Viewpoint
Against Environmental Learning: Why we need a language of environmental education

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Abstract

As witnessed at the 2004 EEASA Conference, environmental learning is emerging as a popular term in environmental education discourses in South Africa. There are those who argue that there is no need to speak about environmental education in South Africa anymore since environment is embedded in the new curriculum frameworks for General Education and Training and Further Education and Training. All that is required is the (environmental) learning of what is defined in various education policies. In this viewpoint paper I contextualise 'environmental learning' within the emergence of a language of learning internationally. I raise some concerns about a language of learning and argue for a language of environmental education.

Introduction

My attendance at the Conference this year made it possible for me to identify some of the new developments/thoughts among the organisation's members. Of particular value were the sessions in which reporting was done on part of a South African project – the National Environmental Education Project (NEEP). NEEP's varied activities focus on supporting environmental education in the General Education and Training (GET) band of the South African education system. Funded by the Danish government, the project is housed in the national and provincial education departments and conceived as a partnership between civil society (EEASA) and government. In these sessions and in conversations with South African colleagues attending the conference, I noticed two expressions being used quite freely, namely, 'environment is in the curriculum' and 'environmental learning', without any apparent need to gloss them. I have to admit that these two expressions bothered me at first, and so my reflections on these constructs should be seen as emerging from my initial feelings of uneasiness. Although the two constructs are not divorced from each other I shall at times separate them in my discussion so as to give greater attention to the latter, which I contend is fraught with dangers.

   I assume that what is meant by 'environment is in the curriculum' is that environmental concerns are reflected in some of the outcomes of learning areas and content selections of the GET band and the subjects of the Further Education and Training (FET) band. Furthermore, I assume that environmental interest is embodied in one of the nine principles on which the National Curriculum Statement of the FET is based: 'human rights, inclusivity, environmental

and social justice' (Department of Education, 2003:7). Or as described in the Revised National Curriculum Statement for the GET: 'The relationship between human rights, a healthy environment and social justice is addressed in each Learning Area Statement' (Department of Education, 2002:10). The inclusion of environmental concerns in South African curriculum policy is a positive step towards integrating environmental education into formal education. This has created opportunities to enable environmental education processes in classrooms.[1] However, the fact that some of the learning outcomes embody environmental concerns does not guarantee that 'environmental learning' will occur. Another problem is that the learning outcomes do not necessarily reflect the complexities of the term 'environment' and the associated problems, issues and risks. At most, what the learning outcomes and Principle 7[2] of the National Curriculum Statement for FET do is to provide opportunities for enabling some environmental education processes, of which 'environmental learning' is integral. Environmental learning depends on teachers recognising the opportunities that environmentally-oriented learning outcomes provide; teachers' knowledge of place and dimensions of environment; and teachers' having the pedagogical knowledge to mediate environmental learning. Naïvely bandying around an expression like 'environment is in the curriculum' is dangerous. It could produce a simplistic interpretation of what the learning outcomes and knowledge foci (GET) or content selections (FET) identified in South African curriculum policy documents encapsulate, namely that all that is to be said about environment is embodied in the mentioned policy documents and, furthermore, that all that needs to happen is the learning of these by school and other learners. While these are important issues, however, my concern in this article is to raise some criticisms of the expression 'environmental learning' and to argue why it might be preferable to talk about environmental education instead.

'Environmental learning', an idea propagated by the National Department of Education[3] (Reddy, 2004, pers. comm.), is a language used to reinforce learner-centred education, which is one of the key features of the post-apartheid national curriculum. There are two ways in which it needs to be seen. Firstly, it needs to be understood as part of an international trend to shift emphasis from teaching to learning. For example, technology makes it possible to make learning take place whenever and wherever desired. Learning can involve the ability to access information rather than being a process that engages deliberation among learners and between learners and teachers. Secondly, as a response to teacher-dominated pedagogies that characterised apartheid classroom practises. With respect to South Africa's new learner-centred curriculum framework, Malcolm (1998:45) points out that learning programmes[4] should do the following:
- Put learners first, recognising and building on their knowledge and experience, and responding to their needs.
- Create opportunities for all to learn, including persons with disabilities.
- Acknowledged and accommodate different learning styles and rates of learning.
- Construct ways in which different cultural values and lifestyles affect the construction of knowledge.
- Motivate learners by providing them with positive learning experiences, by affirming their worth and demonstrating respect for various languages, cultures and personal circumstances.

- Acknowledge that not all learners learn at the same rate and in the same way – learners should attain them through a wide range of experiences encountered over several grades and in a variety of contexts.

Few would disagree with Malcolm (1998) that some or all of these should be integral to all good education programmes. So what then is the problem with a 'language of learning'? Part of the answer lies the fact that we have learned over the years how powerful language is, that language not only describes reality (practices) but also is a practice itself, that is, it is something that we do. Moreover, language constitutes reality (what can be said, seen, known, thought and be done). As Biesta (2004:70) writes:

> Just as language makes some ways of saying and doing possible, it makes other ways of saying and doing difficult or even impossible. This is one important reason why language matters to education, because the language or languages we have available to speak about education determine to a large extent what can be said and done, and thus what cannot be said and done.

Whether we (un)consciously either use the construct 'environmental learning' or 'environmental education' matters because the construct we choose will enable or place constraints on what might be done. But why has a language of learning emerged?

The Rise of a Language of Learning

The rise of a new language of learning in South Africa is evidenced by the frequent use of the concept 'learning' in policy documents; by the identification of life-long learning as one of the key features of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF); by increased talk of adult learning and not adult education; and more recently, the emergence of a language of environmental learning instead of a language of environmental education. However, developments in South Africa need to be understood in terms of the emergence of a language of learning internationally and in particular in countries of the 'developed' world. Biesta (2004:80) argues that the emergence of a language of learning should be understood as the unintended outcome of a range of different developments: new theories of learning, postmodernism, the silent explosion of learning and the erosion of the welfare state. New theories of learning refer to developments in the field of the psychology of learning and specifically the emergence of constructivism and socio-constructivism. New theories of learning shift the emphasis from teacher to learner since they are premised on the view that learners actively construct knowledge and understanding and that knowledge cannot be transferred intact from teacher to learner. The postmodern critique of education views education as a modern project and troubles the idea that teachers can liberate and emancipate their students. By the 'silent explosion' Biesta (2004:73) refers to the mushrooming of non-formal kinds of learning such as 'fitness centres, sport clubs, self-help therapy manuals, internet learning, self-instructional video's, DVD's and CD's, etcetera.' The rise of learning is also associated with the decline of the welfare state and the rise of neo-liberalism. The welfare state provides all citizens (rich and poor) with health care, security, education and so on. Biesta (2004:33) argues that within the neo-liberal state, 'value

for money' has become the key principle in many of the transactions between the state and tax-payers. The state's role has shifted from provider of the mentioned goods to taking on a monitoring role with tighter systems of inspection and control, and prescriptive over education protocols – what Ball (2003) refers to as a rising culture of performativity. In this context, Biesta (2004:73) argues, parents are viewed as consumers of the education of their children, and the suitable name for the consumer therefore, the learner.

All of these developments have influenced the development of a language of learning in South Africa, even though the influence of postmodernism may be negligible. Constructivist and socio-constructivist theories of learning have had a particular appeal in South Africa because they offer a response to the teacher-dominant pedagogies (influenced by Fundamental Pedagogies and Christian National Education) that have characterised education practices during apartheid. As a consequence of globalisation there is also a growing market for non-formal forms of learning such as the ones described earlier. The expansion of neo-liberalism is strongly felt in South Africa. Since 1994 we have witnessed both the commercialisation and privatisation of government assets and that the state is actively putting in place tighter systems of inspection and control. In relation to education, quality assurance, for example, has become a favourite word in many of the education policy documents. There is no place here to discuss these developments in great detail. Suffice it to say, the usage of concept 'environmental learning' may be understood in the context of these developments.

The developments that I have described are not all bad. My concern is not with the (de)merits of each development but rather with the unintended outcome that these developments have collectively produced, that is, the rise of a language of learning. But, what is wrong with a language of learning? Biesta (2004:74) argues that one of the main problems with the new language of learning is that it makes possible the re-description of the process of education in terms of an economic transaction; that is, the learner (who has the needs) is the consumer, the teacher or education institution the provider, and education becoming a commodity. But, should the education process be understood as an economic transaction? I go along with Feinberg (2001) and Biesta (2004) that education should not be viewed as an economic transaction. In a typical economic transaction a consumer knows what (s)he needs and wants and manufacturers and retailers provide for such needs and wants. However, it is questionable whether children know what it is that they want from education. Even adults do not always know what they want from education or what their needs are. People engage in education precisely to find out what their needs and wants are and education professionals play a vital role in helping students with finding out what it is that they actually need. Furthermore, viewing education as an economic transaction dilutes education processes to technical concerns of efficiency and the effectiveness of such processes, neglecting questions concerned with the content and purpose of education which Biesta (2004:76) argues should form part of the education process – that asking questions about the content and purpose of education are important educational questions.

The Nature of Education

Education has always been and will in all probability continue to be a contested terrain. However, one could claim that education always involves an element of risk. Even if a learner

believes that they know what it is that they want or what their needs are these might change in the education process – education processes always produce unintended outcomes. For example, in the education process there might be serendipitous moments that students might not have imagined they would experience and also instances when their beliefs, values and their notions of truth are challenged/disturbed. Biesta (2004) goes as far as to claim that education only begins when the learner is willing to take a risk. He writes:

> To negate or deny the risk involved in education is to miss a crucial dimension of education. To suggest that education can be and should be risk free, that learners don't run any risk by engaging in education, or that 'learning outcomes' can be know[n] and specified in advance, is a gross misrepresentation of what education is about (Biesta, 2004:77).

Although not the main concern here, Biesta's argument also provides a basis for critiquing outcomes-based education, which is premised on the idea of pre-determined outcomes. But, let me return to the centrality of risk in education and by pointing out that teachers' roles in 'managing' the risk involved in the education process is crucial. Sometimes teachers have to play nurturing roles, and sometimes they have to disturb students. They also have to make pedagogical judgements; for example, when shall the pedagogical episode begin and when shall it end. These responsibilities, Shalem, (1998) argues, constitute the pedagogical authority of the teacher.

But, what are some of the implications of what I have discussed for a language of environmental education?

Why a Language of Environmental Education?

The arguments made for a language of education generally are also applicable to environmental education, except that the nature of environmental problems increases the risk[5] involved in environmental education processes as compared to education processes in general. Environmental problems are complex and so are their solutions. Today's solution may be tomorrow's problem. Associated with environmental problems are risks that have become pervasive in contemporary society so much so that Beck (1992) refers to society of late modernity as risk society. Risk society is characterised by the distribution of 'bads' or dangers across the globe. Beck (1992) argues that risk society is concerned with a type of immiseration of civilisation. The immiseration he refers to does not involve material impoverishment, as was the case of the working masses of the 19th century, but rather concerns the threatening and destruction of the natural foundations of life. The ubiquity of risk is evident today when harmless things such as wine, tea, beef, pasta, etc., turn out to be dangerous (see Beck, 1992:51). Beck (1992:52) points out that in contrast to the immediacy of personally and socially experienced misery in the 19th century, today's civilisation presents threats that are intangible, brought to consciousness chiefly in scientised thoughts. More and more the public are dependent on the knowledge of experts in the field of science to make decisions concerning risks that might affect their lives. People are therefore becoming increasingly incompetent about their own afflictions. Le Grange (2004) points out that in the developing world risk associated

with material impoverishment is still largely present, thus compounding risk in such societies.

Perhaps I have taken the discussion beyond the meaning that those who use the term 'environmental learning' give to it. It may be that 'environmental learning' is used in a more trivial way than the language of learning I have discussed in this article. I mean trivial in the sense that it is unquestioningly accepted that all that is to be said about environment is embodied in curriculum policy documents ('environment is in the curriculum') and all that must happen in classrooms is the learning of what is defined in the policy documents ('environmental learning'). Perhaps my discussion of an emerging language of learning can be meaningfully employed to read education policies in general and constructs such as 'environmental learning' deconstructively, that is, to lay bare traces of a new language of learning.

The complex and contingent nature of environmental problems and their associated risks cannot be captured in a few learning outcomes of a National Curriculum Statement – so 'environment is [not] in the curriculum'. What the National Curriculum Statement for FET and the Revised National Curriculum Statement for the GET does is to provide the spaces for enabling environmental education processes. But recognising these spaces requires teachers who have an understanding of environmental education processes. To ensure this, environmental (teacher) education has a cardinal role to play. If teachers are not able to recognise the spaces for enabling environmental processes then in all likelihood they will continue as presently is largely the case, in copycat fashion use exemplars provided in policy documents – resulting in, for example, the majority of South African Grade 1 classes doing recycling at a given point in time. Moreover, environmental learning is dependent on teachers mediating environmental knowledge, on teachers exercising their responsibility and pedagogical knowledge. Environmental knowledge is produced in interdependent and interactive relationships between teachers and learners who engage critically with information, issues and problems, often resulting in unintended outcomes. An appreciation of this necessitates a language of environmental education and not merely a language of environmental learning. Language is loaded, so we must not dismiss lightly the importance of the terms we use: a superficial interpretation of a notion such as 'environmental learning' can have potentially damaging consequences.

Notes on the Contributor

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Endnotes

1   My use of classroom here refers to sites where teachers and learners interact and is not limited to a space enclosed by four walls.

2   Principle 7 is: 'human rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice'.

3   In particular, senior departmental officials overseeing the NEEP-GET process.

4   Learning programmes are a compilation of activities, based on a particular topic, which enable learners to achieve specified critical and learning outcomes.

5   Risk is used in two senses in this section. Firstly, the risk that a student takes to engage in education processes that will inevitably have unintended outcomes. Secondly, as referring to dangers or hazards that are prevalent in contemporary society.

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