

Ethical consequences of 'educational programmes' linked to sustainability

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It is a great honour to present a talk today to a group of prominent thinkers concerning one of the most serious challenges that humans face today. I have been involved in designing and providing educational programmes and projects, which address sustainability issues for over 23 years. I have also taught a number of courses around the topic of sustainability at universities in Tokyo for about 10 years. Preparing for the talk today made me realise that sustainability is indeed a deeply ethical issue. Today I would like to share with you some of the examples of educational programmes which try to foster individual and collective ethics towards sustainability by affecting the participants' values.

Many authors passionately advocate the importance of education in transforming values and empowering people to participate in environmental protection activities. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development produced an influential publication *Our Common Future*, in which education was seen as a focal point of its agenda. In short it says; 'the world's teachers ... have a crucial role to play' in helping to bring about 'the extensive social changes' needed for socially and ecologically sustainable patterns of development.

However, many researchers, particularly environmental education researchers, argue that knowledge alone will not lead people to take action. Some argue that people must first take an interest before developing knowledge, and some argue that a sense of wonder and affection for the natural world is the beginning of the process. Regulations and laws can guide people to act certain ways, but these regulations are themselves created by human beings based on their values. Therefore if education is to help bring about social change, it needs to touch people's values.

There are many 'educations' in the world which address some aspects of sustainability, such as environmental education, development education, outdoor education, peace education, education for sustainable development, and place-based-education, to name a few. The demarcation is not clear-cut, and even within sub-disciplines, researchers argue about what the curriculum may be expected to cover. Some claim that if various groups could unite and go forward as one influential movement, they would better succeed in promoting sustainability and quality of life for all on our planet.

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Regardless of the name, to what extent have those 'educations' and the 'educators' been successful since they emerged?

Looking at worsening data on climate change, these 'educations' seem to have failed to influence people's core values strongly enough to have a real effect on behaviour causing this change, which entails huge ethical consequences. Indeed, there have been persuasive observations, such as those made by Bourdieu and Passeron, that education, especially school education, commonly reinforces mainstream culture and values, and is inherently embedded in the ideology of oppression. Some argue that, hijacked by instrumental rationalisation and utilitarianism, modern prevalent education seems to transcend values, promoting the continuation of market ideology rather than attempting to build a more expansive vision of a sustainable future. In this case, modern education bears responsibility for the ethical consequences in the future.

We cannot afford to not take any action . How can we, who have an interest in learning and education, do better in terms of bringing in more people to think about, and act towards, a sustainable future?

For any individual, it is difficult to grasp the indirect result of her or his actions, particularly when the impact is distant in time or space. If something is predicted to happen in the remote future based on present one's actions, then one might consider it as a mere threat not worth believing or might even simply feel indifferent towards it. Many global issues such as climate change are so big and complex that an individual may not feel responsible for the ultimate harms. Recognising the connection between one's own life and global sustainability requires imagination and the development of an ethic of care for other being, including non-human beings. Some research shows that carefully designed experiential programmes can help foster affection towards that place or towards the natural world in general, and thereby the development of a personal ethics towards sustainability. Guided reflection as part of the programme could enhance imagination and deepen understanding about ecology and the connection between one's daily life and the bigger issues.

Various study results exist around the world to demonstrate some of the positive and on-going outcomes arising from educational programmes for sustainability. To a certain extent, I have achieved very positive outcomes with my own students in terms of making sense of or understanding the gravity of the issues when I utilise an experiential way of learning such as a simulation game in the class. Here I would like to show you some outdoor learning programmes

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with slides as examples.

I have been taking a group of young people to an island in Micronesia called Yap for 23 years, and its purpose is fundamentally for a participant to personally re-evaluate what is important in life. The group of young visitors live simply, just like most Yapese people used to do until around 20 years ago, without electricity, gas, or running water. They would make their own toilet in the mangrove area or use the ocean itself, and sometimes use rainwater for drinking. They spend days learning local knowledge and island skills to sustain themselves on the land, often taught by local children. They harvest food and fish together with locals, and cook for themselves using coconut husks. They realise that when they eat a crab, they need to take life away from it, which of course they knew, but never before understood in a realistic sense. They see the remnants of the war between the US and Japan, witness the products of Japanese companies in the garbage, and see some of the visible effects of climate change.

Their comments include things linked to values such as these in these slides (“I cannot continue to be selfish”; “Simplicity is more ‘cool’ than hi-tech products”; “wealth & happiness comes from relationships with other people”, etc.)

In returning, typically they state that they have experienced the following changes in their attitudes;

- I lost interest in buying many things.
- I pay more attention to the world news.
- Now I do more family activities, and try to express my appreciation to my family.
- I joined in my community’s festival for the first time.
- I am more concerned with where my food comes from.

Through the programme, the participants seem to have sorted their priorities based on their newly affected values.

I don’t go on due to the time limitation, but in some cases their learning here led them to actions such as creating groups back home in Japan, contacting companies to propose biodegradable packaging, or organising an event to raise awareness among university students.

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The second example is a case in a small farming community in a mountainous area of Japan where I conducted a study on a series of educational programmes. Japan as a nation faces the problem of a rapidly aging population, and it is especially acute in mountainous areas. As of October 2014, people aged 65 and over account for 26% of the population in Japan, whereas it was just 5% in 1950. It is predicted to reach 33.4% in 2035.

The village, Tochikubo, is situated on a gentle slope at an elevation of 500m about 220km north-northwest from Tokyo. Among 176 residents 37% were above 65 years old as of 2014.

In the village four programmes were arranged in different seasons, and 84% of the 67 programme participants, aged between teens to 70s, were from urban areas. The programme length was one night and two days, and in all the programmes the community residents taught something local experientially such as harvesting crops, local history by walking on the ancient path, foraging for edible wild plants in the forest, techniques for preserving vegetables, and so on.

When asked about whether they intended to change their behaviour based on what they learned during the programme, 80% of the participants responded that they would change something about their lifestyle, such as seeking more experiential learning opportunities, sharing their learning with others, and learning more about their own local places, people and history. They planned to live an altered lifestyle including more walking, recycling, saving water, practicing not-so-convenient but enjoyable sustainable activities everyday, such as choosing organic food, becoming contributing consumers to farmers, visiting local shops, and reducing their reliance on machines gradually. Many of the answers are linked to values and they all have implications for sustainability.

The experiences also helped them imagine what it means to farmers and consumers when they hear a statement such as a rise in temperature of just 1°C reduces the grain harvest by 10%.

I do not have time to go into details here but these programmes also affected the values reported by local people and the way they see themselves.

These examples show that carefully designed experiential learning programmes, which directly engage participants with other people and with the natural environment have the potential to raise awareness and foster better attitudes towards global sustainability. What these examples do not tell us is the longitudinal effect of these experiences; whether the attitudinal changes become part of them for life or whether in time they will fade away to be replaced by something else.

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Some studies suggest that repetition of experiences helps the effect to last longer. Therefore well planned 'educations' around sustainability should be promoted at all levels to increase the number of individuals with an understanding of the connections between the issues we face, and also between their own lives and global issues.

We cannot deny that mainstream education in economically powerful nations, which are responsible for global sustainability issues, may transmit largely only the socially dominant values based on market ideology. Therefore, educational programmes designed with a critical and creative mind and which aim to nurture the growth of ethics towards sustainability are needed for the world to shift towards sustainable future.