

## BOOK REVIEW: 1001 ACTIVITIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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### *1001 Activities in Environmental Education*

Allers, Nico. 1997. Publisher: Kameleon Publishers, Vereeniging

The title of this recent South African publication indicates the author's intention to provide a collection of activities which primary and secondary school teachers, teacher educators, conservation educators outside of schools and trainers in industry can draw on for environmental education. To its credit, the text also provides an orientating framework for these activities. However, I found this framework quite weak, as I will explain below. The activities *per se* can be quite useful to educators who have already developed more substantial frameworks for environmental education for themselves.

Whereas the title and several disclaimers in the book indicate that readers should not expect more than a source of activities, the text does open with some background on the development of environmental education. The first chapter relies heavily on Joubert & Steenkamp's (1995) eclectic collection of historical facts and directives for environmental education, and is poorly referenced. I was therefore uncertain about the origin of several sets of ideas. This would present significant problems if students of environmental education saw the publication as a text- or reference book.

Chapter One continues by outlining some educational theory on how best to teach (environmental education), e.g. when to be 'concrete' or 'abstract' and when to target the learners' affective or cognitive 'domains'. It also draws on American models for environmental education which fit well with the notion of education as didactics, providing sets of quasi-scientific prescriptions on how best to teach for the outcome of 'positive environmental behaviour'.

At the outset Dr Allers refers to a need to re-think the concept of 'environment', and he presents an adaptation of O'Donoghue's diagram in which social, economic, political and bio-physical domains of meaning are linked to the concept (see Rhodes Environmental Education Unit, 1996). It is therefore somewhat surprising to read that "most of the activities [in the book] emphasise wildlife - because of its intrinsic, ecological and other values, as well as its

importance as a basis for understanding the fragile grounds upon which all life rests" (p.14). These grounds are presented from an allegedly neutral position, about which I will say more later.

The worthy contribution of the text is the wide range of activities in the following chapters. A relatively experienced educator can choose from these to provide learners with many meaningful opportunities for learning. (I stress the need for experience because of the conceptual and stylistic problems outlined below. Also, the fact that the suggested activities are not linked to an outcomes-based education framework could present a hindrance to some educators in South Africa.) Activities to develop an awareness of environmental problems (Chapter 8) are particularly interesting, as are some of the ecosystem studies in Chapter 7. None of them are really unique, but they are broader and thus more useful for a range of teaching situations than the largely experiential-learning based activities in Opie's activity books (e.g. 1989, 1992). Also, they are South African in orientation; the *Project Wild* activities from the USA have been re-written with some success for the local situation.

However, the orientation or framework for these activities is, as I suggested, weak. It involves e.g. the now dated notion of a cognitive-affective-psychomotor split (outlined on pp. 6-16). This concept has been set aside (at least theoretically) in outcomes-based education where learners' orientations and skills (knowledge, attitudes, emotions, behaviours) are conceptualised holistically (Lotz, pers comm., 1997). The author is indeed aware of the short-comings of this classic but conceptually weak distinction; he opens a chapter on "Awareness and Appreciation through Nature" by noting that "Although perceptual awareness may be regarded as affective in nature, it is almost a cognitive behaviour" (p.19).

Also, although Chapter One cautions the reader to use different kinds of activities for different age groups, the activities which then follow are flexible enough to be adapted for all age groups, and are often indicated as such in the information box following each activity. One arbitrarily chosen activity, Trails, is evaluated by the author as suitable for "Age: Gr.1-10 (and older)" and although he classifies it as an "Awareness and Appreciation through Nature" type

of activity, the "skills" ensuing from it include "analysis, application, classification ... writing, appreciation, cooperation, enthusiasm" (p.39).

I found the section on "Citizen Action Skills and Experience" (p.11) more useful, e.g. its advice on how to deal with these 'goals' when working with young children. The way in which some of the activities (e.g. Learning to Look, Looking to See ... on p.28) can be linked up towards "[helping] us to become better, more aware and informed decision-makers" is also helpful. Another valuable approach is followed in Activity 14, where cultural attitudes and beliefs are treated from a historical perspective with emphasis on changes over time, rather than on reified group differences.

The section on "Concept formation" (Sub-goal Knowledge) is based on individual conceptualisation and gives no recognition to the social influences that shape our conceptions (e.g. the mass media, advertising, community leaders, teachers as role models). Recognition of these influences makes the statement about the provision of neutral knowledge to allow learners to make up their 'own' minds, referred to above, problematic (See Janse van Rensburg & Murtough, 1997).

The author's wish to appear neutral can be questioned in the light of his particular recommendations for Biblical studies (p.42). One could also argue that his claim that "biodiversity is a vast and undervalued resource" (p.81, my emphasis) is a value-based statement rather than a neutral fact. (The statement on p. 131 equating an environmental education perspective with natural resources as 'utilities' for people can be critiqued on the same basis.) The wish for factual neutrality (evident in the current drive for environmental education standards in the USA, see Simmons, 1995) and to allow learners to make 'their own' decisions, can also not be reconciled with the statement that "children up to the age of 12, have not yet developed ... moral reasoning ... and require assistance in making most moral decisions" (on p.61).

The advocacy-education debate is a significant one in environmental education (see e.g. Jickling, 1996) and one amongst others which should not be skimmed over in a book of this kind. It may only be a collection of activities, but the author has (rightly so, I believe) provided an orientating framework for these activities and if the framework is weak, it leaves potential users with little substance to base their activities on. Then environmental education

becomes no more than a series of *ad hoc* activities with little connection to meaningful learning.

The question has been raised whether the book should be translated into Afrikaans. Whereas a strong case could be made for the value of learning about one's environment in one's home language, as it could bring the concept of environment and environmental care 'closer to home', the above aspects of this commendable effort would caution against a direct translation without first addressing some fundamental educational aspects. (Any re-write would also benefit from an attempt to use non-discriminatory language, e.g. replacing "the learner and his needs" with "learners and their needs".)

My most enduring concern with the book is its very poor editing. The text is rife with spelling and grammatical errors and inaccuracies. This is particularly serious in that readers new to environmental education would find some sections hard to follow, not because of technical or conceptual complexity, but due to stylistic and grammatical clumsiness.

Low-cost publications (and thus, unfortunately, the sometimes barely useful computer-generated graphics) have a place. It is indeed appropriate to make ideas for doing environmental education accessible to as many educators as possible, but we should nonetheless ensure that the ideas we invite others to share are indeed worth sharing, and shared well. Amongst the ideas in this text some (the activities) would be very useful to a relatively experienced educator, and some (the conceptual framework for the activities) of little value. All these ideas can be greatly enhanced through the author's active engagement in broader environmental educational practice and deliberation. Although Dr Allers has consulted a range of local and American literature and resources, this needs to be extended considerably for a text to be of the broad value claimed. A study of recent educational theories with bearing on environmental education will probably also resonate more strongly with the author's experience in the field than the rather outmoded (environmental) educational theories he provides as framework for the *1001 Activities in Environmental Education*.

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