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Environmental Education is History: The Extent to Which Modern History Education Adopts Characteristics of Socially Critical Environmental Education[1]

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Abstract   This paper reports on a research study that investigated the extent to which the Queensland secondary school subject Modern History adopts characteristics of socially critical environmental education. The study found that while the Modern History syllabus gives ample opportunities for students to focus their inquiries on *environment*, Modern History teachers had overlooked this aspect of the syllabus. More positive findings of this research are that both the syllabus and teachers adopt many characteristics of socially critical environmental education. In particular, the *values*, *political* and *emancipatory* characteristics feature strongly in both policy and practice. To a lesser extent, both the *holistic* and *issues-based* characteristics are represented. Finally, this research study shows that the *action* characteristic, as defined in socially critical environmental education, is clearly neglected. Despite this, there is a case to be made for Modern History to be used as a vehicle for socially critical environmental education in Queensland schools.

Introduction

This paper summarises a research study that investigated the potential of the Queensland secondary school subject Modern History to adopt characteristics of socially critical environmental education (SCEE). The study arose out of my own classroom practice. While teaching Modern History in Queensland schools, I found the dividing line between human problems and environmental ones was often blurred. In fact, by studying the evolving conflicts of race, gender, class and ideology, Modern History students were actually exposed to some of the dominant values conflicts that socially critical environmental educators also seek to address.

The research study focuses on two aspects of modern history education: Queensland's Modern History syllabus and Queensland Modern History teachers. Two research questions were posed:

1. Does Queensland's Modern History syllabus allow *environment* to become a focus of students' work, and does it allow teachers to explore environmental issues in a *socially critical* way?
2. How receptive are Modern History teachers to including *environment* in their work programs, and to what extent could their teaching be termed *socially critical*?

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Background

Environmental Crisis as Social Crises – The Need for a Socially Critical Approach to Environmental Education

> (The Ecological Crisis is) ... invariably political, having to do with "who gets what, when, and how". (Orr, 1994, p. 70)

This research study begins with an overarching premise: that environmental problems stem from unequal and exploitative relationships between humans across the spectrum of race, class, gender, location and time. This premise, of course, is not new; it draws its philosophical roots from social ecology and is a platform of SCEE. Central to the assertions of social ecologists is the claim that "nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems" (Bookchin, in Zimmerman et al., 1993, p. 354).

In Australia's formal school setting, however, some educators have argued that environmental education is deficient because it neglects these "deep-seated social problems" (Connell, 1997; Payne, 1995; Smyth, 1998). For instance, in Connell's study she concluded that while students had a high awareness of environmental problems, they had a "very low understanding of the social, political and economical causes" (Connell, 1997, p. iii). Fien confirms that, in environmental education, there is "widespread avoidance of environmental politics and the political economy of resource use" (in Jickling & Spork, 1998, p. 315).

Many environmental educators have argued that it is through a *socially critical* approach to environmental education that political/social/cultural/economic processes can be scrutinised for their role in the environmental crisis (Huckle, in Greenall Gough, 1992, p. 127; Payne, 1995, p. 96). While there is no formal set of agreed upon characteristics of SCEE, over time six characteristics have become well embedded in

Characteristic	Description
Values Explicit	Values underpin decisions – students cannot critique decisions without also exposing and critiquing the platform of values that support those decisions.
Political	All decisions affecting the environment are political decisions involving the maintenance and distribution of power. Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by these decisions?
Action-oriented	Action, or real-life learning, is an integral stage of the learning cycle. It encourages students to make an emotional investment in their learning and gives them agency to make change.
Holistic	Environmental and social problems are interdisciplinary. A holistic approach to *environment*, drawing on all knowledge areas reflects real-life problem-solving.
Issues-based	Education is purposeful when it is centred on issues that are topical and relevant to students' lives.
Emancipatory	Education should empower students to make change in their worlds. Education is a tool to redress injustice and overcome inequality.

FIGURE 1: Characteristics of Socially Critical Environmental Education

the literature[2]. These six characteristics formed the benchmarks for this research study and are summarised in Figure 1 below:

SCEE in Purgatory – Why it's Time to Look for Alternatives in Environmental Education

> ... this was not the best time to put (environmental education) strategies in place, for (principals) had little inclination, energy or time to address yet another curriculum priority. (Clark, 1997, p. ii)

At present, SCEE in Queensland schools is in a kind of purgatory – promoted by policy makers while often neglected by school administrators and teachers. Queensland secondary schools face similar challenges that impede SCEE in other places, including inflexible administrative structures (OECD in Robottom, 1990, p. 62; Lang, 2003, p. 7), overcrowded curriculum (Gough, 2003, p. 2; Clark, 1997, p. ii) and reluctant teachers (Hunt, 1991, p. 102; Bell, 2000, p. 77). In Queensland schools, environmental education is characterised by a neglect of the "critical aspects of education" and by students experiencing "frustration, sadness and pessimism" about environmental problems (Yencken, Fien & Sykes, 2000, p. 156 & 211). In short, a new approach is needed.

Unlike environmental education, modern history education in Queensland holds a stable, if not a burgeoning place in the school curriculum[3]. There is much to be said for utilising the gains made by modern history education—as a subject with a *social* focus— to further SCEE. And yet, modern history education has only briefly been explored as a vehicle for SCEE in schools. In his 1993 article, Hoepper posed to Australian history teachers the possibility of "greening the history curriculum" (Hoepper, 1993, p. 11). In the National Environmental Education Council's curriculum mapping, Queensland's Modern History syllabus (the subject of this research study) rates a brief but unsubstantiated mention for its environmental education potential (Environment Australia, 2003). Apart from this, however, there is a paucity of Australian research that explores the potential of history education to meet the goals of SCEE.

Research Methodology

This research study used the case study method. This method was chosen because it is "empirically omnivorous" allowing the researcher the flexibility to adopt both quantitative and qualitative methods and utilise a range of data collection techniques (Freebody, 2003, p. 82). This flexibility is an advantage of the case study method. Not only does this allow for alternative and corroborative pathways of inquiry, it also allows for triangulation of data to control for validity and reliability (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 215; Silverman, 2001, p. 233). Secondly, the case study method has what Bachor (2000) terms "face-value" credibility. In other words, due to the bounded and detailed nature of the case study, results are more likely to impact on teacher practice (Freebody, 2003, p. 81).

The research employed three data collection techniques to corroborate data and to demonstrate validity. A *textual analysis* of the 2004 Queensland Modern History Senior Syllabus was undertaken to determine the inclusion of *environment* in the syllabus and whether the syllabus promoted the six characteristics of SCEE, as described in Figure 1 above. A *semi-structured interview* with four Modern History syllabus writers was conducted to discover their justification for including *environment* in the syllabus. Data were analysed and coded using themes derived from the literature review and initial textual analysis of the Modern History syllabus. Finally, a *questionnaire survey* using both qualitative and quantitative techniques was conducted with teachers of Modern History in early 2005. Surveys were analysed according to Neuman's three-

stage coding model (Neuman, 2003, p. 442). 19 of the 28 schools involved in trialling the 2004 Modern History syllabus participated in the survey, resulting in 22 respondents. The survey sought to discover whether Modern History teachers adopted the six characteristics of SCEE and whether they incorporated *environment* into their modern history teaching.

Summary of Findings

Inclusion of Environment

The Modern History syllabus focuses on *environment* in three ways. Firstly, *ecological sustainability* is promoted in the syllabus rationale as a pedagogical goal. The rationale states:

> Underlying these studies and the values involved in them should be a commitment to open-minded debate, human rights and responsibilities, improvements in the quality of life, social justice and ecological sustainability. (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 3)

Secondly, *environment* features in the *"People and Environments in History"* theme, one of 16 themes in the syllabus available for schools to choose from. The purpose of the theme is stated below:

> … students will understand that changes and continuities in human values, attitudes, knowledge and practices can affect natural and built environments over time, and that human values, attitudes, knowledge and practices can be shaped by human experience of environments. (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 35)

Thirdly, *environment* features in the *focus questions* provided to students to structure their inquiries. *Environment* is included as one dimension of student inquiry, alongside the political, economic, spiritual and cultural dimensions, as the following focus question exemplifies:

> To what extent did the phenomenon produce deep-seated changes to ideas and beliefs (such as the way people thought about the meaning of human existence, or about preferred forms of social, economic and political organisation, or about preferred forms of relationship between people, and between people and environments)? (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 27)

Modern History syllabus writers justified their inclusion of *environment* by claiming that "the environment is just part of the agenda…and you couldn't not address it" (Interviewee A). Interviewee B elaborates, describing the intersection between modern history education and SCEE:

> "Critical inquiry" in history and "critical" environmental education share pedagogical commitments to student inquiry. They are "critical" in probing and evaluating deep seated taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas, and in encouraging students to make decisions about the effects of human activity and the "sustainability" of dominant practices … (Interviewee B).

Interestingly, syllabus writers did not think many Modern History teachers would include the "People and Environments" theme in their work programs, a view confirmed by the survey. No teachers surveyed included the "People and Environments in History" theme in their school Modern History work programs. This supports syllabus writers' comments that this theme was perhaps "a bit left field" and "just too new" (Interviewee

B). What the survey did not reveal was whether or not the environmental dimension was being given the same level of attention as other more traditional dimensions of historical inquiry, such as the political or economic dimensions.

Characteristics of Socially Critical Environmental Education

The Modern History syllabus is inconsistent in its adoption of all six characteristics of SCEE. Interestingly, the survey revealed that those characteristics neglected by, or not strongly emphasised in, the syllabus (*holistic*, *action* and *issues* characteristics) correspond to those characteristics overlooked by teachers. However, the characteristics that feature strongly in the syllabus (*values*, *political* and *emancipatory* characteristics) also feature strongly in teacher's practice.

Values characteristic

The *values* characteristic features very strongly in the syllabus and manifests itself in two distinct ways. Firstly, there is an investigation into *societal values*, such as attitudes and beliefs, or human motivation. Secondly, there is a focus on *personal values refinement*. These two categories are exemplified in the following statement found in the Rationale. Again the pedagogical goal of *ecological sustainability* is reinforced:

> There is a special focus on values. In historical studies, we encounter different values, investigate their origins and study their impact on human affairs. We begin to decide which values might guide us in building a more democratic, just and ecologically sustainable world. (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 3)

Teachers were emphatic in their support of a values focus in Modern History. All respondents believed students <u>always</u> (12 respondents) or <u>almost always</u> (10 respondents) "explored, questioned and challenged values that underpin events and issues" in their classes. Many respondents referred to the *socially critical* nature of modern history education. For instance, Respondent 7 "encourage(s) students to question everything" while Respondent 13 states that "questioning individual's motives to determine values is (the) starting point". Respondent 9 further justifies a critical values focus:

> (An exploration of values) is the basis for understanding and critiquing historical events and society. It gives students a context on which to base their assertions. (Respondent 9)

Political characteristic

Like the *values* characteristic, respondents revealed a strong focus on the *political* characteristic in their teaching. The majority of teachers "refer to political issues in their teaching" either <u>every lesson</u> (7 respondents) or <u>most of the time</u> (11 respondents), while four respondents claimed that this <u>depended on the inquiry topic</u>. The syllabus supports teachers in this regard, as exemplified in the following global aim:

> Through studying Modern History, students will:
>
> … understand the forces and influences that have shaped the modern world.
>
> Students will understand that the state of the world at any given time is the result of complex processes or change and continuity. These processes involve the exercise of power and reflect complementary, competing and conflicting interests and motives. (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 5)

Issues that incorporated both a political and environmental focus in Modern History classrooms included the war in Iraq (10 respondents), the Kyoto Protocol (4

respondents), Boxing Day tsunami (3 respondents), the "war on terror" (3 respondents) and the Middle East conflict (2 respondents).

Action-oriented characteristic

While the syllabus states on one occasion that studying Modern History is "an ethical basis for action" (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 6), there is little in the syllabus to recommend the subject as a vehicle for immediate change. Indeed, the *action* characteristic, as defined in SCEE, barely registers amongst surveyed teachers. 13 respondents claim they <u>almost never</u> or <u>never</u> present students with "real-life learning opportunities". Those survey respondents who claimed they did present real-life learning opportunities mostly defined these opportunities in terms of excursions. This is a limiting definition not supported by the literature (Chapman, McPhee & Proudman, 1992, p. 17).

Holistic characteristic

The Modern History syllabus is not inter-disciplinary in the way suggested by some environmental educators (Hunt, 1991, p. 103; Walsh, 1984, p. 21). This is not surprising given the disciplinary nature of Queensland's formal school sector, particularly in the senior phase of schooling. The syllabus does, however, promote a multi-dimensional approach to learning and it is here that the potential of modern history to adopt the holistic characteristic is seen. The syllabus focuses on "the interdependencies between the social, cultural, political, economic, environmental and ethical aspects of experience" (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 2). This holistic approach occurs most markedly in the focus questions presented to students to structure their inquiries, as the example below makes clear:

> At the time, what were the major effects of this phenomenon on human wellbeing, social, political and economic structures, and environments? (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 27)

There is little to suggest from the survey that Modern History teachers were advancing an inter-disciplinary approach to teaching. Seven respondents actually claimed to have <u>never worked</u> "with another department" in the school setting, while another four respondents only <u>rarely</u> worked with other departments. Time constraints and coordination difficulties were given as two barriers to an inter-disciplinary approach. Those teachers who did work with other departments mainly drew on their expertise to help with things such as assessment (Respondents 14 and 18) and content knowledge (Respondents 19 and 20).

Issues-based characteristic

Except for the "School-based" theme, there is no prescription in the syllabus to focus on topical issues. Despite this lack of prescription, it seems teachers are advocates of an issues approach to teaching. The majority of teachers <u>always</u> (2 respondents) or <u>almost always</u> (11 respondents) "incorporated topical issues in their teaching", while a further eight respondents claimed that this <u>depended on the inquiry topic</u>.

Interestingly, of those teachers who <u>always</u> or <u>almost always</u> incorporate topical issues, seven were willing to "side-step the syllabus" in order to do so. This is because "the cause of empowering students certainly takes precedence" over the work program (Respondent 20). Another respondent links an issues-based approach to teaching to the *emancipatory* characteristic:

History helps make sense of the present. It is important that students see themselves as witnesses (and possible change agents) in history. (Respondent 19)

Emancipatory characteristic

The syllabus is a hopeful document that attempts to empower students to shape the future. The following global aim exemplifies the emancipatory tone of the syllabus:

Through studying Modern History, students will:

... develop the knowledge, abilities and ethical commitment to participate as active citizens in the shaping of the future.

Through studying history, students develop ways of understanding society in historical perspective, insights into how changes and continuities may be effected, skills in making judgements about complex situations, an ethical basis for action, and an appreciation of the possibilities of human agency. These skills and knowledge can help students approach the challenge of making a better future with realistic, informed enthusiasm. (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 6)

The *emancipatory* characteristic, in practice, is found in the focus questions that help students structure their inquiries. A sample of those questions that adopt the *emancipatory* characteristic is outlined below:

- Who benefited or was disadvantaged by the phenomenon?
- Whose interests were served or neglected by this phenomenon?
- Is this study helping you live more purposefully, ethically or effectively?

(Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 27)

To determine whether Modern History teachers adopted the *emancipatory* characteristic, respondents were asked to convey their attitudes towards four pedagogies. These pedagogies were *Liberal/Traditional*, *Instrumental/Vocational*, *Progressive* and *Socially Critical*. Descriptions of each pedagogy were adapted from Symes and Preston (1997). The *socially critical* pedagogy most obviously incorporated the *emancipatory* characteristic, as described in Figure 1 above. The survey revealed that respondents were strongly aligned to the Socially Critical pedagogy. Eight of the respondents claimed that the description sounds like me while a further 10 respondents claimed the description sounds like me to a degree.

Conclusion

The Modern History syllabus is an appropriate vehicle for teachers to focus on *environment*, particularly with the inclusion of the "People and Environments in History" theme. Yet teachers have chosen to overlook this syllabus theme. This may reflect O'Donaghue's finding that teachers cannot recognise "the opportunities available in their syllabuses to address (environmental education) objectives" (in Yencken et al., 2000, p. 155). This finding also reinforces Hunt's view that:

No matter how persuasive curriculum arguments are mounted in documents, there is no guarantee that the classroom program will follow. (Hunt, 1991, p. 102)

Perhaps of more interest to the socially critical environmental educator, then, is the extent to which Modern History teachers adopt SCEE characteristics. The *values*,

political and *emancipatory* characteristics are all heavily promoted in the syllabus and emphatically supported by teachers. By focusing on values and politics, Queensland modern history education is well placed to explore underlying values and hidden interests that support what Capra calls "exploitative and anti-ecological" activities (Capra, 1996, p. 8). The emancipatory tone of the syllabus, supported by teachers' socially critical pedagogy, may also help alter SCEE's image as a "doom and gloom" industry (Buchan, 2000, p. 5; Yencken et al., 2000, p. 211).

In terms of the *holistic* characteristic, the syllabus promotes a multi-dimensional approach to learning rather than an inter-disciplinary one. By focussing on the interrelationships between politics, culture, economics and environments, modern history education goes some way towards addressing the social and political deficiencies of much environmental education (Connell, 1997; Payne, 1995; Smyth, 1998; Kim, 2003; Orr, 1994; Huckle, 1986). What this research does not investigate is how the multi-dimensional approach to teaching Modern History is enacted in the classroom.

All this looks promising until the issue of the *action* characteristic, and to a lesser extent, the *issues* characteristic is raised. While the syllabus and its teachers adopt many aspects of a socially critical pedagogy, students are not involved in immediate action in the way that socially critical environmental educators would like, and there is no prescription to respond to local or topical issues. In this respect, socially critical environmental educators demand more for, and from, students (Fien & Tilbury, 1996, p. 23). As Fien and Gough (1996, p. 213) assert, "such experiences must be an integral part of student learning".

Of course, it would be unwise to discard modern history education because it fails to adopt one or two of the characteristics of SCEE. Rather, Modern History teachers need to be offered examples of how an action approach to learning can benefit their students, as well as strategies to overcome structural barriers to "real-life learning". Likewise, teachers could be offered professional development opportunities to take advantage of the new environmental themes found in the syllabus. For socially critical environmental educators, it would be useful to further investigate how Modern History teachers incorporate some of the characteristics in their classrooms, particularly the *values* characteristic, which seems to be such a keystone of the syllabus and teacher practice.

To conclude, Modern History mostly espouses a socially critical pedagogy. Just as importantly, it emphasises the connections between social and environmental processes. This makes Modern History sympathetic to the goals of SCEE. Because of these factors, and because of its stable and established place in the curriculum, Modern History may be a pragmatic way to incorporate socially critical environmental education into Queensland secondary schools.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

1. This research study employs the term *socially critical environmental education* rather than the terms education *for* the environment or education *for* sustainability.

There has been exhaustive debate about the use of the terms above (see, for instance, Jickling, 1992; Van Rossen, 1995; Jickling & Spork, 1998). In brief, I share the concern that educating *for* anything has a potentially deterministic, even inculcating tone that jeopardises its *educational* potential in the school system (Holsman, 2001, p. 4; Jickling & Spork, 1998, p. 314; Sauvé, 1999, p. 23). For the purposes of this research there are no *characteristic* differences between education *for* the environment and socially critical environmental education. However, adopting the term socially critical environmental education helps foreground the *social* and *critical* nature of this approach to environmental education.

2. Many writers have either purposefully or incidentally attempted to characterise SCEE. See for instance, Lee and Williams, 2001; Bell, 2000; Maxwell and Metcalfe, 1999/2000; Payne, 1999, 1995; Sauvé, 1999; Jickling and Spork, 1998; Walker, 1997; Fien and Gough, 1996; Tilbury, 1995; Tourtillot and Britt, 1994; Orr, 1994; Greenall Gough, 1992; Fien, 1991; Walsh, 1984, and Hall and Sullivan, n.d.

3. In Queensland, numbers of students completing Year 12 History have increased from 8043 in 1993 to 8205 in 1998. Both figures represent about 30% of the state's Year 12 population (Taylor, 2000). Interestingly, since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, there has been an increase in the study of History (The Age, 2003). Taylor states "September 11 had a really interesting effect on what happened in the classroom. There is now a huge growth among adolescents in the desire to know how we got to this point" (in The Age, 2003).

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