Environmental education: Preparing students to take on the 'Invisible Empire'

Peter Andersen

University of Wollongong, petera@uow.edu.au

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Abstract
The primary reason that I embarked on my career in environmental education was because I was becoming extremely frustrated by my perception that school children were being bombarded by bad news about the plight of the environment, yet were not being given the opportunity to better understand the environmental issues they were exposed to, or to take action on these issues. I believe that we need to create programs that deepen our students' ecological literacy, or put simply, an understanding of what is really going on in the world around them.

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Environmental Education

Preparing students to take on the ‘Invisible Empire’

A call to empower students and develop their ecological literacy.

By Peter Andersen
Lecturer in Education for Sustainability,
Co-ordinator of Human Society and Its Environment, School of Education,
University of Wollongong
petera@uow.edu.au

The primary reason that I embarked on my career in environmental education was because I was becoming extremely frustrated by my perception that school children were being bombarded by bad news about the plight of the environment, yet were not being given the opportunity to better understand the environmental issues they were exposed to, or to take action on these issues. I believe that we need to create programs that deepen our students’ ecological literacy, or put simply, an understanding of what is really going on in the world around them. Environmental education programs need to provide a link to the social, familial and educational forces at play in the students’ lives. Imagine vegie garden projects that not only teach children how to grow and cook their own food but also raise awareness of the ‘pornification’ of food by the western media, and the monopolisation of food by multinational chains. All of this whilst millions in the world starve. My feelings are captured by Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 93):

‘Getting mad is no longer enough. We must learn how to act in the world in ways that allow us to expose the workings of an invisible empire that leaves even more children behind’.

While not wanting to sound too melodramatic, I do believe that it is our responsibility as environmental educators to expose that ‘invisible empire’, empowering our students to understand the machinations of this empire, and if needed, act counter-culturally to free themselves from the empire. In other words, change their views on what they have accepted as the norm in order to create a more sustainable, just world.

So, the challenge that I have faced, and continue to face, is how to design programs that will expose my students to the ‘invisible empire’ while providing them with the skills to overcome its pull and lead more environmentally responsible lives. On top of that, in my role as a lecturer to pre-service primary school teachers, I also face the challenge of preparing them to be effective environmental educators in their future classrooms. I recently had the pleasure of seeing Sir David Attenborough interviewed on stage, and while I am inspired by his passion for wildlife conservation, I couldn’t help but wonder how most children living in the west would experience such seminal moments in nature as he had when they live in urban environments. One way forward is to redefine the urban landscape for our students, allowing them to see all urban structures and events as part of nature, derived from nature, and impacting on nature. One of the methods that I use at university is to ask the students to look at everyday events through different lenses. An example of this is the Melbourne Cup. Instead of looking at this iconic event just as a national celebration, we unwrap it by looking at how it represents the global issues of food, energy, waste, and animal welfare. We have done the same with the Sydney Royal Easter Show. Such investigations can then propel the students towards unwrapping their own familial and cultural milestones and activities.

At the heart of what I am trying to teach the university students is that their environmental education programs should ultimately have resonance in the homes and communities of their students. Never should their environmental education programs be ‘sound and light shows’ that leave the children feeling good, but without a greater purpose. An environmental education is never a ‘one off’, but part of a continuum designed to empower the children to negotiate and act in a complex world, or ‘invisible empire’. It is the very least that we can do for our children.

Reference

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