

Southern African Journal of Environmental Education, Vol. 22, 2005

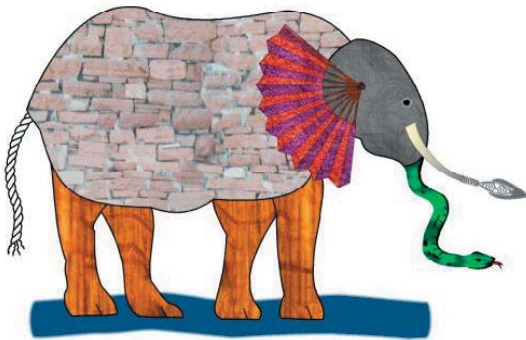


Conference Reflection On Blindness, the Nature of Elephants, and Educational Research

David Zandvliet
Simon Fraser University, Canada

Preamble

Adapted from 'The Blind Men and the Elephant'
John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)



*Once there were some scholars, to learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant (all of them were blind)
So each by observation, might satisfy their mind.
The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,
Against a broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:
'The elephant, it seems, is nothing but a wall!'
Another, feeling a tusk, cried: 'What have we here?
(To me it is both reliable and clear)
This wonder of an elephant is very like a spear!'
A third approached the animal (now wily and awake)
Then happening (by grounded chance) to take,
Trunk in hand, cried 'the elephant is a snake!'
Then a fourth reached for, and felt about the knee
(Having paid a substantial entrance fee)
Then proudly declared that the elephant was a tree.
A fifth, now touching an ear (weathered and tan),
States 'what this resembles is clear to the blindest of man,*

© 2005 Environmental Education, Ethics & Action in Southern Africa

*The marvel of the elephant is very much like a fan!
 The sixth no sooner had begun about the beast to grope,
 Then seizing the tail, that fell within his scope,
 Said finally, 'the elephant is a rope!'
 And so the scholars, inquired loud and long,
 Each with opinion exceeding and strong,
 Though each was in the right, still all were in the wrong!*

An Invitation to Meet the Elephant

The Eastern Cape of South Africa has much to offer. It has popular activities, married with opportunities to interact with people and wildlife of many persuasions. So, when the invitation to participate in the 8th International Invitational Research and Development Seminar on Environmental and Health Education came, it was quite impossible to refuse. Port Elizabeth, said the website: 'beckons with an attractive atmosphere of year-round holiday fun against a backdrop of urban activity ... leisure options encompass a wide range'. Of course, this is only a small and distorted picture of what the Eastern Cape represents to the local inhabitants. So, I had to acknowledge that for now (as some kind of Canadian snowbird) I was going to be coming in 'blind' and I hoped that there would be some reliable guides on hand when I arrived.

The tourist website went on to describe parks, botanical gardens, nature reserves and an abundance of wildlife. It notes that in Port Elizabeth, the '1820 Settlers' were introduced to their new land, and there they built some of the graceful homes that still enhance the city's landscape; it is also related that the settlers' trail eventually extended north from here and travelled through Grahamstown (our eventual destination). Of great interest (and also nearby to Port Elizabeth) is the Addo Elephant National Park which is said to support about 350 elephants, in addition to Cape buffalo, black rhino, kudu and over 180 bird species. Keenly, I was anticipating the possibility of a chance meeting with some elephants during this, my second visit to the Eastern Cape.

When the opportunity did come for myself and a few colleagues to visit Addo (just prior to the seminar), I would find the experience of elephants both 'touching' and deeply moving. It is truly fascinating to watch elephants emerge from dense undergrowth and trees, and to see them carefully guiding their young towards a watering hole. While it would not be appropriate to literally touch elephants in this context, the experience lead me to think about the popular parable 'The Six Blind Men and the Elephant' which I liberally adapted for use as the preamble to this article. The original poetic version (by American poet, John Godfrey Saxe) is in the public domain and has been used as a useful prompt for dialogue in a number of areas of inquiry including theology, business, education, politics and more recently, the science of climate change (Goldin, 2002).

The origin of the 'Blind Men and the Elephant' story is thought to reside in Buddhist thought and Chinese folklore and in its original form involved only three blind disciples (Kou & Kou, 1976). This early version was later adapted as an Indian, then Islamic parable before becoming the well known children's story. With these multicultural beginnings, the metaphor

seems appropriate as an organiser for reflections on an international seminar. Further, the plight of Cape elephants embodies an important environmental issue localised to the Eastern Cape, and so holds an appropriate symbolism for environmental and health education within the South African context. The image of 'blind' scholars attempting to describe or define the educational 'animal' also seems an appropriate metaphor for reflecting on research and complex methodological issues we all face in our work. Beyond this, any resemblance to 'person, place or thing' is purely coincidental, so with that brief caveat, I will continue with this reflection ...

Acknowledging Our Blindness

The seminar at Rhodes University in Grahamstown was just my second experience with the participatory nature and long history of environmental and health education research shared in these meetings. While it is not entirely true that an elephant 'never forgets,' the collective memory of participants at the 8th International and Invitational Research and Development Seminar In Environmental and Health Education recounted that there is a long story to be told and the promise of many more healthy years (I am told elephants live long lives too). I particularly enjoyed the human and honest recounting of the seminar's history by Karsten Schnack at the closing session where he recounted the early beginnings and evolution of the seminar over the years since it was begun in Copenhagen. He may have summarised our intent best with his earlier comments: 'at the first seminar, ...we discussed action competence as an ideal for environmental and health education. At that time, (he) defined action competence as a capability, based on critical thinking and always incomplete knowledge, to involve yourself as a person with other persons in responsible actions and counter-actions for a more humane world' (Schnack, 1994). I believe that this agenda was seriously undertaken by all attending the seminar and that some of us moved incrementally closer to this goal for our research.

To me, the unique participatory format of the seminar is the most positive aspect of its conception. At other meetings, I often find the most productive experience to be the 'background discussions' with colleagues between formal sessions. At the Rhodes seminar, I found that the focus was precisely these conversations (brought to the foreground) and I appreciated the opportunity to have a sustained dialogue on how to do better research. As scholars of different background and experience, we came together to discuss research problems with colleagues from around the world in the most open and honest ways. Within the experience, I observed much mentoring and thoughtful exchange of distinct, overlapping perspectives on research. Paul Hart summarised the process well in his experience of the previous seminar: 'in the midst of a rather bewildering array of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to enquiry within the social sciences, researchers in health and environmental education continue to search for more nuanced and thoughtful foundations for their enquiries' (Hart *et al.*, 2004: p.564). In a way, the metaphor of 'blind scholars' visiting 'the elephant' holds truest here. The seminar format allows each of us to acknowledge our own limits or 'methodological blindness'. In this act, we open ourselves to a greater range of methods and the possibility of adopting/adapting new methods for our research.

Key for this meeting, was of course, the unique context that is the Eastern Cape. Indeed,

the theme for the meeting, 'Ethics and situated culture in environmental and health education' spoke clearly to the problem of research context and we were given many opportunities to experience aspects of South African culture during our visits to the townships, wildlife parks and other nearby areas. Most importantly, the great number of our African colleagues present at the meeting insured that the dialogue would focus on these perspectives. Implicit in this was the notion that methods and ideas that are workable in one context may not be readily transferable to other contexts due to situational factors. Placing oneself in unique situational contexts such as these are a way of noting the further 'cultural blindness' we occasionally inhabit. Erickson (1986) referred to this contextualisation as 'making the familiar strange'. Erickson argued that a relating of interpretive research in one context can enhance the interpretation of research in more familiar settings. I will continue now with some personal examples of this, drawn from the seminar experience.

Southern African Contexts for Research

Southern Africa is a large region with great variation in physical, cultural and social factors. This reality is reflected in the issues that were considered most central to the seminar experience, including: relational epistemologies and post-colonial research; local interpretations of curriculum; situated learning, culture and ethics; and finally, participation, democratisation and globalisation as they influence the educational field. In considering these complex issues together, we were attempting to develop understandings of the interplay of ethics on different ways of knowing, on educational practice, and on power, politics and educational policy. Importantly we also deliberated on how these complex undertakings are taken up in educational praxis.

Edgar Neluvhalani began the dialogue in our opening plenary. In a thoughtful presentation, he described some of the problems associated with mobilising indigenous knowledge in environmental education contexts and how notions of formal education and its associated policy requirements can contribute to the marginalisation of local or indigenous knowledge and epistemologies. Despite Edgar describing his work in the context of South Africa, I was struck with the similarity of the problem he faces and issues that continually arise in my work with First Nations peoples on the West Coast of Canada. Where the notion of honouring indigeneous knowledge is often taken up as a positive (even romantic) notion, it is seldom reinforced by policies that would make the enactment of these practices a reasonable course of action for teachers. I was heartened that efforts were being made here and elsewhere, to correct this imbalance in curriculum.

The topic of policy was taken up by another colleague, Mphemelang (MJ) Ketlhoilwe with his genealogical analysis of environmental education policy in Botswana (see Dillon *et al.*, this edition). This presentation focussed on research on policy construction and interpretation and specifically, a consideration of the forms of reasoning (epistemologies) that lead to the incorporation of an 'environment in education' policy. The topic was also of deep interest to me and sparked further questions around how environmental education came to be in my province. I found myself asking the same questions posed by MJ, for example, by what process does

policy construction influence policy interpretation and what political and power relationships are at play in these processes? I think that the answers to these types of questions may have consequences for the ways that policies can influence teachers' decision making, reasoning and their judgement of experiences in environmental education. In considering context, we must also include political aspects in the mix.

The contextualisation or research in African settings was also taken up by the panel discussion on the morning of the last day of our meeting. Here, researchers from around southern Africa described their research design decisions in environmental and social science research. The panelists, Mweru Mwingi, Felistus Kinyanyui, Joyce Kimani, Justin Lupele, Mphemelang Kethoilwe and Abel Barasa Atiti, each related their efforts to situate their research in the context of diverse communities, and described the problems in adopting conceptual tools and research methodologies to frame their work in areas as diverse as curriculum, policy, course development and organisational change (see Lupele *et al.*, this edition). Their stories reminded me of how difficult the research development process can be when it strives to situate itself with/in authentic communities while honouring culture and social norms that have developed in these places. All of this I found also related strongly to the work in progress I shared at the seminar which I described as an *ecological* framework for environmental education. For me, this framework is one that acknowledges that 'place' is central to our understanding and interpretation of curriculum. I believe that certain places give rise to unique forms of knowledge and ways of knowing which need to be honored in the educational process. This was the message that I took away from the seminar and also informed my interpretation of the seminar theme 'Ethics and situated culture in environmental education'.

Some Final Thoughts

The research seminar in environmental education held at Rhodes University was undoubtedly a profound and rewarding experience for those involved. The seminar format assisted us in working through complex methodological issues faced daily in our work as educational researchers. The strengths inherent in the seminar include: its participatory nature; the diverse background and experience of participants; and the space made in the programme for supportive dialogue and critique. One hope for the future of the seminar would be that while important issues of environmental education research continue to be discussed, more concern be given to issues of health education. From what I have read from the broadly available UNESCO and WHO reports, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has made a devastating impact on educational provision in East and southern Africa, thereby increasing the problems faced by educational researchers and policy makers alike. At our seminar, this topic was the proverbial 'elephant in the room' with only a few sessions dedicated to the topic. I believe there is more room to consider issues related to environmental *and* health education research, and it would be interesting to explore the intersection of these related enquiries.

Now that I have returned again to metaphors involving elephants, I will close with a short story related to me by a park naturalist at Addo (where this story began): 'When the first settlers came to the Addo region they began decimating the big elephant herds because they were

known to devastate fields and plantations. The remaining elephants (12) eventually became protected in the Addo Elephant Park (established in 1931). Because of years of being hunted, the surviving elephants were highly aggressive and in an attempt to mollify them, they were fed truck-loads of oranges (a questionable ethic indeed). Though these special feedings were soon stopped, today the elephants of Addo are still mad for oranges, and will smash any car if they sense the smell of their favourite citrus fruit in it. For this reason, it remains strictly forbidden to take citrus fruits into the park'. So, a moral for all of us in this may be that as scholars, we should first, remain keenly interested in elephants, second, acknowledge our blindness, and remedy it through a diversification of methods and finally, be ever mindful of what we do with our oranges!

Notes on the Contributor

David Zandvliet is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University and coordinates the environmental ecological education programmes there. His research interests include studies of the learning environment in science, technology and environmental education contexts. Originally trained as a biologist, he has worked in a variety of formal and informal educational settings in and along the coast of British Columbia, Canada.

References

- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In Wittrock, M.C. (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. New York, NY: Macmillan. pp. 119–161.
- Goldin, D.S. (2002). The Blind Men and the Earth: An Environmental Parable. *Harvard International Review*, 24(3). <http://hir.harvard.edu/articles/1076/>, visited 30 May, 2005.
- Hart, P., Barrett, M.J., Schnack, K., Dymont, J.E., Taylor, J. & Clark, C. (2004). Reflections on the 7th Invitational Seminar on Research and Development in Health and Environmental Education: Anchorage, Alaska, USA, October 2003. *Environmental Education Research*, 10(4), p. 564.
- Kou, L. & Kou, Y. (1976). *Chinese Folktales*. 231 Adrian Road, Millbrae, CA 94030: Celestial Arts. pp. 83–85.
- Schnack, K. (1994). Some further comments on the action competence debate. In Jensen, B.B. & Schnack, K. (Eds), *Action and Action Comments as Key Concepts in Critical Pedagogy. Studies in educational theory and curriculum*, Vol.12. Copenhagen: Royal Danish School of Educational Studies. p. 190.