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Viewpoint Education, Ethics and Values: A response to Peter Blaze Corcoran's keynote address, EEASA 2003

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Abstract

This paper is written in response to the Keynote Address on the Earth Charter presented by Peter Blaze Corcoran at the EEASA 2003 Conference in Namibia. It draws attention to the significance of ethical debates in education and emphasises the need for careful attention to the way in which educators approach values education. In particular the paper considers the Earth Charter critically, and notes that while there is much value in the principles of the Earth Charter for guiding educational practice, educators should also consider some of the dilemmas of simply appropriating universal ethical frameworks to guide practice.

Introduction

In Africa we have a tradition of lauding worthy achievements through praise singing. My first response to this paper is to praise Professor Blaze Corcoran for having the courage to express and fight for his convictions at a particularly difficult time in global history. I would also like to take this opportunity to praise the people, organisations and nations who over time have worked and are working through environmental education for a better world. I praise the architects of the Earth Charter for articulating the vision that has been presented.

Visions are important. They are able to inspire. They are able to unite. Above all, they are affirming – they are affirmations of our 'humaneness', they are affirmations of humans as rational and ethical beings. Every once in a while a vision that has considerable power is articulated. The Earth Charter is such a vision. Challenging such visions is tantamount to challenging apple pie and motherhood.

However, I believe that we need also to be fully aware of the potential danger of visions. Great visions have led to more wars, genocide and other crimes against humanity throughout history than any other single cause. Visions by their very nature are open to interpretation. While it may be argued that this is an essential characteristic of visions, it is also their main Achilles heel. I am sceptical of visions and believe they need to be approached warily and subjected to constant critical scrutiny.

In looking at the truly fine ideals within the Earth Charter, I find myself asking how we can change the rhetoric into reality. I find myself asking what do these statements really mean, what

will they require and from whom, and most importantly what are their implications? I also find myself asking who and what will really benefit in the long run.

My response to this paper is a response to the Earth Charter as a vision in the context of education in southern Africa. In southern Africa we are in a process of freeing ourselves from a vision of colonialism. My concern is that if we accept the Earth Charter uncritically we might be accepting another form of colonisation that may be even more invidious than the previous one. If education is to have a role it ought to be to develop critical thinking and learners who are able to question and challenge.

My second concern is that the Earth Charter has been linked to and with the notion of sustainability, particularly that of sustainable development. Sustainability is a slippery notion and is awash with paradoxes. It too is a notion that needs to be used with caution. In particular, it is a notion that cannot be applied as some sort of catch-all concept. The reality is that sustainable development is also a vision and I question whether the vision of sustainable development and that of the Earth Charter are necessarily compatible. That they will have dimensions of compatibility and congruence is probable, but that they are in the totality of each seen as interrelated and interdependent is not only questionable, but perhaps not even desirable.

In presenting the following response my intention is not to detract from the Earth Charter as an inspiring document, rather in arguing as I do, I hope to add value and perhaps to mitigate any possibility of the Earth Charter becoming just another body of empty rhetoric.

Ethics and Education

The incorporation of ethics into formal curricula is acknowledged as a desirable and worthwhile part of the educational endeavour. The problem we continue to face is the issue of ethics as education and ethics as indoctrination. I hold the belief in common with far better scholars than I will ever presume to be that indoctrination and education as concepts ought to be mutually exclusive. To impose any ethical framework, no matter how 'good' it may be, without subjecting it to constant critical scrutiny and challenge is a denial of human freedom to make informed choices. The imposition of an ethical framework as a given is to reify not only that framework, but to mask possible interpretations of that framework that may in fact be corruptions of the original ideals. Thus, if we were to accept the Earth Charter as a code of ethics without critical and informed analysis this would seem to me to be a form of indoctrination.

Ethics are essentially bound up with the notion of rights. Rights are firstly privileges that have to be earned, secondly there can be no rights without responsibilities, and thirdly rights only have worth if there are measures that ensure that they can be upheld. The fourth characteristic of rights is, however, the most problematic – that is that rights all too often impinge on and negate other rights. In looking at the Earth Charter my concern is that unless we examine it and teach it through a critical analysis of rights, responsibilities and freedoms, we may well be opening a Pandora's box.

By all means let us use the ethical framework of the Earth Charter in our educational endeavours. But let it be one set of ethics that should be explored and examined alongside any

other set, so that if individuals do subscribe to this particular ethical code they have done so based on an informed and reasoned choice, so that they understand their choice, its implications and its consequences. This to me provides added value. Upholding a view based on rational and independent understanding in its fullest sense ought to be the only basis for espousing a particular value. It is educationally unsound for curricula to be swept along in the wave of current enthusiasms, visions and ideals. Accepting something because it is the best currently on offer is fine providing its acceptance and incorporation into the curricula conforms to the tenets that underpin education and not indoctrination.

Environmental education, as all forms of education, is not value-free and, valuable as environmental education is, the positioning of environmental education within a particular ethical framework is likewise fine, providing that environmental education acknowledges that the values accepted as integral to environmental education are open to challenge and scrutiny. Were environmental education to lay claim to holding the moral high ground, this would be not only be highly problematic educationally, but would in fact detract from the intrinsic value of environmental education. Adopting the Earth Charter and the notion of sustainable development uncritically as that which is cast in stone is just not on in terms of sound education practice. Thus, if the Earth Charter and sustainable development are to be accepted as ethical approaches in the context of environmental education in southern African, we need to ensure that the manner in which we tackle this in education is educationally sound.

I suggest that environmental education has the potential to lead and to encourage our concerted search for ways to turn the risks, problems and issues into possibilities. In southern Africa the need for positive and innovative approaches to the multitude of problems we face is enormous and experience would seem to bear out the futility of applying common and/or global wisdom to addressing these problems. Another role of education in our southern African context would seem to be the development of knowledge and skills that equip people to seek alternative and appropriate solutions and embrace radical change, for we in the south are inherently too conservative in too many areas. Essentially, working for a better world as envisaged by the Earth Charter is about bringing about change in our practices. Change is however inextricably linked to values and therein lies a key challenge facing environmental education. Not only is it necessary to make the values underpinning the desired change explicit, it is necessary to explore the underlying values of existing practices and make these equally explicit.

If we are to work within an ethical frame such as the Earth Charter, particularly in conjunction with notions of sustainable development, I would argue that unless we first critically examine existing social and cultural values that have shaped practice, the ethics on which change depends will be lost and the change will be at best be tenuous. It is fairly obvious that a key dimension of environmental education is about values. Environmental education has an important role to play in values education, but this role needs to be clearly understood. Those involved in environmental education should develop a critical understanding of the issues involved in values education processes lest they fall into the trap of indoctrination.

Taking the Earth Charter Forward in a Southern African Education Context

Examples of how the Earth Charter has and can be utilised in and through education have inspirational and pedagogical value. However, in light of my arguments, I suggest that as educators we must avoid latching on to these as recipes that can be copied. Not locating teaching approaches in the sort of critical analysis I have proposed is both educationally unsound and further detracts from the intrinsic value of any ethical framework. Subjecting the ideals within the Earth Charter to a critical analysis enables them to be better located within the learning situation and context.

No value system can be decontextualised. If the ideals espoused by the Earth Charter are to have merit in a southern African context the starting point should be questions such as:

- What do these ideals mean in our context?
- Do they (all or some) relate to our national aspirations? What are the possible risks and threats that working towards these ideals could pose?
- What benefits are inherent in working towards these ideals?
- What consequences are implied in the short and long term?
- Who and what benefits?

A key question about the Earth Charter in an educational context is whether it should be taught piecemeal or as a whole. Can and ought educators decide only to focus on certain aspects and to leave out others? If the latter is the case then I ask: Why include the Earth Charter as part of the education experience? Surely all education contains certain of the key values in the Earth Charter, and only choosing those sections with which we feel comfortable begs the whole point of the Earth Charter? If the Earth Charter has any meaning in education it is surely the integrated nature of the document in its entirety. It has been presented to us as a holistic concept, implying that each of the ideals contained are interdependent and interrelated. Herein lies a considerable challenge: How can this be 'taught' holistically in various educational contexts and settings?

Ethics in education present a further challenge that goes beyond teaching about them or using them as vehicles for teaching. Education by its very nature ought to be located in an ethical system, and as such model the values through the systemic structures. My final question then is whether we can adopt the Earth Charter as a body of knowledge to be taught without making it the basis of the values to which education systems ascribe, on which they are based and which they model.

Conclusion

In concluding my response to the keynote presentation on the Earth Charter (at the EEASA Conference in 2003), I reiterate the worth of the document as an articulation of a holistic ethical framework. It surely captures the totality of the 'oughts' for which all humans should strive, simply because we are humans. I believe that it forms a counterpoint to the greed, the megalomania, the xenophobia and the new right trends that are currently so much a feature at

the dawning of the new millennium. I believe that as an ethical framework it should be part of the educational endeavour, as all education ought to include education in ethics as well as being based within an ethical framework.

The challenge for educators and education systems is to find a way to incorporate the Earth Charter into education in an educationally sound manner. The issues raised here are just some of the issues that we ought not to ignore in our consideration of the Earth Charter in an educational context.

Notes on the Contributor

Ursula van Harmelen is a senior lecturer in the Education Department at Rhodes University in South Africa. Most of her work is with postgraduate students in the area of education theory, both in Grahamstown and in Namibia. In addition to lecturing she has been involved in a number of education evaluations and is currently leading the formative monitoring team of the SEEN project (Supporting Environmental Education in Namibia). She has co-authored a series of textbooks for the new South African curriculum in the learning areas Life Skills and Human and Social Sciences. Email: U.vanharmelen@ru.ac.za.