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Sara Soledad Garcia

Santa Clara University, sgarcia@scu.edu

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Empowering Teachers as Environmentally Literate

Ethical Considerations



BY SARA S. GARCIA
*Associate Professor,
Department of Education,
Santa Clara University*

ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IS THE BASIS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY. THIS LITERACY INCLUDES THE RELATED NOTIONS OF INTER-CONNECTED, INTERDEPENDENT SUSTAINABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY, AND REQUIRES A MORE THOUGHTFUL REFLECTION ON THE WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE, BOTH PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL. Needless to say, environmentally literate teachers are more likely to engage in ethical thinking that is sensitive to the environment and the people in it. This thinking becomes a tool of the imagination which, when cultivated consciously, the teacher uses to confront new moral, economic, and political challenges. The cognitive tools acquired through conscious responsiveness stimulate the capacity for imagination to anticipate the effects of our actions. The focus on ecology linked to a more environmentally sensitive ethical thinking is supported by moral obligations that prohibit actions to satisfy needs that are not essential to humans when they negate the needs of animals,

plants, and the environment. The ethics of environmental literacy deals primarily with human relationships, and the interdependency between them is based on conscious representation of nature as a community of interdependent components of which humans are part.

Human activities that are sustainable are those that are universal and take into consideration ecological restrictions imposed by a finite biosphere. The ethics of sustainability consists of a sense of moral responsibility that leads to individual and collective actions that do not endanger the survival of humanity on Earth. This moral responsibility is required of sustainability.

Empowering teachers as decision makers and environmentally literate leaders requires creating situations that enable them as practitioners to exercise greater reflection in planning education for the future. Ecologically literate teachers, as socially responsible agents of change, will take the helm of leadership by integrating natural science concepts into

Empowering teachers as decision makers and environmentally literate leaders requires creating situations that enable them as practitioners to exercise greater reflection in planning education for the future. Ecologically literate teachers, as socially responsible agents of change, will take the helm of leadership by integrating natural science concepts into curricula for students who have no real access for learning about the rapidly changing world and the devastating effects of rampant urbanization in their own communities.

curricula for students who have no real access for learning about the rapidly changing world and the devastating effects of rampant urbanization in their own communities. This critical ecological literacy is the ability to make meaning of *place* to *self* and *others* through active engagement with that *place*. Ecologically responsible citizenship requires critical ecological literacy, which in turn is dependent upon both *functional ecological literacy* (comprehension of ecology) and *cultural ecological literacy* (comprehension of the human dimension of landscapes such as land use patterns and cultural icons, which includes the use of multiple languages).

According to David Orr,¹ ecological ethics is a process that is continually evolving socially, something that never stops. Implicit in this process is the work of individuals in a group, committed to restructuring the relationships within the group. The evolution is tentative because it never ends. Thus, the development of environmental literacy should enable teachers to make appropriate ethical decisions in a wide variety of contexts over time. The evolving transformation of teachers from an ethical standpoint is a process which challenges the system of certification since it requires a realignment calling for experiments in ethics focused on community based learning. As a

systemic change this transformative process needs to happen with teacher educators themselves if the field of teacher education is to make a difference in environmental education.

Unfortunately, in many cases teacher educators are not reflexive practitioners; that is, they are not as sensitive as they can be to both the physical and social environment from which their own students come. In general, their role in an evolving process of changing social structures connected to schools needs to be strengthened. This complex situation is due primarily to teacher educators who follow traditional guidelines for research and do not forge participatory action research or practices that contribute to change. Although the formal certification of teachers stipulated by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing presumes that the education process follows an “integrated” education model, in most cases, it is not holistic but fragmented. These are challenges to teacher education programs and to the future of environmental education in schools. In addition, the social ethic that is articulated as “equity” which requires students to serve communities that are socially, institutionally, economically, and politically underserved is insufficiently implemented. In general the field of teacher education nationally is in a state of flux over values and future directions.

Although change is inevitable, the political and economic context will determine the direction of schooling. In this milieu, environmental issues are at the forefront and ecological ethics could in the future guide the process of reconstructing the gap between theory and practice.

Teaching as a service profession is focused primarily on the learner in classrooms and in schools. In rare cases, learning is done outside the classroom in school gardens or in conjunction with outdoor schools. These “spaces” or “places” are the fundamental base for transformation and reflexive practice in environmental literacy for teachers as well as students. Ecological action is most powerful if the text that one is able to comprehend functionally, culturally, and critically is one’s home place. Environmental literacy demands understandings, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that empower individuals to relate to their environments in a positive fashion, and to take day-to-day and long-term actions to

maintain or restore sustainable relationships with other people and the environment. The ecological ethic requires a process of imagination and experimentation in which individuals and groups create new ways of being in their own context. Through participatory action, teachers, by making schools public spaces, can question what is worthwhile to know and experience, and the kind of learning environment that will engage their students. By transforming the environment into a reflexive practice of continual curriculum inquiry focused on sustainability, teachers can grow as individuals in collective concern, along with their students, in generating fundamental ecological ethics. Anthony Weston,² states that environmental ethics has multiple possibilities but needs much exploration. Thus, development of the field of environmental ethics needs to be a prolonged process with tentative results and continual experimentation. He posits the creation of a *space* for values to evolve. This *space* is social



Charles Barry

Campus Minister Matt Smith shows his worm compost bin to students at Campus Sustainability Day 2006.

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and psychological and has ethical preconditions that are necessary to facilitate the evolutionary process. It is also fundamental to have the *ethical freedom* to stimulate thought. In this way individuals and groups can create or co-evolve new values as a result of daily practices focused on sustainability in and outside classrooms and schools.

The credential program at Santa Clara University has always had a strong social justice strand; it is focused not only on the pragmatics of teaching but also on preparing teachers to be transformative thinkers. A main goal of our teacher education programs is to guide prospective teachers to “feel with” people they regard as different via knowledge about how they and others come to occupy particular social positions. Whenever possible, we use an integrated cohort approach to teacher education to provide a reflective dimension to the professional development and growth for individual teachers and the community of teachers to which they belong. In addition, we continually strive to organize community-based experiences that provide a basis for teachers to become agents of social change. The growth and transformation of the department require constant awareness to insure that the goals of social justice are integrated into our new programs. The education department is strengthened by the Jesuit mission of social justice as an ethic for a transformative process. Through this process we stress the notion of a society in which the concern for concrete needs of all people and the creation of reciprocal interdependence as fundamental requires

institutionalized patterns of mutual actions. As such, the concepts of social justice and social responsibility are synonymous, especially when the act of teaching is characterized by social agency.

In several of the most recent Masters level degree programs, the pedagogy consists of faculty team collaboration, critical reflection, and action toward meaningful social change. The intent is a concerted effort to approach the interdisciplinary blending of content and to forge collaborative approaches for guiding prospective classroom teachers who will acquire the necessary content knowledge as well as become environmentally literate. The objective is not only for teachers to become reflective and conscientious practitioners in the most virtuous ethical manner, but also to educate future generations to be ecologically aware and strive to become ethical in understanding the environment and develop “good thinking” through ecological literacy and ethical action. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004).
- ² Anthony Weston, “Before Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 14 (4): 321-338 (1992).