

Environmental Education in Australia — A Personal View — (Summary)

Richard Smith
Faculty of Education
University of South Australia

Introduction

I am pleased to bring a greeting to my esteemed colleagues at Kyoto University of Education. It comes from the Faculty of Education at University of South Australia and from the Australian Association for Environmental Education. The greeting includes their congratulations to KUE for organizing this international symposium. It also includes a message of fellowship in our shared endeavours in environmental education.

I bring a similar greeting of fellowship and shared endeavour to my colleagues in environmental education who have traveled here from China, Thailand and from other parts of Japan.

It is also my great pleasure to offer my personal thanks to my colleagues from Kyoto University of Education for their kind invitation to take part in this symposium. I also thank them for their most generous attention to me as their guest during the celebratory period surrounding this symposium.

The views I express in my paper are my own. They do not represent any official view of environmental education. But they are based on many years experience in environmental and teacher education. I hope they make a useful contribution to the development of our shared interest in environmental education.

1. Major environmental problems in Australia

In the paper I suggest that, before considering these problems, we need to make clear what we define as environmental problems. I further suggest that our definition needs to take account of the elements of environmental problems. I propose five for consideration.

1.1 Biophysical elements

These are the ways in which natural systems are changed or degraded by human activity.

1.2 Sociocultural elements

These are the ways in which humans act individually or collectively in social systems to cause, recognize and alleviate environmental problems.

1.3 Informational elements

This refers to the information about 1.1 and 1.2 which is available to humans. The information available is largely determined by interest groups, or aspects of 1.2. The relative value of different kinds of information is also determined by aspects of 1.2. For example, information from agrochemical companies is more readily available to students and teachers than is

information from farmers using organic farming methods.

1.4 Psychospiritual elements

This includes what it is that humans value and why they value those things. It considers how humans might analyse the information available to them. It also includes being able to consider the possibility of information coming from interest groups and to critically analyse the information in order to recognise bias. As a result of information and values humans make decisions to do something about an issue - or to ignore it.

1.5 Actionable elements

Humans may decide to do something about an issue - but only if actions are apparent, possible and seen to be effective.

My paper suggests that elements 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 are as important as 1.1 and 1.2 in defining environmental problems. However, they are often less well considered. This I suggest is an environmental problem of its own. It is also a problem for environmental education because environmental educators need to bring these elements into the prominence they deserve.

I suggest that this it is difficult for environmental educators to assist their students towards knowing about and acting for the environment because information available about environmental problems is not comprehensive. Whatever its source, it is also filtered by interest groups providing it. The task of environmental education is made more difficult because the view of what is significant which the mass media offer to citizens is limited and often trivial. In addition, the people who feature as important in popular culture are placed in that position largely because of the exposure given them by mass media. These people are not presented by the media in ways that suggest they consider environmental issues and action as important. I suggest that in these and other ways the informational, psychospiritual and actionable elements of environmental problems are "degraded".

2. Environmental education in Australian schools and teacher education

2.1 Schools and in-service teacher education

Environmental education is presented as

*Education in knowledge, skills, attitudes and action
which is about in, and for environments.*

The remarks I make are about students approximately 5-17 years of age in government funded schools.

The national government has established a set of National Statements and Profiles in eight Key Learning Areas (KLAs). These documents consider aspects of environmental education in several places particularly in the KLA called Studies of Society and Environment. A national in-service education scheme is being funded to support teachers as they consider the nature and use of these documents. The Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) is involved in several courses for teachers in this program. These include:

Biodiversity and ESD

Catchments, Coasts and (vegetation) Corridors

Teaching for a Sustainable World

Teaching and learning through the environment

Environmental education in practice

The previous national government's Department of Environment, Sport and Territories and AAEE held a national environmental education conference in September 1995. Several recommendations emerged about raising the status of environmental education nationally and improving practice in schools. The future of these suggestions under the new government is uncertain. So too is the future of a Civics and Citizenship project initiated by the previous national government. This could have increased schools' attention to environmental citizenship.

Many schools, teachers and students are involved in programs in which biophysical aspects of environments are monitored and, sometimes, actions taken to improve situations. Vegetation projects are carried out by many schools. Operating a "green" school is being attempted by some schools. Much support is given in a few schools to students becoming responsibly environmentally vocal and active.

Some commercial concerns foster student attention on litter control. Often these are the same companies whose products contribute significantly towards litter. These companies make little attempt to support deposit schemes which are known to reduce litter.

Often effective environmental education depends on the energy of individual teachers whose programs may not continue if they leave their school or need to take up other duties. There are, however, whole-school programs of environmental education becoming more common. Schools where students are about 5-12 years of age generally have stronger environmental education programs than those for old students. Examples of successful projects are reported in two publications referred to in the paper.

Field studies centres are maintained in several states. Not all school students enjoy equal access to these facilities.

Some government systems of education are developing corporate profiles in which environmental responsibility is a part of policy. The conversion of policy into institutional practice is yet to come.

A long overdue bioregional perspective is taken by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission which overviews the management of Australia's largest catchment and makes strong contribution to environmental education in that area.

2.2 Pre-service teacher education

Environmental education is not explicitly represented in many pre-service programs.

Active post-graduate environmental education courses occur in several institutions.

Institution-wide environmental responsibility in curricula and management is not evident in any Australian universities.

It is hoped that education faculty members will be amongst those whose initiatives will stimulate tertiary institutions to take environmental responsibility seriously.

3. Problems to be addressed in environmental education for schools and for teacher education

3.1 Conditions for effective learning

Increasing interest is being shown in constructivist approaches to learning. These stress the importance of students' constructing their own understandings, skills and attitudes. These approaches are congruent with environmental education. Constructivist approaches and environmental education are both difficult to achieve.

3.2 The need for experience in environmental problem solving

The development and operation of environmental education that is coherent and comprehensive requires further consideration throughout Australia.

3.3 The need for analysis and critique

Schools need assistance to provide students with appropriate opportunities to consider more than the information content of what is available. Greater emphasis needs to be given to increasing students' skills in the analysis and critique of information. This is especially true where information of an incomplete nature is made available to schools in attractive formats and for little cost by interest groups, including business ones.

3.4 Consumer power

Student education in becoming environmentally responsible consumers needs to be given increased attention.

3.5 Curricular places for environmental education

It is important that environmental education be accorded a more explicit place in the curricula offered by schools and institutions of teacher education.

3.6 Planning for and offering integrating experiences

Educators in schools and in teacher education courses for pre-service and in-service teacher education should provide experiences which assist students to integrate the many facets of environmental education whether it is offered as an area in its own right or as a theme in cross-curricular work. Educators should be provided with additional staff development and other resources which will enable them to plan and execute such experiences for their students.

4. End notes

4.1 Australian environmental problems?

I suggested that all the environmental problems which Australia - or any other nation - might think of as "theirs" are, in fact, the result of issues associated with the sociocultural situations in other nations. Environmental educators should assist their students to understand this "global" aspect of environmental problems.

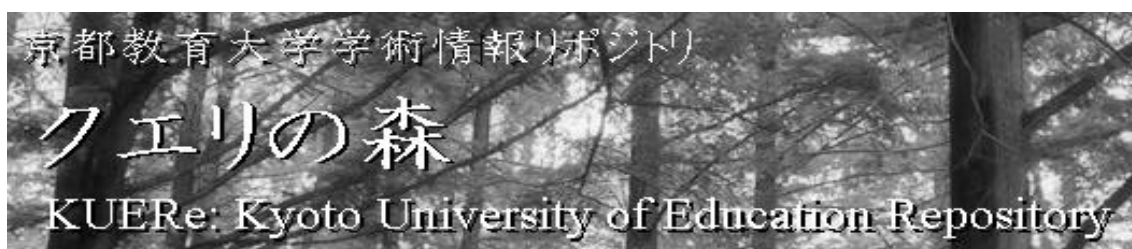
4.2 Environmental education - or education for ecologically sustainable development?

Environmental education which concentrates on intergenerational equity and the maintenance of the integrity of natural systems is only part of the picture which we need to assist our students to appreciate. The practice of intragenerational equity or social justice across the globe is a second major component of education for ecologically sustainable development.

Assisting our students to move towards the attaining of these two ideals is a task of enormous proportions for environmental educators. The development education which this task calls for is particularly contributed to by one of the AAEE teacher professional development courses, Teaching for a sustainable world. This task is one in which environmental educators will again need to work to inform students of the effects and implications of the consumerist lifestyle which constitutes much of the “mainstream” of popular culture in Australia and in many other countries.

Closing comments

My paper concludes by wishing my colleagues well in meeting the significantly important - and difficult - demands of an environmental education which, in partnership with development education, will contribute properly to education for ecologically sustainable development. I invite colleagues present to offer questions for discussion at the symposium or afterwards, both during my stay in Japan , and by mail or other means when we return home.



この文献は、国立情報学研究所において電子化されたものを、本学でテキスト加工したものです。

