



Viewpoint

Reading Conference Recommendations in a Wider Context of Social Change

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Abstract

This short Viewpoint paper considers the role and value of conference recommendations in shaping the field of environmental education. It explores the social politics, and often contested nature, of conference recommendations and their institutional histories, arguing that the act of producing conference recommendations forms part of the practices of new social movements. The paper recommends historicising conference recommendations and cross readings, to consider changing discourses and new developments in the field. Accompanying the short Viewpoint paper, are two sets of recently produced conference recommendations, one from the 4th International Environmental Education Conference held in Ahmedabad, India, and the other from the 1st International Conference on Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities held in Nairobi, Kenya.

Introduction

This Viewpoint paper was inspired by a request to publish the 4th International Conference on Environmental Education declaration and recommendations produced at the end of 2007 in Ahmedabad, India, in this edition of the Southern African Journal of Environmental Education (SAJEE), and was produced shortly after the 1st International Conference on Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities (MESA). The paper provides a 'foil' for the publication of the Ahmedabad declaration and conference recommendations (this edition), and the MESA conference recommendations (this edition) and encourages readers to think more deeply about conference recommendations. It considers why we might invest valuable time, energy and effort into the processes of generating, sharing and using conference recommendations. In the field of environmental education there have been various more or less popular sets of conference recommendations, each with its own institutional and social history. I first briefly review these, and then discuss the phenomenon of conference recommendations in relation to social movement theory in a little more detail, although the reflection is short. The purpose of this reflection piece is to consider the wider picture of environmental education conferences, and how their products contribute to new social movement intentions and politics.

The Emergence of Different Sets of Conference Recommendations

Some of the earlier and most memorable international environmental education conference recommendations are the 1977 Tbilisi Principles (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978). They were developed at the 1st International Conference on Environmental Education held in Tbilisi a few years after the 1st International Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. These principles 'filled a niche' that was previously vacant, since many governments and social and educational practitioners around the world have (and to this day still) use these principles to inform decision-making, practices, courses, materials and guidelines for environmental education. These have, however, not been without critique, and early on Robottom (1987) critiqued the Tbilisi principles for their institutional culture and their 'bland' rhetoric devoid of strong value orientations or positioning in relation to social justice. An almost silent 'second set' of recommendations emerged a few years later at the 2nd International Conference on Environmental Education in Moscow in 1987. These were mostly oriented towards UNESCO and UNEP's own practice at the time, and thus seemed to have minimal wider impact.

A more memorable set of conference recommendations (at least from a southern African environmental education perspective) were the NGO Forum Principles that were put out by the International Centre for Adult Education shortly after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 (ICAE, 1993). These recommendations were not produced by UNESCO or UNEP or any other UN organisation, but by a civil society movement participating 'outside' of the mainstream UN conference. This set of civil society recommendations has had a profound material and social effect on environmental education in southern Africa, as it has guided a democratic turn in which we were willing to engage critically and practically with the recommendation that 'we are all learners and educators' and with recommendations for inclusivity, participation and the valuing of indigenous knowledge, amongst others.

At the same event (the Rio Earth Summit in 1992) Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992) was produced, which gave UNESCO the mandate to integrate environment and development education into a new synthesis under the banner of education for sustainable development (ESD). This move has been highly contested, particularly by environmental educators who have argued that this international framework limits and narrows the focus of education (Jickling, 1999); confines concepts of environment and allows for appropriation by the prevailing political economy of globalisation and exploitation (Sauve, 2005); and allows for economic appropriations of wider environmental education discourses (Gaudiano, 2007; Lotz-Sisitka, 2004), which has negative impacts on the poor and already marginalised. This contestation was reflected in ambivalent and antagonistic engagements with the conference recommendations produced at the 3rd International Conference on Environmental Education in Thessaloniki in 1997 (UNESCO, 1997), which many critiqued for being predetermined and for not allowing adequate debate and discussion on their origination and construction. By this time there seemed to be a greater awareness of the possible material and political role that conference recommendations have when approved by bodies such as the UN. The Thessaloniki conference outcomes were contested for their focus on ESD, providing a further indication

that the emergence of ESD discourse was not without contestation. Sauve (2002), for example, argues that in the conceptual framework of sustainable development (illustrated by the 'balance' between economy, environment and society) economy has already been elevated as a separate autonomous entity, outside the social sphere, which determines a society's relationship with the environment. She questions whether this should be promoted as the supreme goal of humanity through education.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 proposed the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) which was ratified by the UN General Assembly to start in 2005 (UNESCO, 2005). Various UN, international and national government-led initiatives have been established to integrate ESD into national policies, actions and universities. Within these is a wide-ranging diversity of orientation, intention and practice, with seemingly inadequate financial backing to implement a very ambitious agenda for educational transformation. At the same time, the NGO movement involving environmental education associations around the world gathered and proposed the establishment of a World Environmental Education Congress, the first of which was held in Espino, Portugal, in 2003, the second in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, 2004, the third in Turino, Italy, in 2005 and the fourth (hosted by EEASA) in Durban, South Africa, in 2007. In 2009 this conference will move to Montreal, Canada, effectively cementing a firm commitment from environmental educators around the globe to strengthen their international links and voice as a significant force in the UNDESD and beyond. Within this movement lies a somewhat ambivalent engagement with ESD discourse, which is slowly becoming amplified and/or superseded by recent attention to climate change. This brings renewed attention to the links between environment and sustainability in education. New concepts to guide practice are emerging beyond the dominance of sustainability, a recent example being socio-ecological resilience (Folke, 2006).

An interesting 'crosshatching' of engagement between environmental education and education for sustainable development is visible in the social politics of conference recommendations in the 2007-2009 period. The Indian government, with support from UNESCO and UNEP, hosted the 4th International Conference on Environmental Education in Ahmedabad, India, at the end of 2007. A declaration and a set of recommendations were developed at this conference which resonate with the sentiments of the International Council for Adult Education (IACE) recommendations produced in Rio in 1992. They call for a 'radically different new Enlightenment' than that currently guiding humanity, and for a radical shift in global politics, models guiding development (i.e. a model of sufficiency rather than efficiency) and approaches to education. They affirm the breadth and scope of contemporary environmental education as encompassing community education, inclusion of the marginalised and more formal institutional settings for education; and they argue for education's contribution to meaningful socio-ecological transformation. These recommendations were compiled during the conference from the inputs emerging from 40 different workshops, and were reviewed and ratified by the full conference delegation before the end of the conference following a participatory process. They therefore represent the 'spirit of the moment', constructed in the company of 1 500 people mainly from what is currently called the 'global South', but not excluding a number of wider international representations at the conference. These

recommendations consider the importance of strengthening environmental education within the wider UNDESD initiative and extend (and in many ways provide) an epistemological challenge to the contents of the International Implementation Scheme produced to guide the UNDESD by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2005).

In 2009 UNESCO will host the first World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Bonn, with its set of recommendations which could be ratified by the UN General Assembly (i.e. all of our governments) in a similar way that the UNDESD was ratified. Will these recommendations be used by governments, and by whom and how will they be constructed? Shortly afterwards the 2009 World Environmental Education Conference will be held in Montreal, Canada. Will this conference produce more recommendations? Who will use them and how will they be constructed? How will they contribute to a diverse and shifting cultural capital circulating in our field? And will they have social transformation possibilities?

Social Politics and the Role of New Social Movements

As indicated above, the social politics of conference recommendations can be an interesting topic for deliberation when considered in the context of time-space configurations, the mapping of institutional affiliations and resistances. This can provide insight into the nuances of a social movement at work. According to Melucci (1996) new social movements are 'disenchanted prophets' who are a sign, not an outcome of a crisis. 'They signal a deep transformation in the logic and the processes that guide complex societies' (Melucci, 1996:2). The environmental movement, with its environmental education arm, is such a movement, busy with the project of 'speaking before', seeking diverse ways of inserting new categories into society (in our case it would be inserting thinking about environment, sustainability, equity and socio-ecological resilience, amongst others, into the education system), and they reflect the commencement of change. Melucci, however, warns that these movements must also proceed within a disenchanted framework, and should at the same time be both involved and detached, passionate and critical, and reflexive of their own role and moves in society. Such movements are not 'uniform' and involve diverse phenomenon, and generate ambiguities (as seen in some versions of environmental education and ESD, and in the 'currents of environmental education' identified by Sauve, 2005), if not outright contradictions (Melucci, 1996:3). Such processes also involve power relations and ideological contradictions. Bringing about social change is not a smooth process, as can be seen from the diversity and contestation surrounding environmental education conference recommendations and their reception to date.

These processes might be worth reflecting on in a little more depth given the rise in global conferences on environmental education and education for sustainable development, and what seems to be an increase in global 'products' emerging in the form of declarations, recommendations and proceedings which have the intention of guiding governments and practitioners in their environmental education practices.

Social movement theorists such as Melucci (1996) and Tourraine (2000) offer insights into what might be going on in the field of environmental education as we 'conference together' and produce more and more steering ideas (in the form of conference recommendations) for

each other and an ever-widening group of practitioners who are contributing to the expansion of environmental education (and ESD) in different contexts. Delanty (1999) argues that at the start of the 21st century we have moved beyond discourses of postmodernism, which rely on conceptions of the individualised subject, or the modernism of Habermas, which operates with a somewhat decontextualised conception of agency. Touraine and Melucci present us with a social actor that is not decontextualised, but one who is a collective actor and an agent of social change (Delanty, 1999). Like Melucci, Touraine argues that society has a capacity to reflect upon itself and to interpret the direction of its movement. Might our regular production of conference recommendations and our intellectual engagements with them (i.e. the Robottom, Sauve, Jickling, Gaudio, Lotz-Sisitka) and other comments referred to above be indicative of part of a field-based reflexivity which is deliberately engaging the direction of its movement at a global level? Delanty (1999:125) explains:

The cultural model captures the creativity of social action and gives it a cognitive form, which allows social actors to interpret the social field. This capacity is the cultural model, and is the basis of all change; it is the 'image of creativity' and gives society a set of orientations that govern social action.

As indicated in the discussion above, the contestations that have been going on in relation to environmental education (institutional and civic versions) and later between environmental education and ESD (institutional and civic versions) captures the 'creativity of social action'. The conference recommendations produced as artefacts along the way appear to be providing the field with useful collective cultural capital (produced at various intervals by different groups embroiled in diverse politics and contexts) that provide for orientations to direct our thinking and deliberations in ways that help us to either govern our social actions (in this case, our educational thinking and practice) or to engage in contested arguments for creating better governance frameworks that allow for open-ended governance. As indicated above, these recommendations are more or less powerful and appear to resonate differently in different contexts, and as Robottom said as early as 1987 all of these documents are imbued with particular ideological perspectives and theories of social change, which when institutionalised can become technocratic.

Historicity (and being able to view our various conferences and their products from this vantage point) conceives society as a 'set of cultural tensions and social conflicts' (Delanty, 1999:126) rather than as interaction and participation of actors (i.e. conference goers). In this process knowledge as an agent of social change and the capital it embodies can enable society to act upon itself and to bring about social change. The basis of Touraine's social theory is that there is one central conflict in every society (e.g. the conflict between environment and economy), but there is not necessarily only one social agent. As we have seen from the description of the conferences and their recommendations above, the social agents involved in the hosting and production of the conference outputs are many and varied in nature and cover the full spectrum of international organisations, national governments and civil society groups, and a wide range of vantage points and ideological perspectives. Sauvé (2005) recently

summarised these as representing a variety of what she called ‘currents’: naturalist, conservation/ resourcist, problem solving, systemic, scientific, humanist/mesological, value-centred, holistic, bioregionalist, praxic, socially critical, feminist, ethnographic, eco-education, and sustainable development/sustainability oriented. She concludes her analysis by stating that: ‘The effort to identify and characterise currents in environmental education leads to the construction of a typology of the various ways of conceptualising and practicing environmental education. Clearly, further analysis remains to be pursued in an ongoing mapping of this field’ (Sauvé, 2005:31). Her argument is that this mapping process can be stimulating of reflexivity, change and further creativity in an already rapidly changing field.

Both Melucci (1996) and Touraine (1977) argue that social movements are instrumental in bringing about social change; they translate the cultural model and the field of historicity into a system of social and political organisation with various material outcomes. For example, UNESCO (2004) reported that environmental education, along with technology education, is the fastest growing curriculum change area in formal education systems around the world, indicating that the mobilisation of the cultural model (using international conferences and conference recommendations as one instrument) has the potential to bring about social change. In South Africa (Lotz-Sisitka, 2002) and in Botswana (Ketlhoelwe, 2007) we have seen direct evidence of how social movements are able to translate the cultural model (represented in the Tbilisi Principles, the NGO Forum Principles or the UN International Implementation Scheme) into social and educational change processes.

Historicising Conference Recommendations

This short Viewpoint paper on conference recommendations provides some food for thought on why we continue to engage in this practice, and may open the space for a more in-depth deliberation or more careful empirical investigations into why the process of producing international conference recommendations (by civil and institutional groups as well as cross-overs and hybrids of civil and institutional groups, and in various ways on various continents) seems to be proliferating. Perhaps we require more variety, greater plurality and more cultural capital at this point in history to reflect on an increasingly complex set of socio-ecological issues and educational contexts and settings in which we respond to these. The 19th-century modernist project seeking to unite society under one frame is apparently no longer possible, although it would seem that we may need to unite our pluralist views on one finite planet (as climate change is showing). As Delanty (1999:127) argues, ‘... society is not a whole, or reducible to a single category, but is diffuse’. Political monitoring of the World Social Forum demonstrates the horizontal proliferation of new social movement groups, cultural capital and strategies for bringing about social change (Wallerstein, pers. comm., July 2007). According to Touraine, society is not merely a system of norms or a system of domination: ‘it is a system of social relations, of debates and conflicts, of political initiatives and claims, of ideologies and alienation’ (Delanty, 1999:128).

Social change is a complex process, and involves questions of transition, crisis and transformation, and many kinds of collective action (Delanty, 1999). Producing conference

recommendations appears to be an interesting part of this process. Wallerstein (2006:83) argues not for radical relativism in embracing pluralism, but rather for historicising our engagements in a field; which means we need to place the reality we are immediately studying or experiencing (a conference and its outcomes) ‘... within the larger context: the historical structure within which it fits and operates’. He explains further that: ‘We can never understand the detail if we do not understand the pertinent whole, since we can never otherwise appreciate exactly what is changing, how it is changing and why it is changing ... one cannot historicise in a void, as though everything were not part of some large systemic whole. All systems are historic, and all history is systematic’ (Wallerstein, 2006:83). We are, as Wallerstein indicates, in the unit of analysis we can call the modern world-system, but we are also within a particular moment of that historical system, ‘its structural crisis or age of transition’ (Wallerstein, 2006). This view may help us to understand the proliferation of environmental education conference outcomes with more depth and perspective.

Conclusion

In concluding this short Viewpoint paper, I would like to recommend a re-reading of the Tbilisi Principles, produced in 1997, in relation to the 2007 Ahmedabad declaration and recommendations. It may then be interesting to read these in relation to the MESA conference recommendations, with due consideration for how, where, when and why they were produced. Similar relational and critical readings can be made of the UNDES International Implementation Scheme (UNESCO, 2005) accessible on <http://www.unesco.org/education/desd>) and its production and consumption. Also look out for the conference recommendations that will emerge from UNESCO’s 2009 World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Bonn, and, of course, the Montreal 5th World Environmental Education Congress discussions/recommendations. The purpose of all of this effort would be to consider the significance of this cultural capital in relation to own and other practices and contexts, and to the social change possibilities that might exist through this work at local, national and/or global levels.

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