

Research Symposium

SOCIAL LEARNING, SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This short paper is an outcome of the research panel on social learning and presents some key principles, perspectives, and practices of social learning in the context of environmental education and sustainability. Special attention is paid to the methodological implications of these principles for environmental education research. The three authors and members of the panel, all contributed to the book 'Social learning towards a sustainable world' (Wals 2007).

SOCIAL LEARNING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Let's face it, the universe is messy. It is nonlinear, turbulent, and chaotic. It is dynamic. It spends its time in transient behaviour. On its way to somewhere else, not in mathematically neat equilibrium. It self-organizes and evolves. It creates diversity, not uniformity. That's what makes the world interesting, that's what makes it beautiful, and that's what makes it work (Donella Meadows 2005 in, Stone and Barlow, ed., p. 204).

Not everybody agrees about what it means to live sustainably or to live an environmentally sound life. Moving towards sustainability or sustainable living, inevitably involves diverging

norms, values, interests and constructions of reality. What it means to live sustainably of environmentally sound in Burundi, Africa, inevitably will be different from what it means to live a sustainable life in Virginia Beach, USA. Even within a country like Burundi or a town like Virginia Beach, there will be different positions and interpretations of things like 'environmentally sound' and 'sustainable'. A key premise of social learning is that such differences need to be explicated rather than concealed. By explicating and deconstructing the oftentimes diverging norms, values, interests and constructions of reality people bring to the challenge of becoming more sustainable or environmentally sound as citizens, companies, organisations, communities, etc., it not only becomes possible to analyze and understand their roots and their persistence, but also to begin a collaborative change process in which shared meanings and joint actions emerge. This learning can indeed take place at multiple levels, *i.e.*, at the level of the individual, at the level of a group or organisation, or at the level of networks of actors and stakeholders.

The success of social learning depends a great deal on the collective goals and/or visions shared by those engaged in the learning process. Whether such collective goals and/or visions can actually be achieved depends, to a degree, on the amount of space for possible conflicts, oppositions and contradictions. Given the importance of conflict and dissonance in social learning, it is important to be mindful of people's comfort zones or dissonance thresholds. Put simply: there is no learning without dissonance, and there is no learning with too much dissonance! An important role of facilitators of social learning and, indeed, of environmental educators is to create space for alternative views that lead to the various levels of dissonance needed to trigger learning both at the individual and at the collective level.

COMMUNITY LEARNING

One question discussed at the research panel on social learning was: How can social learning contribute to improving the quality of learning in the context of sustainable development and/or the quality of environmental education?

In responding to this question Marianne Krasny introduced a social learning-oriented approach to community greening to help understand the potential of urban community greening and other civic ecology approaches in building resilience and thus reducing risk in the face of disaster and conflict (Tidball and Krasny 2007). Urban community greeners and other civic ecologists integrate place-based activities, such as planting community gardens or monitoring local biodiversity, with learning from multiple forms of knowledge including that of community members and outsiders, and with civic activism such as advocating for green spaces, for food security, and for reduction of crime and violence. In so doing, they build human, social, and natural capital that becomes integrated into constructive, positive feedback loops. In this way, community greeners integrate diversity, self-organization, and learning to create the conditions that spawn resilience in the face of disaster and conflict. The case of the community greeners reminds us of the ideas of Fritjof Capra, who sees eco-systems as learning systems that have developed a number of traits that are both crucial and exemplary for social systems, including resilience, flexibility, adaptiveness, and networked connectivity (Capra 1996, 2007). All these traits combined lead to sustainability and continuity. The essence of sustainability, Capra maintains, lies in the way eco-systems are organized and are able to respond to disturbances/crises. Healthy (eco) systems are systems that are continuously learning.

SOCIAL LEARNING AND EE RESEARCH

Another key question addressed during the seminar related to research: What kinds of new possibilities does a social learning perspective offer for environmental education research? In focusing on this question Paul Hart framed action research as a form of social learning that strengthens practitioners' own reflexivity (teachers as co-researchers) (Hart 2007).

Underpinning notions of action research as a form of social learning is the assumption that knowledge and understanding may be conceptualized beyond formal (i.e., propositional) knowing as socially-situated, practical knowing. By broadening our ideas about learning we can explore learning within the context of an individual's participation in socio-cultural practices. Action research may help teachers in subtle but profound ways to acknowledge their multiple subjectivities and to see new categories, perhaps blurring boundaries between existing binaries (e.g., cognitive/social perspectives on learning) and create new approaches, as socially and environmentally sustainable educational experiences.

Associating action research with social learning begs the question of what counts as learning. Social learning theory takes learning beyond individual memory work and cognition. It uses social constructivist perspectives to move interactional actions and experiences such as those involved in apprenticeship and cultural participation on par with personal 'headwork.'

Learning viewed as co-operative and holistic challenges conventional wisdom, teacher hegemony and institutional expectations toward more critical and reflexive kinds of meaning-driven, identity-forming and socially situated constructions of meaning. Such social constructivist perspectives also challenge research evaluation practices to create conditions that can properly account for broadened dimensions of learning and other legitimate ways of

knowing. Creating spaces for such approaches requires forms of inquiry that themselves can engage in participatory processes, hence action research.

CONCLUSIONS

As is usually the case after what we thought was an interesting seminar, we are left with more questions than answers. The point of social learning is perhaps not so much what people should know, do or be able to do, which could be an embodiment of authoritative thinking and prescriptive management, but rather: How do people learn? What do they want to know and learn? How will they be able to recognize, evaluate and, when needed, potentially transcend or break with existing social norms, group thinking and personal biases? What knowledge, skills and competencies are needed to cope with new natural, social, political and economic conditions, and to give shape and meaning to their own lives? How can social learning build upon people's own knowledge, skills and, often alternative, ways of looking at the world? How can the dissonance created by introducing new knowledge, alternative values and ways of looking at the world become a stimulating force for learning, creativity and change? How can people become more sensitive to alternative ways of knowing, valuing and doing, and learn from them? How do we create spaces or environments that are conducive to this kind of learning? How can we develop people's capacities to become more reflexive in what they do in their professional and personal lives?

As far as the implications of a social learning perspective for EE research is concerned we sense congruency between social learning perspectives and methodologies that:

- allow for emergence (questions continuously change and (re)emerge in light of changing contexts and people involved),

- seek out diversity (i.e., recognizing that there are multiple realities, types of knowledge and ways of knowing),
- develop agency (i.e., by providing equal status to participants and to that what they bring to the study and to help serve the needs of all participants by allowing them to co-frame the research and the underlying questions),
- promote reflexivity of all involved (i.e., by raising critical questions, soliciting feedback, creating a community of (co)learners).

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