

Complicated conversations: the ecological, the sustainable and the educational

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After we introduced ourselves over coffee, we began to notice connections. Over time, the conversations became increasingly complicated...

On a blue skied, crisp winter weekend in June 2007, twenty-five Australian scholars and community educators came together at La Trobe University in Melbourne to exchange ideas and deepen their understandings of what might be meant by 'eco-learning'. Associate Professor Bernie Neville – a passionate educator with a keen interest in creating community and transformative education – initiated the colloquium. He welcomed us all and outlined his hopes for the weekend. He anticipated a spirited and informed exploration of ecological learning at a time when understanding the ways in which we interact with the natural environment are crucial to personal, community, and planetary ecological sustainability. Bernie's personal style set the tone of the colloquium – relaxed, open, curious and fully engaged in informative conversation. One by one, we presented our ideas.

Over the two days we co-created conversations and connections. The papers presented on Saturday explored aspects of environmental and ecological education, spirituality, sustainability, literacy and sustainable pedagogies using creativity and social ecology. By the end of the first day clear themes had begun to emerge which highlighted the need for, and the ways in which, personal and community agency contributed to eco-learning processes and outcomes. As the remaining papers were delivered the next day, we became involved in a diverse yet connected range of projects including the development of scientific literacy; reconstructing science education; curriculum and sustainability; challenges in community eco-education programs; teaching an ecological world-view; permaculture training as a holistic learning model; using creative arts and applying Jungian frameworks to enhance personal ecological relationships. Such complexity, such conversations!

The colloquium was entitled, 'eco-education' which drew on the late twentieth century plethora of new terms with the prefix *eco*, usually with a hyphen, that embody an environmental perspective towards whatever concept happens to be under discussion. Collectively the *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* tells us, they take their cue from the term *ecology*, first coined in 1873 by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel from the Greek *oikos* meaning house or dwelling place, and then, 'oikology' as the study of home. When combined with 'environs' from the French *environer*, meaning surroundings in the sense of the conditions in which a person or thing lives, then ecology has come to signify both the idea of a home or an environment as well as the systematic or symbiotic relationship that dwell therein (Soanes & Stevenson, 2003). Haeckel defined ecology as the comprehensive science of the relationship of the organism to the environment or home in nature, but as he didn't elaborate the concept further, nor write its first authoritative work, he is not always credited with its origin (Goodland, 1975).



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Hence, we can come to think of the term ‘eco-learning’ as the systematic or symbiotic relationships that dwell within home or an environment or a place or nature. These relationships must necessarily include learning and other matters of curriculum and pedagogy. As Klein (2007) suggests, the eloquent words of David Gruenewald help to explain:

A critical pedagogy of place aims to contribute to the production of educational discourses and practices that explicitly examine the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education. It is a pedagogy linked to cultural and ecological politics, a pedagogy informed by an ethic of eco-justice, and other socioecological traditions that interrogate the intersection between cultures and ecosystems (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 10).

With the exception of Noel Gough’s article, this issue of *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* does not consider place-based pedagogies in any detail, but there are a number of related points we can take from Gruenewald’s perspective. In our selection of articles around eco-learning, we are interested in the production of educational practices and discourses that trouble the intersection of cultures and ecosystems, and seek an ethic of eco- as well as that of social justice. The articles in this edition have approached this task in two main ways. Those from Annette Gough, Arran Gare and Lyn Carter focus on the environmentalism inherent in eco-learning, while the articles from Julie White and Catherine Camden-Pratt consider student learning and teacher pedagogy. Athena Vongalis-Macrow’s and Noel Gough’s papers traverse both aspects, troubling distinctions between *knowing* and *doing* by questioning the oversimplification of complex knowledge about sustainability in schools and society at large.

For Bill Pinar, *complicated conversation* is central to the study of contemporary curriculum and ‘keeps hope alive, enabling us to have faith in a future’ (2004, p. xiv). In this edition, we offer a view from the south with some measure of hope. We are hopeful that readers from other places might engage with some of the ideas and authors and enter into further complicated conversations. In the next issue, we plan to print some of these responses as well as another instalment of themed articles arising from this fruitful colloquium in Melbourne.

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