

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



Conference Reflection

Reflections on the '3rd World Environmental Education Congress: Educational pathways towards sustainability', Italy, 2005

Heila Lotz-Sisitka
Rhodes University, South Africa

Travelling to Torino

The 3rd World Environmental Education Congress follows two previous World Congress Meetings, one in Portugal in 2003 and one in Rio de Janeiro in 2004. The 1st World Environmental Education Congress was held following the World Summit on Education for Sustainable Development where, at this meeting, environmental education associations from around the world gathered to discuss networking across different associations and environmental education groups. A southern African group has been present at all the earlier World Congress meetings, and this year was no exception. Africa was invited to be a 'special guest' at the 3rd World Environmental Education Congress in Torino. Historic Torino, situated on the fringe of the beautiful Italian Alps, provided an inviting venue for a congress which attracted over 2 500 participants.

The Congress Theme

The congress theme 'Educational pathways towards sustainability' foregrounded the current 'state of play' in environmental education / education for sustainability, at the start of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), and drew attention to the role of education in creating pathways towards sustainability. Mario Solomone, convenor of the congress, in his orientation to the congress describes the congress as being about 'cultural changes and cultural forces for change', highlighting the role of education, training and communication in redirecting values, knowledge and behaviour to construct a human society 'that is fairer and more aware of the equilibrium of a beautiful and fragile planet' (Salomone, 2005: 6). To facilitate deliberations during the conference a set of interrelated themes were established which included: communication and the environment; paths to sustainability; research and assessment in environmental education; sustainable education; training the trainers; community awareness; promoting participation and governance and creating a network; economics and ecology; environment and health; farming and related issues; ethics; and emotional involvements. These congress themes, together with an impressive array of keynote papers kept congress participants actively engaged with the question of the DESD.

Congress Deliberations

Some of the more interesting lines of thought that emerged during the first day of the congress included:

- European development is changing focus more and more on technological innovations and services that address ecological problems, and that education and training in these societies is increasingly highly valued and is seen as one of the 'critical success factors' of the future Europe in terms of retaining advantage in an increasingly competitive world. The benefits of this approach were seen to be visible in rapidly developing countries such as India and China, and that behaviour change (and economic development) in these societies was seen to be closely linked to the success of education, training and research capabilities.
- Climate change was discussed as being one of the most significant challenges facing humanity in future. With this, was the challenge of cultural change, and it was said that the ecological and social problems being faced by humanity in the present day were reflective of a 'crisis in human intelligence'.
- The world was facing a dual challenge: poverty reduction with an associated wealth reduction. Increasing wealth (at current levels of wealth accumulation) for all is not sustainable and sooner or later it needs to be recognised that the key to change is not unlimited growth (no matter how 'sustainable' this was), but rather more equitable distribution of resources. However, no one seemed very optimistic that this realisation would dawn in the near future, as economies around the world are firmly in the grip of neo-liberal orthodoxy, which falls under the spell and power of transnationals, who are not accountable to anyone except themselves. It was said that even global governance systems (such as the UN) are fairly powerless in the face of the power of transnationals.
- Key dimensions of re-orienting education towards sustainability involved engaging individuals and societies in the values of equality, tolerance and respect for nature. Ethics and values thus need to take a stronger place in educational deliberations in the next decade.
- Culture, history and power were identified as important themes in educational work in the next decade, bringing the past into relationship with the future, and recognising the complexity associated with human relationships in every local context.
- Fritjof Capra argued vociferously for a return of the 'ecological' to debates about sustainability, noting that without firmly placing the ecological in the centre of these debates, one is left with a distorted, trivialised and senseless discussion on sustainable development. He argued that ecological literacy, complexity theory and systems theory provide key dimensions for understanding the meaning of sustainable development.
- The Slow Food Movement argued for slow (thoughtful) speaking, slow (thoughtful) understanding and the need for a cultural revolution which puts sustainable food production at the centre of sustainable development in the next decade. This requires a change in the behaviour of producers and consumers.
- Lucie Sauvé noted that we should not underestimate, nor be naïve about, the power of globalisation as an agent of sustainable development. She described sustainable development

as a ‘hyper-complex phenomenon’ with paradoxical and invisible powers that were both political and cultural. She drew attention to the hegemonic language and critiqued the DESD movement as introducing an economic mission of/for education, and noted that with the introduction of this discourse political economy had finally colonised educational thought, and noted that this was too narrow to be a project for society in the 21st century. She argued for a continuous seeking of alternative proposals to sustainable development.

- Joe Heimlich drew attention to the fact that most of our learning does not take place in schools, and that learning processes are integral to socialisation processes in the world outside of schools.

One of the more interesting presentations that I attended, was one presented by Phillip Payne from Australia. He put forward an ecological theory of human agency, and I was particularly interested in it, as it linked up with our recent work with Margaret Archer’s (1998) theories of structure, agency and social realism. He made a distinction between ‘nature embodied’, ‘material culture’ and ‘propositional culture’. The first of these, ‘nature embodied’, he argued, is about natural relations and involves somatic (bodily) interactions as embodied relations with associated approaches to environmental education being immersion, exploration, discovery and appreciation. The second of these, ‘material culture’, he argued, is about practical relations and involves doing practical projects in/as practical meaning-making, with associated approaches to environmental education being applying creativity and resourcefulness in doing practical projects (action learning). The third of these distinctions, ‘propositional culture’, he argued is about discursive relations and involves rationalising, signing, coding, texting as constructed and mediated knowledge, explanation, value and evidence projection with associated environmental education approaches being biological studies, geographical studies, geological studies, etc. in which nature is textualised and discoursed. This work, together with its links to Margaret Archer’s significant work on the emergence of agency and structure, promises to provide much food for thought in the next decade, as we continue to fathom how people learn, and how social change takes place.

Another highlight (for us) in the congress was the workshop on ‘environmental *education, ethics and action*’, organised by Bob Jickling, Akpezi Ogbuigwe and myself as a UNEP contribution to the congress. We prepared a draft booklet in four languages (English, Spanish, French and Italian) which we used in the workshop (Jickling *et al.*, in press). Through the workshop we tested the orientation and focus of the book, which was aiming at generating involvement in ethics as an everyday activity. Through a series of activities involving cultural critique, analysing self-validating reductions, ethical quandaries, identifying ethical practices in the everyday, and re-imagining the future, workshop participants contributed many new ideas to the book. The book has since been revised and will be printed as a resource for teachers and teacher educators in 2006.

The Final Plenary

One of the challenging tasks that was assigned to me by the Scientific Committee, was to serve on the final congress panel as part of a four-person team who was tasked with the job

of synthesising the main congress themes, and pointing out the significant themes that could be taken forward into the future. I briefly summarise the 'synthesis panel contributions' here, to share some perspectives which may guide thinking as we move towards the planning of the 2007 World Congress in Environmental Education, to be hosted by EEASA, in Durban, South Africa (1-6 July 2007).

Enricho Leff from Latin America drew our attention to the wealth of the social movement in Latin America. In painting a picture of increased participation in environmental education in Latin America, Leff told the story of an increase in national programmes of environmental education, and stories of how environmental education was beginning to re-new the concept of education in 'Education for all' discussions, and how the unions were participating in environmental education as part of a new social movement. He indicated that some of the challenges in the future included establishing the identity of environmental education, and conceptualising the place of environmental education in ESD. He argued that we need to engage in epistemological criticism, develop a new rationality that reflects the essence of environmental education, which he saw as bringing together the relationship between 'thinking' and 'being'. Environmental rationality, he argued, has as its pre-condition the right of being, and being different in the sense that values should not be overshadowed by a dominance of particular forms of rationality. He noted that a new potential exists if we can mobilise the potential that exists in the hearts and minds of people, and that an ethics of otherness needs to prevail which recognises co-habitation, equality and the importance of listening to the other. Sustainable development, he noted was too focussed on the relationship between economics and nature, and that there is a need for us to understand the strategies of power that circulate in this discourse. He argued for a strengthening of the new social movement which, at its centre, was about an environmental rationality which was built on reason and passion.

Professor Walter Fornasa also provided a thoughtful closure to the conference, in noting that the environmental problem was a cultural problem and what was needed was a shift from contemporary common sense embodied in contemporary globalisation and sustainable development discourses. He argued that we need new epistemological frameworks to work on, and drew our attention to Foucault's proposal that there are different types of ecology, and that an inclusive social ecology was an important aspect of this new discourse that we needed to create. He argued for a pro-ecological attitude, and noted that teachers need to re-assert their roles in society and that we should demand a right to self-biography, which, he argues, was being crushed by globalisation and universalising discourses. He noted that 'we are the stories we tell', and encouraged us to tell the stories that need to be told, not the ones we are habituated into.

My closing contribution attempted to synthesise some of the more arresting themes that arose (in my view) from the deliberations at the congress. I argued that the most significant challenge that seemed to be facing humanity (which was also a strong theme permeating the congress) was one of cultural change, involving greater notions of equity, new identities, changes in *habitus*, and new definitions of a sense of 'well-being'. These, I argued would require new epistemologies which would need to be defined *in situ*, but would also need to be shaped through being brave, creative and radical. At the heart of this cultural change would also be a re-thinking

of the relationship between education and culture. A second key theme arising in the congress was an acknowledgement and valuing of diversity, and a broadening of vantage points for examining our theories and practices. Questions were arising that probed traditional knowledge and different epistemological perspectives, bringing forward new discussions and recognition of the contextual fabric of knowledge creation processes. A third key theme which I commented on was the need to re-focus our attention on processes of social change, which involves a better understanding of agency, learning and empowerment. In a context of risk and uncertainty, the place of innovation and responsiveness (agency) becomes crucial in social change processes. Ethics also arose as an important congress theme, in particular through deliberations on how the world was looking after its children, with some being left to the social dislocations of the lonely and self-absorbed 'screenager', while others were hungry and at risk from increased violence and disease. Attention to the care of children needs to be put on the agendas of everyone around the world, and practical approaches to ensuring greater safety and social security for children needs to be found. All of this, I argued was being done, and could be further enhanced through our practical tools, our research (which needed to be more responsive, explore new methodologies and research contexts), our pedagogies (which seemed to be becoming more situated and active in response to risk), our approaches to professional development (which were becoming more reflexive) and through effective networking (amongst others). All of these activities needed to be creative, and at the 'cutting edge' of change in society, if we are to succeed in building the vibrant new social movement described by Enricho Leff.

These are some of the pointers that could guide the framing of the programme for the 2007 World Congress, and may inspire us to shape the work we do in the DESD.

Openings for the 2007 Environmental Education Congress in Durban, South Africa

The next World Environmental Education Congress will be hosted in South Africa in 2007. The theme of this congress is 'Environmental Education and Questions of Sustainable Development', taking forward some of the insights reported above. This congress will be reviewing 30 years of 'progress' in environmental education, and will commemorate the establishment of the Tbilisi Principles in 1977. A special edition of the EEASA Journal will be dedicated to this task, and will track the transformations in thinking and practice in environmental education in different contexts around the world in the past 30 years.

Notes on the Contributor

Heila Lotz-Sisitka is Associate Professor of Environment Education; she holds the Murray & Roberts Chair of Environmental Education and Sustainability at Rhodes University, South Africa. Her research interests include participation in education, curriculum and social transformation and research as processes of social change. Email: h.lotz@ru.ac.za.

References

- Archer, M. (1998). Introduction: Realism in the social sciences. In Archer, M., Bhaskar, R., Collier, A., Lawson, T. & Norrie, A. (Eds), *Critical Realism: Essential readings*. London: Routledge. pp. 189–205.
- Jickling, B., Lotz-Sisitka, H., O'Donoghue, R. & Ogbuigwe, A. (In press). *Environmental Education, Ethics and Action. A workbook to get started*. Nairobi: UNEP.
- Salomone, M. (2005). Environmental education and the future of the Earth. *Eco* 7, pp. 6–7.