

Independent School

Connecting Learning with Sustainable Living
Spring 2005

What is Education For?

By Pamela Mang

I think H. G. Wells had it right when he said that we are in a race between education and catastrophe. This race will be decided in all of the places, including classrooms, that foster ecological imagination, critical thinking, awareness of connections, independent thought, and good heart.

David Orr, The Learning Curve

For anyone following the cascade of increasingly alarming studies of the Earth's health, it is tempting to conclude that, as we move into the 21st century, catastrophe is the odds-on winner of Wells' race. Newspapers, televisions and mail carry a drumbeat of disaster. Indeed, we have become a society fascinated with great catastrophes. Each year we are alternately thrilled and horrified by the giant tidal wave, the storm of the century, the killer earthquake, all brought to our local theater. As news reports depict increasingly drastic deterioration of the planet's fundamental life systems, it is easy to believe that the chances to reverse the destruction of Earth are disappearing fast.

In our media driven culture the ease of grabbing attention with doomsday predictions has tempted environmentalists and community activists to adopt this strategy. More often than not however these predictions have led either to bitter political or ideological battles or cynicism and the malaise of a general "crisis-fatigue". More important, despite years of such warnings and a growing consensus that our way of life is profoundly unsustainable, the patterns of behavior driving much of this deterioration continue with only minor modifications.

It seems clear that achieving sustainability—the ability of the human species to stay around for the long haul, is not about having more knowledge or disseminating more data about the depth of the problems. Neither is it about enacting stricter laws or mobilizing around great or small cataclysms-- by definition an end game. The threat is in the small but steady erosions draining our natural and social capital, the incremental almost unnoticed extinctions tearing the fabric of living systems, the millions of individual actions that seem innocent and without consequence until the accumulated effect weighs in years, even decades later. To fight problem by problem is to battle the Hydra. “A sustainable society” noted Franz Rauch, “will only be achieved through a social process of searching, learning and shaping.” In other words, an educational process.

The need for education to take center stage in the race for a sustainable future has not gone unnoticed or unaddressed. In 1977, 68 nations signed the Tbilisi Declaration—a declaration of “unanimous accord in the important role of environmental education in the preservation and improvement of the world's environment, as well as in the sound and balanced development of the world's communities.” Two world summits on sustainability (Rio, 1992 and Johannesburg, 2002) have since reaffirmed the key role of education.

Since Tbilisi, much has been learned about the profundity of the change that will be required to shift the world off its current disastrous course, and what education must deliver if we are to meet those requirements. One of the central lessons of the sustainability movement is that achieving ecologically sustainable societies and economies requires above all a deep cultural transformation, and that such a transformation demands nothing less than a paradigmatic shift in education. Unfortunately, institutionalized education has not kept pace. While a wide range of environmental education programs have sprung up outside of the classroom, environmental education in U.S. schools remains largely marginalized. Where programs do exist, they are largely focused on environmental science and the analysis of social policy, or on “green” programs to minimize waste and limit the damage of human activities. This emphasis sustains the myth that more data, better technology or more regulation are enough to turn back the degradation. If catastrophe appears to be winning, it is because educational institutions have largely defaulted their place in the race, ignoring the vital contribution they have to make toward changing our beliefs about who we can be.

Asking what is education for. This year the UN launches its most ambitious and far-reaching undertaking in this arena—a decade-long focus on education for sustainability that aims at no less than remaking the human presence in the world. It is an initiative rich with potential for creative and meaningful work. In addition to building toward global sustainability, it opens the door to a regeneration of education that can lift it out of the increasingly narrow functional role accorded it by a career-driven society, and back to the central role it has played in the health of earlier cultures when it occupied itself with the central human questions of who are we in the world and how we are to live. In 1992 Wendell Berry addressed the question, “What are humans for?” It is time to address that question to education if we are realize the potential of this new global venture.

For much of human history, education enabled acculturation and socialization aimed at maintaining the health of the broader community. Education of the individual was shaped by

what it meant to the welfare of the whole. In traditional societies, past and present, that whole included the biotic communities and the land they inhabited. In the industrial era however, education has been increasingly reoriented toward helping students gain individual security and success in a place-less global economy. Although suitable to an Industrial Age paradigm that set humans apart from other species and viewed nature as an inexhaustible grocery store/garbage dump, this orientation, if unexamined, sets education on a collision course with the underlying changes in perception that are shaping and fueling the sustainability movement.

The revolutionary scientific realization of the last century is the profound interdependence of all life. Biologist Elisabet Sahtouris writes that Western science is “changing toward an understanding of nature as alive, self-organizing, intelligent, conscious or sentient and participatory at all levels.” This Ecological paradigm recognizes human beings as but one part of a complex, dynamic and deeply interdependent natural world. In this context, sustainability derives from profound shifts in how we perceive our world, our role within it, and our relationship to it. Traditionally, this sense of interdependent role and relationship has grown out of and been manifested in how we live in specific places.

Humans, like all other species, are place-based creatures—shaping and shaped by the places we inhabit. Our diverse cultures are the products of our interactions with particular places. Cultures that sustain their vitality and viability have developed practices appropriate to their place, and rituals, moral systems, songs and stories that sustain those practices.

Since the advent of the Industrial Age and its universal, place-blind culture, we are increasingly losing the ability to develop and maintain appropriate relations with place. We have, “fallen out of place” and are losing or have lost the once inherent capacity to understand and then establish right relationships, to put ourselves “back in place.” We are becoming what David Orr describes as residents rather than inhabitants. Where residency requires only cash and a map, an inhabitant “dwells . . . in an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place. Good inhabitation is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness.” Learning how to restore the value and the capability for inhabitancy is the creative challenge and opportunity facing independent schools who take up NAIS’s challenge to join educators around the world in the UN decade. At a time when public schools are increasingly fettered by expectations and political/ideological battles disconnected from any place, independent schools are uniquely situated to lead the way.

Beyond environmental education. The replacement of the term “environmental education” used in the Tbilisi Declaration with the phrase “education for sustainability” in the current UN declaration reflects the sustainability movement’s recognition that in an ecological world, healthy ecosystems, healthy communities and healthy economies are inextricably intertwined. Education for sustainability thus goes beyond most environmental education, a term that implies the environment is something to be studied “out there” separate from us and separate from the other concerns of academia. In contrast, descriptors like place-based or ecological education connote “an emphasis on the inescapable embeddedness of human beings in natural systems” (Smith and Williams). Whatever term is adopted, educators who seriously seek to realize the potential of the global effort within their own schools will need to bring an ecological mindset to the task along with the willingness to reexamine fundamental premises and the purpose of

education itself. The necessary regeneration of education will not come about from adding on courses in environmental studies, greening school buildings or engaging in community service if these are seen as separate activities. These are useful and laudable and not to be discouraged, but for education to become truly relevant to the need for more holistic and systemic ways of living and working in place, we need it to return itself to the core questions of who are we and therefore how are we to live appropriately and well in an ecological, interdependent world.

What should we ask of education? Embarking on the journey toward sustainability in an ecological world means entering a world in which novices and experts, students and teachers, are exploring and learning alongside each other. There is a Native American adage that in traveling through the forest, if you do not know your destination any path will do. Because this is new territory for many educators, the hazard is to meander between different approaches, sampling one then another without any real basis for discernment. The hazard is made worse by the overwhelming number of resources accessible through the briefest of web searches. Questions such as what is education for and what must be its role in the ecological world will help shape a destination that can serve as the basis for discernment.

It will also be important to ask what must be learned from our schooling if it is to help us move toward global sustainability. It is a question that has long been a concern of those working in environmental fields, many of whom have found themselves weaving educational processes into their professional work because of the educational gaps they are finding in those they serve and/or work with.

As an example, my own firm, Regenesys has for almost ten years worked with developers, landowners, communities and institutions, helping them develop their land and construct their buildings such that their projects are net positive contributors to the health of all the affected natural, cultural, and economic systems. Over and over we have found that the biggest barriers to accomplishing this goal are less related to gaps in technology or knowledge than to gaps in understanding and thinking capabilities. Based on our experience over the years, if we were to construct our own wish list of what communities should understand, it would include the following:

- **Humans have a value-adding role to play within the natural world.** Wendell Berry notes that until recently no human culture has ever called the place it lived its environment; instead it called it home. A healthy home depends on all its members making a contribution, each according to his or her own unique talents and nature. In viewing humans as separate from the home of nature, we have demeaned our role, diminishing it to consumer or predator depending on whether we take the perspective of global business or the environmental movement. Sustainability lifts up our obligation to minimize the harmful impact of our own activities, but that is a minor part of the role we can play. The issue for the coming century is not just how to slow the rate of degradation. It will be how to regenerate living systems in both human and biotic communities. This is the role we must prepare ourselves for. The start point is reclaiming the sense of wonder and the deep affinity and caring for the natural world, our home that should be the natural experience of childhood.

- **In order to prepare for this role, we need to learn how to think like natural or living systems.**

Quantum physicist David Bohm often talked about how thought creates the world and then covers its own tracks, leaving us unconscious of our own participation in shaping reality. He compared this to the situation of a man doing things with his right hand that he didn't want to do, and with the left hand trying to hold back his right hand. (Changing Consciousness)

Walk into any building or community and look around—everything you see is a product of thought. Yet we tend to see the product as an independent reality, separate from the thinking process that created it. Thought affects how we see the world and ultimately how we create it. But thought doesn't keep track of its own consequences, its own activity unless we consciously develop a reflective process for doing so. As a result, unexamined systems of thought —intertwined assumptions, beliefs and values, shape our perceptions, reactions and decisions, essentially creating a box within which all our thinking is done. Thus the first step on the path to the fundamental reorientation of education will be to generate systemic and systematic ways of lifting ourselves above our self-imposed boxes, starting understanding the systems of thought or paradigms that currently shape and maintain those boxes.

- **Then we need to develop the capability to translate systemic thinking into holistic activities,**

It is one thing to learn systems thinking in a classroom, quite another to bring it into a living system like a biotic or social community. Time and again we have seen self-described systems experts collapse their thinking down to linear, elemental solutions when confronted with the complex, dynamic patterning of a self-organizing living system. Providing students opportunities to apply systems thinking to real-world situations that they care about and in which they can make a difference will be critical.

These are heady times for education. The world's institutions are mobilizing to put education to center stage in the race for a sustainable future. The Earth is clearly in trouble and therefore so are we. These factors combined with the sheer number of resources ready to support the effort make the impetus to jump to action compelling. But jumping into action usually means jumping to quick solutions: changing what we do not why we do it; altering the processes of education before we understand fully what the purpose of education needs to. I believe that the first challenge for educators will be to slow down the impetus to action enough to truly understand the landscape we all are entering, the role education is being called to carry out there, and the different nature of mind and spirit required to realize its promise.

References:

Wendell Berry, (1992) *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays*, Pantheon Books

David Bohm & Mark Edwards, (1992) *Changing Consciousness: Exploring the Hidden Source of the Social, Political, and Environmental Crises Facing Our World*, San Francisco: Harper
David Orr (2004), *The Learning Curve, Resurgence*, 22, (18-20)
David Orr (1992) *Ecological Literacy*, Albany: State University of New York Press, (130)
Franz Rauch (2004) Education for Sustainability: a Regulative Idea and Trigger for Innovation, *Key Issues in Sustainable Development and Learning: A Critical Review*, Scott, W./Gough, S. (Eds.) Routledge Falmer: London (2004), 149-151
Elisabet Sahtouris, (1999) *Living Systems in Evolution*, Paper presented to “At Home in the Universe: a symposium on the developing dialogue between science and religion” at the World Parliament of Religions, Capetown, South Africa
Gregory Smith & Dilafruz Williams, eds. (1999) *Ecological Education in Action*, State University of New York Press

Recommended:

David Gruenewald, (2002) The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place, *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 3-12

David Sobel, (2004) *Place Based Education, Connecting Classrooms & Communities* (Nature Literacy Series Vol. 4) Orion Books