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Ethics and Higher Education for Sustainable Development: Opportunities for Teaching and Research

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Abstract

Ethics are central to higher education for sustainable development (HESD) curriculum, policy, and pedagogy. Ethical frameworks in HESD deserve more attention from scholars because there is a gap in the literature. This paper addresses the issue of ethics in HESD with special attention to the ethical implications of sustainability, the moral obligation of equipping students with the tools to work towards eco-citizenship, and the related possibilities of averting the ecological crisis. I employ a theoretical approach to explore ethics and sustainability education. Recognizing that HESD is an inherently interdisciplinary topic, this paper draws from philosophical, scientific and political perspectives to illustrate the complexity of ethics in sustainability. I argue that HESD requires an ecological reorientation in the thinking about curriculum and pedagogy to enable students to recognize the interconnections that exist between human health and environmental integrity. This work offers a perspective from curriculum theory surrounding ethics and HESD.

Key Words: Ethics; higher education for sustainable development; curriculum theory; morals in sustainability education; ecological reorientation

1. Introduction

...get busy living or get busy dying. –Morgan Freeman

Whether we know it or not, every person who inhabits the planet earth is faced with critical ethical decisions about the care of the land. On one hand, we can opt to become responsible planetary citizens and reclaim our agency as land stewards. On the other, we can accept the status quo and complacently participate in what has been deemed the greatest threat to humanity, the perpetuation of the ecological crisis. This decision calls upon the moral and ethical fabric of humankind and demands an international dialogue. The earth is at a critical juncture and we need to embrace a pluralistic effort to advance the sustainability movement.

Environmental decisions have systemic impacts of which many are not aware (Steffan et al., 2015). Therefore, all human inhabitants need to be able to have a voice in the planetary bid for making a decision of such significance (Dahl, 2015). Humans have a direct impact on ecological health. This impact is manifested in many ways and scientifically verified through the data collected by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other institutions (Steffan et al., 2015). From the standpoint of higher education for sustainable development (HESD), it is critical that students are equipped with the tools to critically participate in the discourse regarding stewardship and consumption (Dahl, 2015). Also, students must be informed of the possibilities and solutions to advance the sustainability movement.

The notion of eco-justice and social-justice must be exhorted in a transparent democratic platform and supported in a bi-partisan environment. In this paper, I will examine the ethical implications of HESD, the moral obligation of equipping students with the tools towards eco-citizenship (self-learning, critical thinking, stewardship, etc.), and the possibilities embedded in HESD that may help avert the ecological crisis.

2. The Ethical Implications of Sustainability

An intricate web of interaction connects all life into one vast, self-maintaining system. –Lyall Watson

A dialogue surrounding sustainability and ethics must account for the interaction that happens between living organisms while being attentive to the web of life referred to by Lyall Watson as “an intricate web of interaction” (in Suzuki & McConnell, 2002). Investigating the implications of our ecological crisis is a critical starting point for the conversation on sustainability. In the context of higher education curriculum and pedagogy, this conversation has the capacity to generate a more amiable approach towards the positive coexistence of living beings. Positive coexistence encourages humans to become more mindful of their impact on the earth, cultivating a mutually beneficial human-earth relationship and subsequently to focus on the revitalization of the planet’s natural resources (Hensley, 2011). This revitalization reduces humans’ negative impact on the earth and increases its regenerative capacities. The value of restoring this natural process requires an attentiveness to the earth’s warning signals and a deliberate reduction of traditional consumption patterns. This reduction of human impact is sometimes referred to as “being green” (Welford & Starkey, 1996).

To be more green requires ecological thinking and ecological attentiveness. Thinking ecologically involves “connecting the dots between numerous systems, concepts, and ways of knowing while working towards a more pluralistic understanding of our planet” (Hensley, 2019, p. 169). Ecological thinking incorporates the elements of sustainability which include economic vitality, environmental stewardship, and social equity. Sustainability is a far-reaching concept defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” (Chabot & Wavle, 2005, p. 61; Brundtland, 1990). Examples of people exhibiting environment degradation and compromising the environmental balance are prolific. This is not planning ahead for future generations. The fact that millions of plastic bottles are thrown away each day (instead of being recycled) and acres of soil are eroding due to improper land use practices demonstrates that future generations will likely acquire an earth in much poorer condition than it currently is.

The focus on not compromising the future generations’ ability to meet their own needs is referred to as “inter-generational equity” by Chet Bowers (2006). Authors Bernard Lown and Evjueni Chavoz address inter-generational equity by saying:

We must convince each generation that they are transient passengers on this planet earth. It does not belong to them. They are not free to doom generations yet unborn. They are not at liberty to erase humanity’s past nor dim its future. (in Suzuki & McConnell, 2002, p. 13)

By being a citizen on this planet, we have the responsibility to maintain environmental equilibrium for future generations. We are not permanent residents and resultantly are forced to consider the implications of our actions several generations in advance. Intergenerational decision making draws on ethical principles.

Ethics are defined as the “rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession” (Ethics, n.d.). The ethics of the sustainability movement are geared towards creating healthier relationships with the land and provoking more responsible stewardship. One potential guiding post for sustainable ethics is the Seventh Generation Principle. This philosophy is from the Iroquois Confederacy, and it mandates that chiefs are to “always consider the effects of their actions on their descendants through the seventh generation in the future” (Chabot & Wavle, 2005, p. 61). Moving towards intergenerational equity will take significant effort and evoke a new conceptualization of democracy that is complicated but feasible (Dahl, 2015).

The international conversation regarding sustainability is comprised of complicated decisions and multiple challenges. These challenges can be political, economic, or ecological. In considering our nation’s political leaders, we do not need to search far to find snags in the sustainability movement.

For example, in 2018, President Trump began his political fight to overturn the push for higher fuel economy on vehicles, a move which clearly would have negative implications on the environment (Plumer, 2018; Freeman, 2018; Geuss, 2019). President George W. Bush provides another example when he was asked to place the nation's massive over-consumption of natural resources as a top priority on the U.S. agenda. In response, President Bush stated "the American lifestyle is not up for negotiation" (In Singer, 2002, p. 2). He proclaimed that "we will not do anything that harms our economy, because first things first are the people who live in America" (p. 2). This statement demonstrates the mainstream's disinterest in greening industrial and corporate practices.

The resistance to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle generates environmental impacts of global significance. This "non-negotiable lifestyle" mentioned by President Bush compromises the lives of "millions of people and is subject to [generate] increasingly unpredictable weather and the loss of land used by tens of millions more people because of rising ocean levels and local flooding" (Singer, 2002, p. 2). Singer states that this disregard for sustainability ought to make us evaluate a fundamental ethical issue: "To what extent should political leaders see their role narrowly, in terms of promoting the interests of their citizens, and to what extent should they be concerned with the welfare of people everywhere" (p. 3)? It may be that political leaders tend to look only towards the interests of the citizens of the United States, as shown by President Trump's push for cars with lower fuel economies as well as former President Bush's quote. This, therefore, perpetuates a non-sustainable and invasive ethic centered on short term gain. The consequences of commerce-centric decision making are far-reaching. The environmental philosopher and activist Derick Jensen (2006) explores the collective corporate agenda as it relates to equality and the environmental crisis.

Jensen (2006) questions the environmental degradation associated with mass consumption asking, "What right do all of these people have to destroy the lives of others by their very lifestyle?" (p. 94). The idea of maintaining the comfort level of more powerful and wealthy countries over the needs of the marginalized and developing countries demands further investigation. From an ethical perspective, Jensen insists that "no one...has the right to toxify a river, pollute the air, drive a creature to extinction...No one has the right to steal resources from another" (p. 96). The juggernaut of industrial thinking and the resulting consumption practices threatens the quality of life for virtually every human.

What can be done to halt this destructive cycle? Jensen (2006) proposes that "we need to let those in power know that we're taking back our permission [to stop the catastrophes]" (p. 96). He continues by saying that the political leaders "have no right to wield this power the way they do, because clearly on some level they, too, perceive themselves as having the right to kill the planet, or they wouldn't do it" (Jensen, 2006, p. 96). Science demonstrates that the health of our land base is inextricable from the health of all people (Steffen et al., 2015). Relatedly, Jensen (2006) argues that all our efforts should be aimed at sustaining our earth. As Singer (2002) points out, "all humans, or even all sentient beings...[should be] the basic unit of concern for our ethical thinking" (p. x). Consequently, the way that non-humans are treated is an effective indicator of moral integrity. Addressing how humans treat non-humans, Mahatma Gandhi reminds us that "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way it treats its animals" (In Brodd, 1998, p. 102).

The environmental thinker Aldo Leopold believes that ethics should extend beyond animals and must encompass entire ecosystems. Leopold posits that "the land ethic enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants, animals, or collectively: the land" (In Cottingham, 1996, p. 449). Leopold insists that we must recalibrate our ethical outlook. The land ethic "changes the role of *homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (p. 449). Leopold follows this idea with a salient description of how to gauge the "rightness" of decisions. He notes that "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends otherwise" (In Cottingham, 1996, p. 449). Max Oelschlaeger (1995) writes that Aldo Leopold's land ethic is "the best known environmental ethic of our time" (In Knight & Gutzwiller, p. 335). Thus Leopold's notion of a land ethic is compelling and contributes to the discussion on the sustainability movement.

3. The Moral Obligation to Teach Towards Sustainability

[Higher] Education is no longer preparation for an assumed stable future but a nurturing of individual and collective potential to live well and skillfully in an already complex and volatile world, towards human and planetary betterment. -Steven Sterling

Higher education that encourages changes in knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to enable a more sustainable and just society for all (EFSD, 2020) is called higher education for sustainable development (HESD). HESD takes into account the impact of current decisions upon future generations. The measurement of the impact that people have on the earth is referred to by William Rees (1996) as the *ecological footprint*. Reducing the individual and collective eco-footprint involves well-coordinated and methodological efforts.

Educational philosopher Susan Santone (2004) maintains that education for sustainability aims at creating “a more just, humane, and secure world” (p. 5). Accordingly, numerous institutions and individuals are beginning to recognize the moral imperative associated with sustainability. To recognize this moral imperative requires the rejection of the extractive economy, which exploits the earth’s resources to build economic interests (Jackson, 2014). Companies are still pumping our rivers full of poisons, consumers continue to buy vehicles that pollute the air, and trees are being harvested at a drastically higher rate than they are being replanted (Wackernagel & Rees, 1996). Sustainable education has the capacity to send ripples of change throughout the human community. These changes come in various forms that include dialogue, action, and agency. However, these efforts at sustainability are abated by hegemonic influences.

Authors Habermas, Derrida, and Borradori (2003) identify obstacles that block the change-promoting critical dialogue that comes from education for sustainability. They contend that catastrophes such as the environmental crisis are “the product of a ‘dogmatic slumber’ from which only a new philosophical reflection can awaken” (p. 100). Thus, sustainable education works at moving beyond what John Dewey (1916) calls the “crust of conventionalized thought” and subsequently evokes the “wide awakesness” that Maxine Greene (2001) refers to in her book *Variations on a Blue Guitar*. Becoming wide awake helps prevent the phenomenon of blindly stumbling through life as it is and not challenging the status quo. It is like sleepwalking. Philosopher and political activist Cornel West (2004) maintains that

The oppressive effect of the prevailing market moralities leads to a form of sleepwalking from womb to tomb, with the majority of citizens being content to focus on private careers and be distracted with stimulating amusements. They have given up any real hope of shaping the collective destiny of the nation. (p. 27).

HESD addresses this problem of sleepwalking by utilizing a relevant and active curriculum to promote student agency and critical thinking skills. Students who are immersed in HESD gain sensibilities and skills to promote positive change at economic, social, and ecologic levels. For example, students exposed to HESD are more likely to become citizens dedicated to reducing the poverty gap while simultaneously working to restore the earth’s natural regenerative capacities than those students not exposed to sustainable education (Sterling, 2004).

The National Council for Science and the Environment (NCSE, 2003) published a guide to effective implementation of sustainable education entitled *Education for a Sustainable and Secure Future*. The guide addresses several different aspects of sustainable education. The moral argument for this effort is cogent:

[sustainable education is] important from a moral perspective. Because our schools and universities educate our citizens and train our future teachers, policymakers, and community and business leaders, these institutions bear a deep and moral responsibility to provide the expertise and vision needed to foster a sustainable future. (NCSE, 2003, p. 10)

Education must involve a democratic exchange of ideas that promotes a healthy land base and equips students to become transformative leaders.

4. The Call to Action

What I stand for is what I stand on. -Wendell Berry

Within the realm of education, we need to implement a well-coordinated and deliberate effort directed at revitalizing the earth's restorative capacity. In particular, it is important to cultivate a mutually beneficial human-earth relationship between our students and the natural world. One approach is place-based education where the surrounding bioregion is integrated throughout the curriculum and pedagogy. Currently, the great injustices that face the earth are continuing to increase in the form of shortsighted resource development (Bowers, 2006). Critical thinking is necessary to transform this shortsightedness. An integral component of critical thinking is reflection. As philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (2003) states:

As long as one lives through an experience, one must surrender to the experience and shut one's eyes instead of becoming an observer immediately. For that would disturb the good digestion of the experience: instead of wisdom one would acquire indigestion. (p. 184)

Nietzsche's emphasis on digesting experience is a metaphor for slowing down and reflecting. He maintains that deliberately slowing down and reflecting on experience is essential for processing educational encounters and enables one to subsequently move towards deeper understanding. Reflection allows one to evaluate the texture of each experience; it is a gateway to deeper awareness. Dewey (1916) agrees with the value of reflection and emphasizes reflection in his experiential learning cycle. He believes that all education comes from experience and that without reflection one can encounter a mis-educative experience.

When people fail to slow down and reflect, the consequence can be that speeding through life and focusing on selfish consumption become the norm. Personal needs are the only thing people are conscious of, not the needs of others or the needs of the earth. Interestingly, the consciousness that is responsible for the global crisis is also responsible for civil-injustice. As Majora Carter suggested during her Bioneers 2007 conference presentation, the entrenched practices that create the ecological crisis are also responsible for perpetuating the epidemic of poverty. Carter proposes that we must "cap our poverty emissions" just like we "cap our emissions" (Bioneers Conference, 2007). Civil-justice is analogous to eco-justice and it becomes clear that the ecology of a place and the economy of a place are closely linked.

The shallow, personal needs level of consciousness also fails on another level—that of human health. "The health of current and future humans is being compromised by environmental degradation" (NCSE, 2003, p. 36). Again, we face the ethical obligation to minimize and remediate the damage done to the earth. This time it is in order to maintain the health and security of humanity. As the NCSE (2003) points out, human health and environmental health are symbiotic and ultimately inseparable:

The environment is the primary health care delivery system; the disruption of environmental equilibrium threatens us with the greatest public health crisis imaginable. If we respond to ecological reality, human activity will be redirected to sustain the health of ecosystems and concurrently the health of humans. (p. 36)

Reorienting our behaviors so that future generations are able to survive and thrive is a "win-win" process. Orr (1994) posits that we are charged to remake the human presence on earth in ways that work over the long haul. Remaking our presence on the earth involves a place-based approach. When we consider what needs to be conserved and how to be more ecologically sustainable, place comes into the forefront (Hensley, 2011). Place is the platform on which relevant environmental practice can be identified. Bowers observes that "place-based intergenerational knowledge and practices within both rural and urban settings contribute to lifestyles that have a smaller ecological impact" (Bowers, 2006, p. 20). We must know where we are to reduce our impact. Environmental activist, farmer, and writer Wendell Berry states "if you don't know where you are you don't know what you are" (In Ackley, 2003, p. 172). Once we know what we are we are more likely to work towards preserving the integrity of the land base in accordance with Leopold's land ethic.

A sense of place is an integrated and experiential connectedness with one's surrounding ecological and social community (Hensley, 2011). When one has a strong sense of place, they also have the following: a strong sense of belonging, increased connectedness to the surrounding landscape, and a worldview that values both the biotic and the abiotic community. There is a connection between knowing where we are and who we are. Paul Shephard (2003) concurs, stating that, "knowing who you are is impossible without knowing where you are" (p. 75). A sense of place is holistic and therefore helps us to become well rounded individuals. Barry Lopez (1996) adds that, "a sense of place is also critical to the development of a sense of morality and of human identity" (p. 10).

The morality comes from feeling embedded in a place, it's as if we are woven in the fabric of an ecological and social community. Knowing where we are helps cultivate a bond between person and place and motivates us to adjust our behavior to not overburden our surrounding ecosystem while energizing us to take steps in protecting our place.

The call to action towards sustainability is stronger than ever before. It gains momentum through education and awareness. Once a critical number of people understand the significance of the sustainability movement a radical change can happen (Hensley, 2011).

5. Conclusion

Sustainable education requires an ecological reorientation in the thinking about curriculum and pedagogy. As David Jardine (2006) posits, education itself can “be conceived as deeply ecological in character and mood” (p. 179). In education, ecology addresses the relationships and interactions between all stakeholders including the curriculum, administration, teachers, students, community, and the land. HESD helps students to recognize the interconnections that exist and become more in tune with the outcomes of their actions. Thus, there is a transformative quality tied to sustainability and human ecology. Strong arguments are made for the moral obligation to teach towards sustainability. These arguments prompt action for educational theorists and practitioners.

Once curriculum is aligned with the requirements of maintaining a healthy land base, a fundamental shift in commerce and stewardship is possible. This shift begins with a deeper sense of place within students and educators (Hensley, 2011). Subsequently, students are more likely to be environmental advocates and place conservation at the top of political agendas. Also, educators who turn their focus towards sustainability are more likely to bring their students outside and allow nature to serve as an integrating context for the curriculum. When nature serves as an integrating context, students are offered experiential and holistic opportunities to tie their learning into authentic situations. Ultimately, when education is able to honor the value of sustainability, society is better equipped to avert the ecological crisis.

The philosopher Mathew Fox (2006) explains that “the word crisis in Chinese also means opportunity” (p. 19). The ecological crisis is an ecological opportunity to restore the regenerative capacity of the earth and to revitalize the social justice necessary for intergenerational and interspecies equity and ultimately sustainability. As Fox shows us, the “crisis in education and the crisis our species faces in regards to survival itself, are not only challenges but also opportunities that beckon us to rediscover who we are as a species” (p. 19). Fox reminds us that the call for sustainability is a moral issue. “For morality is all about where we want to go and what means we choose to get there” (p. 19). These are critical ideas to consider.

HESD needs to be more concerned with equipping students with the tools for making good decisions (and increasing judgment) than the traditional enterprise of transferring information and reproducing a society that pivots on consumption and convenience. This way students become more in tune with their own strengths and better situated to become change agents who are moved by civic responsibility and self-realization. Self-realization liberates people from lives of mundane sleepwalking and opens up doors of engagement and passion. Education aimed at sustainability can create a more just, humane, and secure world for all its inhabitants in the present and in the future.

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