

STORIES FROM PRACTICE

Hope and Despair in Environmental Education

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An awareness of global environmental problems is a major motivating factor in the work of many environmental educators. It certainly has defined much of my teaching since I worked with Paul Ehrlich, a pioneer in developing global awareness in Australia. Consequently, since 1976 I have taught a course at Murdoch University called 'Population, Resources and Environment' (PRE).

This course has undergone an interesting transition over the past 20 years which reflects something of my own transition and possibly relates to similar processes for many other environmental educators. Fundamentally it has been a transition from an emphasis on despair to one on hope.

Any educational practice can be analysed in terms of the basic values that it espouses or assumes. When PRE was started in the new degree of Environmental Science we felt it was necessary to promote students' awareness of global environmental issues. It was our belief that only when we are presented with issues of population growth, urbanisation, rates of resource consumption, loss of biodiversity, greenhouse, desertification and other global issues do we see the context within which we must work.

To assist students to develop their global environmental awareness I developed a course intended to make explicit the linkages between many global issues and to develop student awareness that these issues were highly significant and demanded our attention (Newman 1987).

In the late 1980s the course's emphases began to change. This came about partly because over the previous decade I had become involved in a range of practical issues in my own environment through being a local government councillor and a member of the WA Government's Environmental Protection Authority as well as spearheading some local campaigns (Newman 1991a). Mostly the transition came about because of my awareness

of the literature on youth culture values and my sense that the course's concentration on issues was becoming a part of the problem, not part of the solution.

At this time there appeared to be a new sense of despair which characterised youth culture both globally and in Australia (Newman 1991b). This despair was related to the reduced opportunities for employment but seemed to go deeper to a sense that the problems facing human society were now well beyond any hope of solution. Indeed young people's awareness of global environmental problems was so acute that it seemed often to fall into a sense of despair. Raising awareness about global environment issues needed to move to promoting the belief that everyone and anyone can play a part in solving such problems.

It was and is my belief that developing a sense of hope about global environmental problems comes not from bland assurances about the value of optimism nor from just being a little less graphic about the nature of such problems. Indeed, unless we are completely honest about the issues we will only continue to extend the sense of despair. I wanted the course to provide as many stories of hope as possible without being any less forthright about the nature of global environmental issues.

PRE is presently based on the texts of Tyler-Miller (1995) and Brown et al (1996) and has attempted to provide a hopeful perspective on global environmental issues in the following ways.

Population

Although global population is growing and providing a per capita 'multiplier' for every resource issue there are also increasing signs of stabilisation appearing; every country is going through a demographic transition, a transition which is dependent on social and economic development at the grass roots. Thus the concept of sustainable development can be introduced at an early level by showing how environmental gains can be made through social and economic change. Case studies on China, India—especially Kerala state—and Indonesia show such changes and gains.

The extraordinary growth of cities this century compared to the continuing intensive use of the countryside has not been all bad. Reduced resource usage per person and greater recycling of wastes are characteristic of larger cities. Thus it is possible to begin to show how changing lifestyle—reduced per capita resource usage—and improved technology can mitigate the effects of population growth and that cities are places we do this. It is also of interest to discuss how in large areas of rural Australia where population is declining there is a deterioration of the environment due to changed social and economic priorities, rather than an improvement as would be predicted by a simple model of more people equals more environmental impact. It is hopeful to be able to show that many environmental issues can be tackled directly and are

not inevitably worsened by having more people, and that pro-environmental social and economic priorities can be realised during periods of population growth.

Resources

Instead of just showing the growth in and constraints to consumption of food, energy, water, timber, soil and other resources the course tries to highlight how some groups have managed to attain development with reduced resource usage. The extraordinary reductions in energy and water use by industry in most developed countries, and reductions in pollution due to clean production are models of hopeful situations. Less hope is obvious in transport energy use but case studies showing how some cities have reduced car use are given in PRE. The growing interest in California, Denmark, India, Germany and Australia in energy from renewable sources is outlined to show how this hopeful technology is developing.

Environment

The problems created by the production by human agency of greenhouse gases, ozone reducing chemicals, acid rain, petrochemical smog, toxic chemicals, loss of bio-diversity and loss of soil and water quality are all outlined in the course in a global context in relation to population and resource usage. They are then related to the growth of new institutions and processes at the global and local level. In particular the UN's commitment to sustainable development and Agenda 21 is outlined. The growing role of international law is discussed including the work of the International Panel on Climate Change on greenhouse, the international agreements on ozone protection, with the associated story of rapid technological change that these agreements induced, and the World Bank's Global Environment Facility for assisting poor countries to implement the phasing out of the use of CFCs. The application of such hopeful scenarios to other areas of global environmental issues are outlined.


Finally the course tries to draw together despair and hope by looking at how economics and politics are changing to address these issues and how an informed and active society is critical to providing the moral framework for global and local environmental change. Examples of how Australians have made a contribution to environmental improvement at global and local levels are used throughout the course.

Evaluation and implications

It may not be easy to evaluate whether an approach to global environmental issues which emphasises hope is better than one which leaves students with a sense of despair. One possible indicator is the number of positive initiatives for solving environmental problems which students generate as part of their project work. This has

certainly grown; one group which started from PRE, called the Cities for People Campaign, continues to be a major contributor on transport and environmental issues in Perth. This seems to me to be a strong indication that such an orientation is appropriate.

Assisting students towards a sense of hope is a subtle process. It will be counterproductive to attempt to gloss over global environmental problems; they must be seen for the major challenges that they are. But an environmental education which did not make explicit the increasing evidence for hopefulness would create a serious problem and be a tragic loss of opportunity. Perhaps we need in the evaluation of all environmental courses a question about the presence of hopeful signs such as :“Does the course help students to create a better future environmentally?”

I used to think that awareness of environmental problems was enough. Now I know there needs to be opportunities for students to develop a sense that such problems can be solved—and that they can make a difference. 

References

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