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## From Global Challenge to Local Efficacy: rediscovering human agency in learning for survival<sup>[1]</sup>

BARRY PERCY-SMITH

**ABSTRACT** There is an assumption underlying education for sustainable development that all we need do is learn the skills and knowledge to live sustainably. Yet, many already know the issues and know we *should* act, but we don't. This article argues that a key part of the problem is that we live according to myths and daydreams perpetuated by a growth oriented global economic system such that ecological collapse remains surreal in our lives. The article argues that for any meaningful progress to be made in response to environmental challenges we need to reconnect with the roots of our existence, become fully conscious of the contradiction between the living daydreams of our lives and the reality of our relationship with nature and become more critically self-aware about our choices, actions and impacts in our everyday lives at a local level. This requires a different approach to education.

### **Introduction: from here to eternity and back again**

John Berger (1972), in his highly acclaimed text *Ways of Seeing*, talks about the power of images – in particular publicity – in shaping human behaviour. He argues that publicity is so effective in maintaining capitalism not because it is relevant to our realities, but instead is relevant to our daydreams. This analysis is pertinent to understanding why human beings are reticent in responding to global environmental change. In reflecting on global ecological collapse and the failure of environmentalism, Paul Kingsnorth (2009) argues that our failure to grasp the reality of the human condition and the gap between how we would like things to be and the reality of how they really are, is the result of a myth that somehow things will be alright with the planet and technology or progress will come to the rescue and bail us out of our foggy illusion of our secure and

taken for granted place in the world. This delusion is dehumanising and undermines the credibility of modern human civilisations. We are of course a highly evolved and intelligent species, able to develop mind-bogglingly sophisticated technology, yet unlike other even significantly less intelligent species, we lack the wisdom of symbiosis – the ability to conserve and live in harmony with our habitat. In the Blue print for survival (*The Ecologist*, 1972, p. 21) it states:

man in the world today is like a bull in a china shop, with the single difference that the bull with half the knowledge about the properties of china as we have about our ecosystems would probably try and adapt its behaviour to its environment rather than the reverse.

Faced with unprecedented global ecological challenges there has of course been considerable attention focused on developing new theories of sustainable development. Yet one can't help but ask what prospects there are for the success of new radical theories of sustainable development within a social and economic system which works on the presumption of growth, profit and expansion contingent on the exploitation of environmental resources. One of the ways in which the challenge of sustainable development has sought to be addressed is through the promise of the 'futuraity' of childhood (Jenks, 1994); although not in ways that allow our children to freely create and envision new ways of living different from what they have inherited. Instead, the promise of childhood is defined by our adult prescriptions of 'right' ways of living, progressed through the education of our children about sustainable development as if, by re-equipping children with new sets of knowledge and skills we will save the planet and live happily ever after. As we seek to look forward we simultaneously look back in nostalgia to an idealised imagined past – another illusion – to resource ourselves with the theories and knowledge we think served us well which we hope will likewise provide the tools for building the future. The irony of course is that past values have not served the greater good of humanity well. So what prospect is there for school-based Education for Sustainable Development to really impact on the global environmental challenges we face, not least whilst the capitalist system continues unabated. How can we then develop different ways of learning and living that are supportive rather than detrimental to our future survival?

Writers on the role of education for sustainable development [2] argue for the need to go beyond transmissive education and adopt a more radical transformative education involving processes of deep learning in relation to the values with which we live (Sterling, 2001). However, discourses of transformative learning are still often presented within a paradigm of linear change, reflected in the assumptions that through deep ecological learning we can develop capacities to address the global crisis. Instead by focusing on the competence of individuals in relation to 'mastery' over their immediate lives, individuals can develop and put in to practice the capacities for sustainable

living in ways that have relevance in the here and now of their immediate existence.

Whilst there are a significant minority who are committed (to different extents) to embracing alternative ways of living, there is a serious question about the extent to which the mass populace will sacrifice their material comforts for more sustainable lifestyles, in spite of modern living not working (in the sense of unhappiness, chronic illness, mental health problems, community and family breakdown, social malaise etc etc.) for many people. A recent report for WWF (Crompton & Thorgerson, 2009) critiques the assumption that learning will spillover into families and communities as, at best, leading only to 'simple and painless changes'. What hope is there then for education for sustainable futures bringing about the necessary transformation to avert ecological collapse? What are the outcomes we can realistically expect from ESD? To what extent can we expect ESD to address global ecological problems? And what sort of learning philosophies might be useful?

Back to John Berger. Berger argues, as does Kingsnorth, that we live in a contradiction between what we are and what we would like to be with the result (or because) of existing social conditions which make the individual feel powerless. These conditions are characterised by the fantasies which we are sold through popular media that produce the illusions that we live by – that through material consumption we will become happy, safe and fulfilled. Berger suggests we have two choices. Either we become fully conscious of the contradiction (between what we are and what we would like to be) and become active in challenging the status quo; or we live with a sense of powerlessness from which we seek escape routes through daydreams constructed by myths and illusions and future promises.

Following the former choice, one of the myths we need to become aware of is that, through education we can do something about the global ecological crisis. For many the crisis is too big and too abstracted from our lives for us to feel empowered to do anything about it.[3] Kingsnorth – an ex-environmental activist – now thinks that it is too late. That we have missed the window for stopping these major ecological changes now. Instead he argues we need to be thinking about what happens next, which means for once facing the reality of what is happening and start writing different stories about how we want to be and live. Kingsnorth argues, the likelihood is that we won't stop the juggernaut of environmental change, but the planet will still be here in some form and human civilisations will still exist in some form. The key issue is in what form and how and when we start writing new stories based on a new awareness of the reality of human relationships with the planet and how we are going to live in the future. By focusing now on the post-environmental project we can start 'designing' new forms of sustainable living by laying the foundations of new forms of human existence which, if we are lucky, might just prevent the worst impacts of global ecological collapse.

By acknowledging the reality of our situation we are confronted with a number of issues or challenges which in turn have implications for how we live and how we learn.

### *Reconnecting with Nature*

First, we need to reconnect with the roots of our existence. I argue this not as an expression of ecological idealism but a necessity. There is an essential psychology in our relationship and connection with nature (Heft & Chawla, 2006) and the planet which has been lost through 'progress' in modernity. Whilst 'development' and industrialisation has given us the opportunity to make our lives easier through machines, this has simultaneously given rise to the unintended effects of losing our sense of power and wisdom and connectedness in our relationship with our global habitat. This has to be addressed as part of any plan to create sustainable futures. In essence this means ensuring our lived realities are characterised by experience of human connectedness with nature.

### *Local Realities*

Second, we need to change the scale of our concern. Seeking to take action in response to global ecological collapse is a huge and unrealistically daunting task. The goal of arresting global ecological collapse is simply too big for us to feel our actions are having any kind of impact. Yet, strategies of education for sustainable development are based on the assumption that if we learn the necessary knowledge and skills we can avert the global ecological crisis. Evidence [4] suggests that whilst there is some merit in promoting sustainable habits through education, the impact of these changes on the wider ecological problem is likely to be limited whilst the juggernaut of global capitalism rolls on. Neither is it possible to effectively confront global capitalism head on and create an alternative in a short time span. Indeed we don't even know what that alternative will be yet. The only option we have is to focus on what we can directly affect at a local level in our everyday lives.

### *Agency and Empowerment*

Third, in re-orientating our focus to our everyday worlds we are necessarily activating our own agency by taking back control of our lives, as individuals and groups. This means taking increasingly more responsibility for the actions and choices which shape how we live in our immediate everyday realities, but doing so in ways which have a built in accountability through environmental and social responsibility. Participation tends to be commonly translated as 'consultation' or 'voice' with respect to decisions made by others, normally professionals. This process of devolvement of power takes away individual responsibility creating a dependency on state institutions which undermines control over our lives. These are not preconditions for promoting active

participation in social change. In the Maori tradition there is an expression '*tino rangatiratanga*' which refers to self-determination over one's life (Williams et al, 2010). We need to develop a sense of *tino rangatiratanga* but at the same time we also need to develop what Heft & Chawla refer to as '*environmental competence*' as a defining element in our transactions with the planet.

### *Critical Reflexivity*

Fourth, in order to reconnect with nature and become more aware of the reality of the impacts of our relationship with it, we need to redevelop a capacity for critical reflexivity, or as Postman & Weingartner (1969) put it: we need to become '*crap detectors*'; developing the attitudes and skills of political and cultural criticism (p. 16). 'Participation' is seen as an imperative in current approaches to bringing about change. Yet, the emancipatory potential of participation has gradually been hijacked and colonised by mainstream policy discourses which offer the illusion of empowerment whilst in reality exacerbating control and dependency of individuals on the state. Kingsnorth similarly observes how the deep ecological commitment implicit in environmentalism has given way to a superficial 'green' consumerism characterised by a reliance on 'managerialism' as a strategy for change as the environmental agenda has become mainstreamed. This co-option as well as the deeper underlying crisis in human-environmental relationships can only be challenged through developing a different consciousness. Paulo Freire (1972) talked of *consicentization* – the development of a critical consciousness – which can be understood in terms of:

looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. Provided with the tools for such an encounter, the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, [...] deal critically with it ... and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world.  
(Freire, 1972, pp. 14, 16)

Becoming more aware of our place in, and interactions with, the world by implication also means becoming more critically self aware about our choices and actions and the intended as well as unintended impacts that result.

### *Creativity*

Doing what we have always done will get us what we always get. Unless we find spaces for creativity in which we can think differently and innovate our thinking and practices we will end up simply reinforcing the status quo. Human beings are innately creative and intelligent, but rarely is that intelligence tapped and utilised. The use of creative forms and processes, like action research, support different ways of seeing and knowing and can provide a fertile ground

for learning for change. Unless we create spaces for critical inquiry and reflection, for wonder and for experimentation we will simply reinvent the wheel.

### **The Learning Challenge**

These challenges for human society in turn have implications for education and how we learn – as adults as well as children. Much has been written about theories and examples from practice of how children and young people in particular have engaged in learning for sustainable development (see, for example, Corcoran & Ozano, 2009). To finish this article I want to consider the implications of the challenges outlined above for approaches to learning. In particular I want to propose *action research* as a credible alternative by considering how key elements of action research are relevant to learning for sustainability.

#### *Experiential Learning*

First and foremost we need to reconnect people with nature by changing the setting for learning outside of the classroom in community settings where ‘real world’ learning can take place in relation to the reality of lived experiences. Experiential learning provides opportunities for people to gain first hand direct experiences of nature. Within schools, school gardens and farms provide opportunities for children to gain experience and develop practical knowledge and skills that can build capacity, confidence and self determination but also develop empathy with nature. Developing connections with nature in local contexts also develops a sense of belonging. Connection with nature does not only mean being in and feeling or experiencing nature (the elements, the feel of the soil etc) but also understanding the cycles and processes of nature.

#### *Person-centred Learning*

Through encounters locally with nature it becomes possible for individuals to become more self aware of their own values and actions in relation to nature. Although we live in a social world, ultimately motivation and change originates within each individual and people’s own struggles in coming to terms with their own sense of identity, place and contribution to the world. If individuals feel valued and cared for they are more likely in turn to care for the world around them. In turn critical self reflection brings individuals into constellations with others giving rise to collective processes of social learning. By holding these criteria constant it ensures that any change process puts the needs and well being of people central and against which changes can be evaluated. What I am advocating here is human scale education.

*Critical Thinking and Inquiry*

By situating learning within the context of experience and self awareness, reflection and inquiry naturally follow as learners begin to ask questions as they seek to understand their place on the world. At one level this involves asking critical questions through inquiry which challenge established norms and assumptions. In turn, this leads to a more holistic or whole system focus for inquiry as people relate local realities to wider social, economic and environmental systems.

*Participatory Social Learning*

Whilst we need to root our learning and action in our individual lifeworlds, our realities are lived out in social arenas in relation to others. A number of writers use ideas of social learning to signify the importance of learning in groups (see Wildemeersch et al, 1998; Percy-Smith, 2006). Through engaging with others new possibilities for creative learning arise as a product of collaborative engagement. Some refer to this as a 'communicative action space' (Kemmis, 2001) characterised by dialogue and reciprocity in which the product of collaborative learning is greater than the sum of its parts whilst at the same time engendering a sense of empowerment over change processes. Through participatory learning individuals also develop a sense of responsibility and an action consciousness – that they can make a difference. Inter-generational learning and peer-to-peer learning are important dimensions to participatory social learning wherein learning becomes a collaborative venture rooted in experience.

*Action-focused Learning*

Through the act of looking at the world and one's own position in relation to it, the learner becomes aware of his/her own possibilities for action. Through reflection and inquiry within the action research process the individual is able to build knowledge, skills and understanding which can open up choices for alternative action and build capacity for self determination and empowerment. In the context of environmental sustainability this means environmental competence (Heft & Chawla, 2006). In contrast to lived realities for many in the western world in which people have little direct control or power over their lives, through person-centred, inquiry-based learning and reflection, individuals and communities can develop a sense of empowerment over their lives and strategies to fulfil that goal. However, generating new thinking is a creative process requiring space for new ideas and visions to germinate, take root and blossom. Developing new possibilities for action therefore is necessarily an experimental, reflective and emergent process of learning.



## Conclusion

This article has argued that central to Education for Sustainable Development is the task of focusing on how well learning contributes to people's ability to live sustainably in their everyday lives. This means drilling down to the heart of human agency and motivation in relation to the roots of human existence and focusing on enhancing people's ability to become more empowered in the decisions that shape their lives. The underlying challenge is to develop approaches to learning which develop different qualities in individuals – concerned with what people do and how people live rather than solely on what they know. Such a refocusing of learning needs to centrally address issues of critical reflexivity, creativity and agency in collaboration with others. There are small examples where some schools have started to embrace these challenges, even within the restrictive confines of the national curriculum, for example through the work of creative practitioner Clare Carney at Brocklewood Infants school in Nottingham, creative learning initiatives at Leedon Lower school in Leighton Buzzard, the Forest school projects discussed in this issue, and community-based environmental learning projects such as the Growing up in Cities project (Chawla 2002). We need to learn from these examples and support developments in education which seek to evolve and practice new forms of person-centred learning that have at its heart the development of creativity and critical thinking and the empowerment of individuals to take back control over their lives.

## Notes

- [1] This article is based in part on research funded by the ESRC and Housing and communities Academy as part of the Skills and Knowledge for sustainable communities research programme. RES-182-25-0038.
- [2] A number of writers have begun to talk of education *as* rather than *for* development (see for example Vare & Scott, 2007). Others argue that even the word development is misleading as it suggests progress in terms of growth rather than sustainability.
- [3] A recent news report from the Copenhagen climate summit (BBC1, December 14, 2009) states that approximately 50% of the public do not accept there is a climate change problem. Watts in *The Guardian* (*The Guardian Weekend*, 12 December, 2009, p. 29) presents similar statistics.
- [4] See, for example, Percy-Smith & Burns, 2009; Crompton & Thorgerson, 2009.

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