, perhaps we need to reflexively review and continue to bravely re-search our textual conventions in a way that will contribute to our own and others’ learning in research.”

June George and Joyce Glasgow, in their paper, “Culturing Environmental Education in the Caribbean,” argue that “one dichotomy that exists pits culture as behaviour against culture as shared meanings.” The interpretation they adopt in their paper straddles this dichotomy. They continue by making an important distinction between informal and formal environmental education, arguing that the former is already “cultured,” coming as it does from “the beliefs of community members with respect to the environment.” This is not

so, they argue, in the case of formal education, the theoretical underpinnings of which “are more likely to be based on the culture of conventional science.” This cultural critique of Western science is a point made from a First Nations perspective by Simpson in her paper, and from a Kenyan perspective by Njoki Wane and Deborah Chandler in their paper “African Women, Cultural Knowledge, and Environmental Education with a Focus on Kenya’s Indigenous Women.” Wane and Chandler “acknowledge the ideological differences between indigenous knowledge and ‘modern’ knowledge” and call for a balanced approach in environmental education.

Kato, George and Glasgow, and Wane and Chandler all point to the inability of Western/conventional models of environmental education to address cross-cultural issues. However, this seems to be an aim of the innovative Master of Science in Resource Management (MSc-RM) at Lincoln University, Aotearoa New Zealand. It is a two year program intended to create professional resource managers. It includes four streams: ecology, economics, policy and socio-cultural studies.

Rixecker (1998, www.ec.gc.ca/eco/education/Papers/rixecker) notes that “the program provides environmental education in, for, and about Aotearoa New Zealand, a country described as bicultural . . . because an official relationship was established between Maori, the First Peoples, and the British Crown through the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi/Treaty of Waitangi in 1840.” When qualified as resource managers, they will implement the 1991 Resource Management Act. But, asks Rixecker “how can they do this when the Act is premised upon Pakeha (non-Maori) structures and processes, couched within the English language and carrying the baggage of colonization, capitalism, and individualism? The broad answer: by learning to appreciate and differentiate the strengths and weaknesses of various cultural representations and practices, especially within the historical context of Aotearoa New Zealand.” In other words, the resource managers must become “*culturally competent*,” that is, develop the ability to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross et al., quoted in Agyeman, 2001). This is easier to say, than to do, as Rixecker (1998, www.ec.gc.ca/eco/education/Papers/rixecker) reminds us: “how can this be achieved when the primary educator of socio-cultural studies is not from Aotearoa New Zealand and is trained in and by American universities? What are the assumptions and challenges of allowing such academic border crossings? To what extent can such border crossings facilitate environmental education and “sustainability” in a postmodern age?”

Ethics, Justice, and Environmental Education

Will reformist strategies change minds and curricula or do they just help people think we’re changing? The Environmental Education Council of Ohio recently held their 35th annual conference entitled “Diversity Matters: Nature, Culture and Environmental Education” (www.lakecountyohio.org/soil/)

2002EECOConference.PDF). The conference was arranged around four strands namely “nurturing diverse perspectives,” “developing pragmatic approaches,” “managing environmental education organizations,” and “reaching diverse audiences.” Individual sessions with titles such as “current environmental education research” (not even “alternative,” or “future”), “nature study in the paved environment,” “*relating* to multicultural audiences” (my emphasis), and “marketing to urban audiences” highlight the pitfalls of token reformism. Nowhere is a discussion of power, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability/disability hinted at, never mind mentioned. Yet conferences such as this are the norm in Western/conventional models of environmental education.

Taylor (1996) argues that “environmental justice activists have inserted issues of power, domination, racism, discrimination, distribution of risks and benefits, inequality and justice into the debate, agenda and education process” (p. 4). One environmental educator who is using these issues to produce an empowering curriculum is Stephanie Kaza. Kaza’s paper “Teaching Ethics Through Environmental Justice” utilizes the liberation theology of Gerard Fourez to raise critical issues. Fourez developed a four step model which: assesses dominant social norms and names the promulgating agents; notes how these norms serve those in power; develops the process of “conscientization,” and finally assists in the articulation of a structural ethics to address (white) privilege. Kaza and her colleagues use Fourez’s model to immerse students in environmental justice at the predominantly white and wealthy University of Vermont. She notes that through this experience, students recognize their own *denial*; they get firsthand experience of *inequity*; they become aware of their own *complicity*, and finally, they witness *resistance*. An interesting exercise would be to utilize this model to teach an identical syllabus at a very diverse institution, and to share experiences and observations with Kaza and her colleagues.

(Re)Framing Environmental Education

Christina Marouli’s paper, “Multicultural Environmental Education: Theory and Practice,” details her Fulbright-funded research into Multicultural Environmental Education in the United States in the summer of 2001. Its findings speak to the need to (re)frame environmental education along lines which recognize cultural diversity and all its implications not as *a* project reducible to “pragmatic approaches” in mid-Western environmental education conferences, but as *the* project for environmental educators. Amongst a welter of observations and recommendations, she first notes that “MEE programs often really target culturally marginalized groups, excluding the dominant ones.” This is exactly the “*targettable*” environmental education I mentioned in the Introduction. The only problem is, as Marouli acknowledges, they miss the *real* target; those who *really* need it: *dominant* audiences. This is why Kaza’s work with predominantly white and wealthy students at the University of Vermont is so important.

Marouli's second point is that Multicultural Environmental Education programs "mostly understand cultural diversity in terms of ethnic origin and less frequently social class." This is a critical point and part of what I call the "*cultural amnesia*" surrounding the concept of cultural diversity, privileging race and ethnicity issues above all other forms of Otherness. The AACTE, Commission on Multicultural Education's (1978) policy statement mentions the need for equal access of all cultures, by which I interpret "socio-economic cultures," as well as ethnicity-based ones. However, as Russell, Sarick, and Kennelly remind us in their paper "Queering Environmental Education," "while critical environmental educators have noted the concern over the marginalization of certain voices, sexuality has yet to make it onto the lists of identity markers worthy of mention." One of the reasons that the AACTE Commission on Multicultural Education's (1978) policy statement is so progressive is that it advocates the support of explorations in *alternative and emerging lifestyles*. The focus of this, in the words of Constance Russell, Tema Sarick, and Jacqueline Kennelly, should be "problematizing heteronormativity, essentialized identities and the heterosexualization of our theories and practices."

From First Nation to Frustration

There is, as this volume of *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* shows, no shortage of theory and practice surrounding the concept of culturing environmental education, and again, I apologize to those whose voices we have not included in this issue. However, the frustration is that, as Marouli shows, much of the material is, in effect, "racialized" environmental education; ignoring the issues of those Others whose voices need to be heard. It seems that the purveyors of some forms of cultural approach can only deal with one *-ism* at a time. Dealing with one *-ism* at a time, is in itself problematical, leading to the easy ghettoization of such approaches. In saying this, I do respect the rationale behind Indigenous environmental education as described by Simpson, focused as it is, on cultural survival through a culturally inherent content and process.

Although we've deliberately shown a range of approaches, the codeword "cultural" is unfortunately almost always interpreted as shorthand for race and ethnicity. Consequently, much of what might pass as culturing approaches is what I call "remedial" environmental education: something "*they* do in cities," or something "*for* diverse populations." As Taylor (1996), Kaza, and Russell, Sarick, and Kennelly have argued, this approach does not challenge the dominant paradigm nor white, male heterosexual power. The challenge now is for us to produce a cultural environmental education which, following Kato's thoughts on cross-cultural awareness "challenges undetected assumptions in ideologies and discourses" and engages both teacher and learner in counter-hegemonic discourses and actions. We hope that the papers in this volume inspire you to rise to this challenge.

Notes

- ¹ As defined by: Department of Environment, Transport, and the Regions (1998).
- ² Although we do not define “culture,” we accepted that our contributors would. Instead of defining it, we solicited articles around a set of themes such as: environmental justice, traditional knowledge, counter hegemony, and/or communities of resistance, communities of transformation, socio-economic change.

Notes on Contributor

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