



## Editorial

# Tracing Actors, Actants and Relational Dynamics in Environmental Education Research

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### *Introduction*

This edition of the EEASA Journal provides insight into a range of relationships in the field of environmental education, and the complexities that exist around them, as reflected in the combination of papers. This Editorial picks up on the methodological ‘note’ (or is it a challenge?) provided by Godwell Nhamo in his paper in this edition of the journal. He provides a description of the possibilities that actor network theory provides for describing and explaining environmental policy processes, and recommends that environmental educators consider this methodology in their analyses. In particular, he refers environmental educators to applications of actor network theory for tracing relational dynamics between actors (i.e., environmental education practitioners) and actants which are non-human referents (e.g., the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and UNESCO’s (2005) International Implementation Scheme).

In response to his paper, I have chosen to ‘pick up’ on this methodological discussion in this Editorial, by considering aspects of this theoretical perspective in describing the ‘happenings’ that occur across the pages of this edition of the EEASA Journal. In doing so, I highlight (in part) the diversity of actors and actants that are influencing the field of environmental education, their subject matter and contexts, and I highlight the relational dynamics that become evident when one accepts a methodology that aims to trace such dynamics. In particular, this Editorial considers how ‘The language of actors, actants and actor/actant-networks brings to the fore the relationships and complexities that exist around them’ (Nhamo, this edition).

### *A Quasi-Object (‘Token’) Influencing Environmental Education Theory and Practice*

Drawing on Latour (1993), Nhamo suggests that the Plastic Bags Regulations can be described as a ‘quasi-object’ or ‘token’, which is ‘simultaneously real, discursive and socially constructed’ (Nhamo, this edition). He explains that such quasi-objects circulate and transform, while in circulation, and in so doing, they ‘... form relationships between the members of the given groups’. He argues that policy frameworks can serve as non-human actants that affect relational dynamics and the practices of actors in a particular field who, in turn, affect and change the nature of the policy frameworks. In this edition of the journal, it is apparent that the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) and its International Implementation Scheme (UNESCO, 2005) can be viewed as such a quasi-object or ‘token’. Numerous papers in

this edition of the journal draw on, and make reference to, this seemingly powerful token/actant. My own paper reporting on the consultations that recently took place in southern Africa to discuss and consider the implications of the hybridised and globalising discourse of ESD in the UNDESD is a case in point (Lotz-Sisitka, this edition). Annette Gough's paper traces the history of ESD in Victoria, Australia, and deliberates the unrealistic expectations of the UNESCO policy framework for sustainable schools in an Australian context, questioning the feasibility, and desirability, of any one programme being able to incorporate all aspects of ESD as elaborated by UNESCO (2005). The paper by Le Roux and Ferreira seeks insight into the implications of ESD for educators' responses to genetically modified organisms, arguing for a need for more careful in-depth engagements with complex questions that have ethical ambiguities embedded within them. Through a phenomenological orientation to research, they explore various perspectives of environmental educators on the ethically sensitive topic of genetically modified organisms. In their analysis, sustainable development and the emerging discourse of ESD provide the referent for their arguments. In a similar vein, sustainable development appears to be providing the referent for other papers in the volume, including the papers by Ndaruga and Irwin (see below), Impey, Lawhon and Fincham, Olvitt and Hamaamba, Ingle, and Nsubungu. A reading of these papers begins to shed light on how thinking associated with the UNDESD may begin to be 'unpacked' in a sub-regional context, through engaged research in context.

Working in a different place, but on similar questions, Chen Nan, Wu Xiaoqiang and Wang Jin describe how deliberations on greening of schools in southern Africa and elsewhere around the world are influencing China's thinking on sustainable schools. They draw on an interconnected network of theory and practice associated with improving green schools/eco-schools, and illustrate how the interconnected global network of actors and actants in the green schools/eco-schools context can influence material realities of green schools construction and evaluation in China.

### *Place as Actant*

In the paper by Ayub Macharia Ndaruga and Pat Irwin, and the paper by Angela Impey, we are able to consider how a non-human actant, wetlands, can influence educational theory and practice in completely different ways. Ndaruga, supported by Irwin, undertakes survey research to establish teachers' roles in promoting wetland conservation in Kenya through educative engagements with communities. He concludes that there is a lack of an holistic understanding and approach to responding to wetland degradation amongst teachers. He recommends culturally situated, active approaches to learning as an important dimension of building a broader, more holistic response to wetland conservation amongst teachers. This is the topic that is explored by Angela Impey in her paper. Working in the context of the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park in South Africa, she uses musical constructions of place as her opening to explore people's socio-cultural relationships with wetlands, and considers associated implications for environmental education praxis. Her paper builds upon the premise that music and associated ritual practices present rich discursive sites where local knowledge about the environment is negotiated and affirmed, and she engages high school students in a process of documenting their diverse cultural

and environmental heritages. She explicitly indicates her interest in relational dynamics associated with the (indigenous) knowledge and experience of actors and place in this statement:

IKS, as manifest in music, body and ritual processes ... seeks the recovery of meaning systems as its principle reference. In this context, its focus is on ways in which people and places are mediated through symbolic vocabularies, the premise being that it is at the level of the intangible, experiential and sensual that people most meaningfully inscribe themselves into their environments, and thus transform physical landscapes into cultural spaces. (Impey, this edition)

### *New and Interesting Dynamics*

In this edition of the journal, we carry papers from fields/sub-fields that have previously been under-represented in environmental education theory and practice. Angela Impey's work referred to above considers music, culture and symbolic vocabularies. This has not previously been covered in an EEASA Journal.

With a completely different research orientation and focus, Lausanne Olvitt and Tyson Hamaamba introduce local government as a new context for environmental education discourse and practice. They discuss their research into establishing a framework for environmental education and training in a local government context. Powerful actants in this context are South Africa's National Qualifications Framework, the compliance frameworks that drive municipal environmental actions, and new skills development legislation which requires that all education and training be considered within a competence framework. Their paper seeks to explore the dimensioning of a competence framework that responds to these powerful actants, in an effort to strengthen capabilities of actors who have a public responsibility for service delivery and environmental management at local level.

Not only do we cover the local government context in this edition of the EEASA Journal, but through the paper provided by Mary Lawhon and Rob Fincham, we are able to consider the realm of public awareness and its construction. Lawhon and Fincham, through a critical analysis of gendered and other issues of representation in the journalism of a South African newspaper (the *Natal Witness*), raise questions around the way in which actants, such as newspapers, may influence the perceptions and responses of public actors. They argue for inclusive and critical journalism that will address what they perceive as current biased representations of environmental issues and perspectives in the contemporary media.

In his Viewpoint paper, Mark Ingle tackles the issue of gender relationships in environmental education. His interest is in exploring a few aspects of women's relations with the environment. He argues that women are seen as critical to environmental education in that they tend to exercise a formative influence over the attitudes of the very young, and that their relationship with the land they work is compromised by their poorly institutionalised property rights, particularly in developing countries. He sees a context of 'environmental injustice' and argues that actors such as development practitioners, bureaucrats and policy makers need to be sensitised to the impacts of environmental injustice on poorer women's lives.

### *Ethics as Shaping Influence*

This edition of the EEASA Journal also brings questions of ethics to the fore. These are foregrounded in the Viewpoint paper by Leigh Price, where she deliberates the ethics of her participatory practice in the context of an industry environmental education programme in Zimbabwe; and by Le Roux and Ferreira, who deliberate the dynamics of engaging with complex ethical quandaries such as genetically modified organisms in environmental education theory and practice. Mark Ingle raises ethical issues and questions associated with gender relations in environmental education. Yvonne Nsubungu, in a Viewpoint paper, raises a deeper ethical question associated with curriculum relevance in rural areas, and she shares some of the openings into her PhD research initiative, which seeks deeper insight into how natural resource management is dealt with in curriculum processes in rural schools.

### *Exploring 'Thirdness'*

Focusing on quasi-objects such as the UNDESSED and the UNESCO Implementation Scheme, or 'wetlands' and the complex relations that exist between actors and actants, brings the notion of 'thirdness' to the fore (as described in Nhamo's paper). Thirdness denotes the space between two (or more) entities, and it is in such a space where relationships are constituted. As actors, we all occupy relative positions in a space of relations which are often complex and difficult to show empirically. In this section of the Editorial, we consider some thought provoking questions on the notion of 'thirdness' and how it might further help us to read the contributions presented in this edition of the EEASA Journal. First there is the paper produced by myself, as 'reporter' feeding back to a constituency of actors who participated in the UNDESSED consultations in the southern African region. Taking up a somewhat neutral stance, the paper outlines the main findings of this consultation, but leaves the spaces open for more in-depth critical engagement with this discourse at a later date. Nhamo, in his paper, occupies the space of critical observer, tracing power relations and events associated with the introduction of new environmental legislation in South Africa. Annette Gough seeks to occupy a similar relational space in her analysis of how ESD is playing out in Victoria schools. Leigh Price, however, occupies the space of reflexive practitioner, seeking more in-depth critical engagements with the fundamental premises (e.g., how participation is conceptualised) of environmental education theory and practice in southern Africa. Angela Impey expresses some degree of frustration with the relational space she was able to occupy in her research process, wanting to strengthen and deepen the relationships that constituted the research process and outcomes in her study. Ingle on the other hand, occupies a relational space of the activist, concerned with taking up the issues of others in his representation of social injustices relating to women's society-environment relationships. We see from the vantage point of 'thirdness' that there are various ways in which the relational dynamics of the research process itself enables environmental education researchers to establish their identities as researchers. These relational dynamics also shape the nature of the research outcomes and findings in different ways.

## *The EEASA Journal Actor Network*

The EEASA Journal provides a forum for the publication of environmental education research in southern Africa. Through the play with actor network theory in this Editorial, it is possible to identify the role of such a journal in building an 'actor network'. The Journal itself can be seen as a semiotic actor/actant, which is a hybrid, engaged in the process of creating its own actor/actant world – the world of research in environmental education. Research constitutes a powerful action resource that allows researchers to influence outcomes in certain respects and to certain degrees. Will the SADC DESD research have such an influence? Will Impey's research into music, culture and place have an influence? Will Ndaruga and Irwin's argument for a more culturally situated orientation to wetland education in Kenya have such an outcome? Will they be able to draw on Angela Impey's insights, and on insights produced in the context of the SADC DESD consultations, for example, to strengthen their argument and practice in future? Will Price re-constitute her practice, and influence the practice of others who believe passionately in participatory approaches through her research? Will the rural curriculum in the Eastern Cape be influenced by the research outcomes being generated by Nsubungu, and will China's Green Schools make a difference to resource use and pollution levels in the world's most rapidly industrialising country? Will Chen Nan and her colleagues in China be able to draw on the insights provided by Annette Gough in Australia into sustainability in schools as she further pursues her work? What translation processes will become possible across these journal articles, and how can researchers associated with the journal work together, form relationships and extend the outcomes of their research in new and unexpected ways? These remain open-ended questions for those enrolled in the EEASA Journal actor network (through publications or readings in relation to their environmental education activities) to consider in time to come.

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### **Post Script**

While this journal was in production, we learned that Stephan le Roux tragically passed away from brain cancer in October 2006. We hope that EEASA Journal readers will value and draw on his contribution to discussions on environmental ethics in education (Le Roux & Ferreira, this edition) for many years to come. Through this journal we extend the condolences of EEASA members to his family and friends.

### **References**

- Latour, B. (1993). *We have never been modern*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). (2005). *United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development. International Implementation Scheme*. [www.unesco.org/education/desd](http://www.unesco.org/education/desd).