



## Reflection Paper Recontextualising Learning? Reflections on the social and relational nature of research in environmental education

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### *Editor's Note*

*The EEASA Journal normally publishes a keynote address from the annual EEASA Conference and workshops as a feature of this journal. In place of the regular keynote address, and as this edition of the journal shares a number of papers and reflections from the recent 8th International Research and Development Seminar on Environmental and Health Education, hosted in South Africa in March 2005, the opening paper of this journal will share reflections from this event. During this event, southern Africa hosted a number of internationally recognised academics and graduate students from a range of different countries, all working in the field of environmental and health education. Professor Paul Hart, from Canada, kindly provided a leading paper on new learning theory at this event, and he assisted with the chairing of this seminar theme. After the event, he presented his reflections on the 8th International Seminar, which are published here as an opening to this journal. His Reflection Paper provides insights into changing understandings of learning, and the changing terrain of research methodology in environmental education research, particularly as these methodological deliberations are emerging within a cultural turn.*

### *Introduction*

The South African Research and Development Seminar (on environmental and health education) was intended to engage participants in exploring research designs from cultural/contextual perspectives, that is, to re-inscribe their methodological practices within the fabric of social life. Participants were encouraged to present their research 'works in progress' as a means of 'growing' ideas through parallel sets of themed deliberations. Each of us knows, as active researchers, that we need a better conceptual grasp of the complexity of the inquiry process. We recognise that we must learn to operate in uncertain and indeterminate spaces so we seek new insights from diverse philosophical/theoretical notions that privilege ethics, context and socio-cultural interpretations of meaning. We also need opportunities to reflect on local interpretations of themed research issues such as participation, curriculum, and learning within broad contexts which are framed relationally (epistemologies) and which are situated. That, I think, is why we came to South Africa and why some of us will continue to find such venues that help us to trouble our work. This paper attempts to reflect on several issues that trouble our practical work, and on questions that penetrate the field and provide the basis for undoing conversations, for more thoughtful discussions that improve on the superficiality of our scholarship.

My seminar focus and responsibility (almost everyone assumed several roles) was associated with one of four themed deliberation sets – situated learning/ethics/culture. I regret not having taken more time to engage two other themed deliberations that focussed on local interpretations of curriculum, and participation, democracy and globalisation. However, the opening of deliberations on a fourth theme – relational epistemologies and postcolonial research – on the final day provided some crossover from each of the seminar themes. Thus, my interpretation of three emergent subtexts was limited by my participation in only two of the four sets of themed deliberations that characterised the seminar.

### *Postcolonial and Relational Perspectives of Inquiry*

My initial motivation, beyond the obvious, for travelling half way round the world, and in particular to South Africa, was to learn more about the potential of postcolonial research perspectives in addressing issues of marginalisation of indigenous knowledge as ‘situated cultures’ in educational learning. I was not disappointed. Discussion ‘openers’ by South African graduate students and faculty provided local substance to theoretical framings from visitors such as Noel Gough whose presentation of ideas of *relational* epistemology provided direction for a number of my own questions about the potential of certain forms of poststructural methodological analysis. Using ideas from Deleuze’s geophilosophy and from ‘*After Method*’ (Law, 2004), Gough’s work has used ‘order words’ such as ‘quality’ to link presuppositions implicated in social order not in terms of their conceptual meanings so much as what they ‘do’ to produce political orderings (implicated in forms of social obligation) that presuppose certain actions. Framed in action theory networking and using concepts such as rhizome (i.e., providing conjectural spaces) and nomadic wanderings (where no one path is privileged) implications for such geopolitical analysis of phrases such as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) can be examined for their locatable effects in specific situations but also across (national) borders.

Leslie Le Grange extended this discussion of geophilosophy-based inquiry/analysis in terms of how media processes can serve to limit the language (e.g., effects of integrated world capitalism) available to people (see Le Grange, this edition). Le Grange equates the erosion of the biophysical with the breakdown of social values and a kind of decolonisation of the mind (referring to Guattari’s three domains of ecology – mental, social, physical) that impels educators and researchers to consider more creative ways to think about issues related to how discourses influence our subjectivities and new forms of solidarity. Like Gough, Le Grange seems to urge researchers to redress the imbalance in our tendency toward arguments over abstract concepts (like ESD) in favour of analysis of the way such concepts *perform* in specific locations. Abstract ideas like metaphors, he says, may predispose people to use ideas in particular ways, in which case we ‘get it wrong from the beginning’, rather than analysing their use in practice.

Within the themed deliberations on situated learning, ethics and culture, similar kinds of *relational* questions arose that seemed to me to chip away at some assumed relationships between language (concepts and discourse) and experience (their work in practice). For example, Leigh Price’s session generated discussion about how methodological tensions have been inscribed within research discourses/cultures (as have pedagogical tensions within educational

discourses/cultures) so that certain concepts and approaches to inquiry become reified (e.g., indigenous knowledge) to the degree that one cannot question them (because they are part of someone else's discourses/culture). In such cases, says Price (see Price, this edition), ethics in effect can be immobilised. Critical interactions that followed led Rob O'Donoghue to venture that (re)mobilising ethics will not occur through rationalising such concepts (as indigenous knowledge) as much as acknowledging contested spaces as one runs such concepts and ideas by one's own lived experience – checked against an ethics of the outcomes (i.e., situated ethics). O'Donoghue's idea of determining the appropriateness of our knowledge (of the workings of concepts such as biodiversity) against the ethics of its outcomes seems to ground Deleuze and Guattari's theory as an instance of analysing thinking as a 'geography of reason'.

Perhaps these particular ideas were meaningful to me because I could see their methodological potential in my own inquiries in evaluating action-oriented environmental education projects and critiquing outcomes-based education. Whatever it was, it resulted, on return home, in follow-up with Noel Gough and by reference to Leigh Price's papers in *Environmental Education Research*, 10(3) (*Environmental Education Research and Social Change: Southern African Perspectives*) for methodological insights into postcolonial perspectives embedded as they are within broader notions of poststructural analysis (e.g., discourse analysis). The point being that, because environmental education researchers like me are currently being pulled in many directions by methodological theorising, Price's (2004) appeal to what might be termed theory-practice inconsistencies provides a space to consider some contradictions that poststructuralism seemingly places on my own work in narrative inquiry, biography and genealogy. My struggle, perhaps like Price's, is how to remain true enough to participants in writing about their lives and yet interpret their talk in ways that 'neither elide the referent nor neglect the socially produced character of my (researcher) judgments about it'. What Price suggests, along with Gough and O'Donoghue, it seems to me, is a means to live within the messes (and the implied lack of methodological hygiene) in ways that are responsive to changing educational environments fraught with conflicts and indeterminacy. It means understanding how our research work is formed through relationships with others as a component of reality (i.e., postcritical realist) through which we must necessarily engage in 'knowing' (an)other being whilst eschewing the illusion that nothing exists except as a linguistic construct (i.e., poststructuralist). Given the complexity of a rapidly expanding 'post' literature, it was useful to participate intensively in seminar discussions that both engaged and critiqued the abstract ideas of that literature and at the same time challenged me as a researcher to rethink notions of constructed and real aspects in our research relationships with participants on the ground.

Heila Lotz-Sisitka's comment near the end of the seminar seemed to me to capture the essence of the relational geography in situated aspects of culture, ethics and learning. In light of the many themed discussions that implicated postcolonial possibilities in research, it seemed appropriate that she challenged us to continue to ask whether, if we change the language (i.e., discursive practices), ideas/attitudes will change. This seemingly innocent, gently injected query – like Robin Williams's portrayal of the genie in the animated version of *Aladdin* as a being with 'giant cosmic powers and an itty bitty living space' – represented the question of the decade. In our discussions about environmental education and education for sustainable development and in our research quest to

embrace postperspectives as overlays to our methodological dilemmas (particularly in qualitative [interpretive] inquiry), one wonders whether greater attention to language (concepts and discourses) in their geophilosophical and perhaps geophysical sense would change our research work or whether (and to what extent) that really matters. No comment!

### *Toward Re-inscribing Methodology as Pedagogy*

Seminar discussions about methodology seemed to merge philosophy with pedagogy in new ways, particularly in those sessions where participatory (action research) approaches were explored. In Onyango-Ouma's experiences with health education implementation in Kenya, for example, participation evolved into learning processes as situated, negotiated, and valued in local community contexts (everyday situations and settings). His inquiry raised questions about the relationship between the value of universalising medical discourses and local knowing through lived experience. This notion of challenging the ideas of experts, particularly in thinking through transfer of the researcher's version of process, adds another reflexive layer to inquiry that is critically conscious of community perspectives (as well as the potential value of poststructural perspectives). In other words, such methodological insights in the context of how one goes about educating local people in personal hygiene represent instances of Justin Dillon's concern about an apparent drive to formalise all learning. His concern about the almost systematic devaluing of situated learning begs questions about which situations (including informal) actually favour learning. Perhaps what people bring to potential learning situations (i.e., their history and culture) is as important to understand as the operational discourses within curriculum and pedagogy? The learning hegemony issue also begs questions, according to Lausanne Olvitt, about what methodologies would be appropriate and generative to engage the added complexity of taking (situated) cultures of learners more seriously. The idea that methodology may in fact choreograph pedagogy, and that both need to be researched as situated, was pursued in many informal sessions, particularly those where Rob O'Donoghue was involved, and emerged for me as one of the 'must follow-up' issues of the seminar.

Discussions about methodology and pedagogy also centered around notions of (action) research as epistemology rather than merely methodology. Abel Atiti's focus on the need to deepen our (researcher) understanding of epistemological and ethical implications of organisational change toward sustainability could be interpreted in line with Justin Dillon's perspective on relational philosophy. Both seemed to be saying, from very different concepts, that we cannot now escape the fact that our methods and methodologies (e.g., Latour's actor network theory), must attempt to account for our participatory ontology/epistemologies in environmental education. For example, if sustainability is viewed as a complex multidimensional process of cultural/community change, then we may be in need of an (action) inquiry process based on relational epistemology more akin to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of human thinking across time and space (i.e., geophilosophy). Geo-connections surfaced in many sessions as a means to empower researchers with new ideas to risk those nomadic wanderings that indeed do not privilege any one way of conceiving ideas. Speculative though they may be, such ideas create openings for yet another aspect of critical focus in our future inquiries.

A geopolitical/geophilosophical subtext was also evident in deliberations about research that accounts for 'drift' in cultural perspectives resulting from exchanges involving Tony Shallcross, Rob O'Donoghue and Bob Jickling. Questions were raised, for example, following Mphemelang ('MJ') Kethoilwe's genealogical analysis of environmental education in Botswana, from more general discussions on situated learning, about the value of deconstruction analysis as a useful lens to look at power relations, that is, whether power is always restrictive or whether it can actually open up learning or policy processes. Tony Shallcross's question about whether situated learning in respect of other learning theories is a synthesis or a debate led to questions of socio-ecological communities of practice as virtual melding pots of 'ethics in action' as well as to questions about how to take ethics into local settings when researchers question why local people may value some knowledges more than others (see Jickling, this edition). Again, we have more questions – big questions – than answers at this point. As Jim Taylor commented, such questions involve applying cross-cutting methodological approaches where new dimensions of ethics consider the darker sides of issues of power, as well as our perceptions of process/sustainability. Such approaches to inquiry that situate learning and knowledge within local culture, whilst anticipated in broadened conceptions of methodology and action inquiry as learning, are yet to be developed.

### *Toward Re-inscribing Action Inquiry as Participatory Learning*

Increasing recognition of action inquiry processes that can facilitate participation in cultural contexts creates openings for research that recognises the value of broadened conceptions of learning in environmental education. My contribution to the seminar encouraged participants to (re)consider the power of the discourse of learning and the culture of schooling in thinking about the effect of environmental education in educational thought and practice. My thoughts about the seminar are reflected by the idea that learning is more than a function of behavioural association or cognitive (internal) acquisition, or an exclusively individualistic process, and is now viewed in terms of the social relations of production (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). This might be both enlightening and encouraging for environmental educators. Socio-cultural views of learning, as a part of a more comprehensive learning theory, argue that learning is participatory, distributed and socially situated – as something that does not simply occur in the head but as embodied experience located within our interactions with others (and the world) (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Whilst the model of acquisition of cognitive knowledge may provide useful resources (i.e., concepts, symbols, tools or technologies) for learning, it is incomplete as a total view (Greeno, 1997). Powerful notions of individualism are now challenged by a socially distributed view of knowing that implicates issues of social role and identity as well as issues of power (i.e., relative social position). Thus, formal, abstract conceptions of learning are overlain by a psychology of knowing (cognition) that recognises participation in authentic communities of practice can lead to transformation and change (see Cobb, 1995; Smith, 1995; Rogoff, *et al.*, 2003).

Research that views learning more comprehensively in terms that incorporate and legitimate its social dimensions, as now argued by learning theorists (see Anderson, Reder & Simon, 1996;

Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000), has not yet penetrated formal education practice. In terms of environmental education learning, research has revealed how incomplete our thinking is about socio/cultural/environmental matters in focussing on the cognitive while marginalising the emotional and embodied sides of such inquiry (Rogoff *et al.*, 2003). One wonders how dysfunctional must traditional school pedagogy become before attention is given to evidence from research on learning that is already there? It is interesting that Jamison (2001), in *The Making of Green Knowledge*, describes social change as a learning process that involves tension between incorporating knowledge into the system and resisting the system. The irony in this may be that the core system change posited by new learning theory coming from within the system is the catalyst for change originating in ideas of those resisting that system.

Another irony may be found in the fact that the literature of environmental learning itself has not focussed on distinctions between individualised and social models of learning. Considering learning in terms of social relations as both 'space forming' and 'space contingent', that is, as postmodern geographies that re-insert space into critical social theory (Soja, 1989:81), implies movement across boundaries between individuals and communities. If we understand communities as interrelationships among people and world (environments) then spaces of both environment and interrelations beg consideration in learning research, which is the real message of this seminar. If we approach our research tasks in ways that increase the messy methodological conceptions of public and private space and in ways that (re)consider how such spaces/relations (re)produce old or new ones, then research will continue to have a place in social/environmental change (and seminars such as this will have a place in that research).

Knowing that pedagogy is never innocent and that it inevitably communicates a conception of learning processes and learners, the juxtaposition of learning, ethics and pedagogy in this seminar has brought into sharp relief a number of practical issues that trouble the assumed status and legitimacy of certain (i.e., behaviourist and cognitivist) views of learning. For example, the idea that key dimensions of pedagogy (including educational goals, curriculum and assessment strategies), as well as the roles of teachers and students, may be transformed by broadened conceptions about what constitutes learning (and knowing) should speak loudly to educators who value forms of education that emphasise practical and real world experiences. Environmental education researchers can now draw on evidence in support of experiential learning from mainstream findings in developmental psychology, anthropology and sociology. Although recognition of socio-cultural dimensions of learning provides a language for broadening the learning curriculum, understanding the implications of this research is just beginning to penetrate mainstream education. The problem for traditional education will be that, just as many environmental educators have argued, dominant forms of pedagogic practice will be exposed as reflecting too narrowly a perspective on learning (as mediated by an external view of knowing) that works against our previous best ideals for education theory and practice.

Socio-cultural perspectives of learning, placed alongside conceptions of situated culture and situated ethics, served seminar deliberations in ways that question the contexts and discourses in which teaching/learning are located (including ESD). From an environmental perspective, our socio-cultural knowing concerns moral values, ethics and beliefs as meaning embedded in

cultural conceptions of context. The seminar focus on a lack of coherence between espoused ethics and ethics-in-action can be interpreted in terms of Bob Jickling's notion of (re)imagining ethics (Jickling, this edition). Although underdeveloped as a perspective for research, questions were posed about assumptions of 'situated' ethics as ethics linking with local activity where Tony Shallcross's notion of thinking about the school as a community of practice (as in whole school approaches that recognise the power of learning through informal learning) may help to minimise gaps between ethics as politics and ethics in action. Researching this complexity as a form of inter- or multi-modal analysis may provide new ways of representing cognitive and affective (i.e., emotional) aspects of learning in ways that are not a privileging of any particular text, but rather as a learning space between intentions and actions (across cases).

Clearly we have more to discuss here. There is a need for rethinking of what we mean by various words and discourses. Implications for research in environmental education involving issues of learning and knowing as ethically distributed phenomena suggest several agendas that seek to understand how learning environments more broadly conceived evoke learning, how knowing is constructed collaboratively, how meanings as well as courses of action (including ethics) are negotiated, how power affects social relationships and democratic process and how evaluation of learning can take advantage of our qualitative approaches to inquiry to expand our notions of what counts as evidence of learning as socio-culturally conceived. Broadening conceptions of learning, ethics and culture may serve to focus on some issues whilst surely silencing others. Whatever the case, it seems to me that collegial seminars that create conditions encouraging deliberation are a call for intelligibility in sorting reflexively through methodological messes created by political dimensions of our fieldwork and knowledge/action-based generative activities.

### *Understanding Our Responsibilities as Educational Researchers*

In her paper, 'The call for intelligibility in postmodern educational research', Elizabeth St Pierre (2000) argues that becoming available to intelligibility involves more than close, responsible reading, that is, immersion in the discourses and practices of theory and critique. It involves a questioning of 'what we cannot not want' (see also Spivak, 1993), that is, questioning our positionings as researchers in learning to conceive ourselves in terms of the theory (see Fay, 1987). Given the rapid extensions of particular postdiscourses into new terrain resulting in a blurring of relationships between philosophy, theory, methodology and method, our responsibilities as researchers to reflect, critique and debate our research design decisions seem crucial. So for me, beyond the obvious benefits of engaging themed deliberations and focussed discussions about research practices, the Research and Development Seminars in Health and Environmental Education provide opportunities to examine the presuppositions embedded in ways of thinking that inform these practices. In South Africa, in particular, we were enticed, by the Rhodes University Environmental Education and Sustainability group, into a culture of questioning our decisions about our research practices at levels of methodology, theory, ethics and politics. Such scrutiny is a necessary part of the productive potential that comes from engagement.

One of my goals in coming to South Africa was to further develop my understanding of epistemological and ontological dimensions of my educational inquiry. My most immediate concern stems from the recent backlash, particularly against any form of qualitative inquiry whereby the process of scientism – defined as the belief that science is the only form of legitimate knowledge – has become confused with science. In the face of such a trend it is possible to become trapped within methodological discussions that fail to recognise this crisis of credibility as an epistemological one (see Lather, 1996). The South African seminar provided some glimpses of ways to think through these concerns about legitimation, ways that could possibly be labelled as postmodern because they eschew ideas about alternatives for success or regimes in favour of deepening our understandings of our inquiries through critical reflection and critique. Such activity is a vital part of the vibrancy of our intellectual work and can, if the processes are sensitive and responsible, improve the quality of our research and practice.

The series of seminars, which now include the South African experience, involve a willingness to subject one's own position and work to critical scrutiny. They involve reconstructive work in an atmosphere of relative safety that does not assume consensus. They create the potential for more critical approaches to research work, considered genealogically also to deconstruct necessity (see Hoy, 1998). Thus the notion of 'pushing outwards yet pulling together', articulated in terms of resisting an epistemological squeeze by drawing together dimensions of broadened ethics, knowing and methodology during the South African seminar, could be viewed as a form of reconstruction identified alongside the need for deconstruction in order to maintain sensitivity to the working assumptions that inform different research practices. According to May (2002) these issues are not, contrary to the attitude of those who regard philosophical matters as detracting from the 'real work', irrelevant. Built into their assumptions are epistemological and ontological presuppositions that we need to get at, because they render our work intelligible (St Pierre, 2000). Failure to understand the underlying value, and I would argue, the political necessity of engaging in future seminars, particularly in health and environmental education research, would represent a lack of understanding of the social and relational nature of the learning process as a complex of relations among our dispositions, positions and practices as environmental education researchers.

### *Notes on the Contributor*

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