

## Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

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Ahlberg, M., & Filho, W.L. (Eds.). (1998). *Environmental Education for Sustainability: Good Environment, Good Life*. New York, NY: Peter Lang. Volume 4 of a series on "Environmental Education, Communication and Sustainability." Pages:300. Price: \$48.95 USD (softcover).

Reviewed by Pamela Courtenay-Hall, The University of British Columbia.

*Environmental Education for Sustainability: Good Environment, Good Life* (1998) is a collection of 21 papers prepared as a follow-up to the "Northern Call for the Environment" conference in Savonlinna, Finland. In its amazingly short introduction (less than a page), the book promises to contribute to the literature on education for sustainability by bringing in "a wealth of ideas related to life long learning and the environment, approaching environmental education from various angles but having high quality of life as an ultimate goal" (p. 9).

This promise does not give us much of a lead as to what the book is about, because there is a multitude of ways in which environmental educators might think of their work as contributing to quality of life, and many different things they can mean by it. So the reader wanting to get a clearer indication of the book's focus must look to the essays themselves. Although the chapters do not share a distinctive theme, they provide a diverse glimpse of recent initiatives in environmental education practice and research undertaken in various European countries and in Canada, Mexico, South Africa and Australia.

One of the shortcomings of this volume is the economy model of editing used — even the table of contents contains no structure or sub-grouping of any kind. Here then is a reviewer's version of what the volume contains. Regrettably, the groupings suggested below are not discernible in the arrangement of the volume.

The volume opens with general reflections on the links between environmental education and quality of life, and discussions of "quality improvement" in environmental education, with papers by Walter Leal Filho (Germany), Mauri Ahlberg (Finland), Chris Maas Geesteranus (Netherlands).

There are several essays exploring the *nature* of environmental education, the importance of environmental education to *citizenship education*, and *pedagogy* for teaching about environmental issues. These are written by Karsten Schnack (Denmark), Leena Aho (Finland), Michael Bassey (England), Arjen E.J. Wals and Daan van Weelie (Netherlands) on biodiversity, and Pekka Hynninen (Finland). The importance of *student participation in school and community greening projects* (also called "ecologisation" projects) is given well-grounded discussion in papers by Peter Posch (Austria), Franz Rauch (Austria), Liisa Horelli (Finland), and Sofie van Volsem and Veronique Vens (Belgium).

There is also an interesting set of contextualized reports on particular environmental education initiatives, with papers by Sepideh Rouhani and Duduzile Ddlamini-Boemah (South Africa), Juriu Kunaver (Slovenia), Maria Kuzniarz (Poland), Mario De Paz and Miranda Pilo (Italy). These authors report (respectively) on the evolution of an exemplary environmental education centre in South Africa, the importance of environmental education in karst regions (cave regions), trans-border environmental education focusing on the heavily polluted "Black Triangle" region in Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic, and an approach to teacher education curricula in Italy.

How do researchers go about exploring teacher's values, strategies and practices in environmental education? These and other issues in environmental education research methodology are explored in papers by Paul Hart (Canada), Moira Lang (Scotland), and Eisenberg Wieder Rose and Theesz Poscher Margarita (Mexico). One of the most interesting questions engaged in the book concerns how we might need to

rethink environmental education practice and research in light of understanding environmental knowledge and belief as socially constructed. This question is well explored in papers by Philipp Payne (Australia), and Markku Kapyla (Finland).

Many of the discussions in the volume include nonformal as well as formal environmental education sites. However, the majority of papers focus on elementary and secondary school education. There is noticeably only limited coverage of education for sustainability at the level of adult education, higher education, and early childhood education, even though the focus of the volume is reported to be on life-long learning. Nevertheless, many of the issues discussed in the book are issues relevant to environmental education in postsecondary schooling as well, and so this collection should be of some interest to researchers in the field of higher education, particularly anyone wanting to get a sense of some of the approaches used in environmental education practice and research in the countries listed. Interestingly, the U.S. is not among them.

The quality of the papers varies considerably, and I will select some for discussion. Most of them reflect the limitations of space, a common problem with conference collections. For example, Canadian educational researcher Paul Hart has done a fascinating and ground-breaking study of teacher thinking and practice in Canadian environmental education, but his contribution to the volume may be too condensed to be readily accessible to readers not already familiar with both narrative inquiry and the literature on teacher thinking. Nevertheless, Hart's summary gives a good indication of the importance of the methodological issues with which he and his research team wrestled as they tried to explore elementary school teachers' reasons for engaging in environmental education. I will discuss one of these issues in particular, as it is likely to be of more general interest to a higher education audience.

One of the greatest challenges of Hart's project was for the researchers to develop a rapport with teachers that was strong enough to enable conversation at the deepest level of personal motivation and worldview. Reflecting on this challenge, Hart writes that it takes "personal qualities such as friendliness, sincerity, genuine empathy and caring, and understanding" to develop conversations that are "open and

interactive.” He seems to characterize the desired research encounter as a “sharing of experiences between kindred spirits who even as relative strangers meeting for the first time share a sense of a common mission or worldview.” And he notes that it “takes a certain relationship which includes a genuineness and caring on the part of both people to develop the instant rapport necessary to really understand at the deepest levels of consciousness” (Hart, p. 71).

Of course, what else it takes to facilitate soul-searching conversations is time, something that can be scarce for mega-research projects involving many participants and 30-minute interviews — which seems to be why Hart’s team was after “instant rapport” with their teacher-participants.

But one of the methodological casualties of research based on “instant rapport” can be the opportunity for sustained researcher-participant dialogue of a mutually trusting, but also mutually *critical* sort. This problem has two apparent sources in the research Hart describes. One source is the immersion of both researcher and participant in a common worldview, which can block the possibilities for mutual critical reflection. The other source is lack of time, which can prevent a researcher from raising critical questions.

I would add that in some of the collaborative research I have undertaken and in some of the graduate research I have supervised, I have noticed these additional impediments to mutually trusting critical interchange between researchers and participants: (1) a researcher’s commitment to being supportive to research participants; (2) a researcher’s gratitude to research participants for joining the project, and consequent disinclination to raise critical questions; (3) a researcher’s discomfort with raising critical questions because they might seem to risk moving the research relationship out of the feminist plane of mutually respectful and supportive co-inquiry and into the traditional malestream pattern of “researcher as epistemic authority, participant as research object”; (4) a researcher’s lack of understanding of how to raise critical questions in mutually shared and supportive ways rather than in ways that might be misread as challenging, judgmental, authority-claiming, or aggressive.

These conditions can lead in either of two directions: (1) to inquiry that is less critical than it otherwise would be, or (2) to an awkward,

ethically and epistemologically suspicious dissonance in one's research between interview *conduct* and interview *analysis* — where interview *conduct* is characterized by careful eliciting of stories and supportiveness of them as received, but interview *analysis* is characterized by deconstructive criticism of a sort that might ultimately feel like a breaking of faith to participants.

Now clearly, the ethically and epistemologically preferable path is to involve research participants in the process of deconstructive criticism to whatever extent they wish to be involved, rather than concealing deconstructive criticism from them or presenting it to them after the interview as a *fait accompli*. Without space to develop and document this idea, I suggest that helping interviewees learn how to raise critical questions in mutually shared and supportive ways is the answer to this research dilemma. It can reduce the dissonance between supportive interview conduct and critical interview analysis, as well as help resolve the other problems discussed above *to the extent that these problems can be resolved*. Hart's short article doesn't delve into this question of mutually supportive critical interaction, but clearly, it is crucial to maximizing the depth and integrity of teacher reflection, researcher reflection, and researcher-participant interaction. In any case, Hart's research into teacher thinking makes an important step forward for qualitative research in environmental education. Perhaps a study of how to facilitate mutually supportive critical interaction between researchers and participants can be one of its sequels.

Papers likely to be of particular interest to a higher education audience include Karsten Schnack's "Why Focus on Conflicting Interests in Environmental Education?" and Moira Lang's "Ethos, Environment and Curriculum," both of which provide some interesting reflections on "action competence" as a goal of environmental education.

Although Philipp Payne's "The Politics of Nature" deals with children's conceptions of nature, people-environment and culture-nature interfaces, the insights he develops are important to education for sustainability at any level. These insights include: that conceptions of nature are dynamic across an individual's life span; that philosophical discussion is an important way to access these conceptions; that this work

should be a foundational part of environmental education around which curriculum planning is built, etc.

Payne makes the interesting conjecture that "Until the sources of nature conceptions are better understood theories of environmental education might well be misguided" (p. 225). This is an important possibility for educators to consider, suggesting as it does the intermediate step of making space in environmental education programs for students to learn about diverse conceptions of nature, to reflect on their own within this diversity, and to think about where they all came from. But conjecture turns to unsubstantiated criticism when Payne accuses environmental education (everywhere?) of failing to engage with students' unique conceptions and sensibilities, and claims this alleged failure to be a source of environmental education's "lack of practical efficacy" in resolving "the persistent contradiction in rhetoric and reality in mundane, daily environmental practices" (p. 211). Payne has a long way to go to support every one of these contentions, and some are clearly in the realm of false universalization (e.g., the assumption that all environmental educators ignore the the fabric and sources of students' conceptions of nature). But Payne acknowledges his paper to be preliminary and exploratory, so we can reasonably expect more carefully considered investigations of these questions to follow. In any case, Payne manages to develop insights here that are not only useful at any level, from pre-school to higher education, but in some cases, urgently needed. Environmental education has its fair share of practitioners more focused on gaining converts than on listening to and working with the environmental understandings that their students have already developed. Payne's paper can be a helpful corrective to this tendency.

I was surprised to find subtle though repeated hints of a behaviourist/dissemination approach to environmental education in several of the papers. For example, Leal Filho speaks indirectly of environmental education as providing students with "access to information that may encourage them to behave in an environmentally sound way" (p. 15), when one might expect, by the year 2000, to hear an emphasis on helping students learn how to *assess* environmental knowledge claims and *participate in the debate* concerning what *constitutes* environmentally

sound behaviour. Elsewhere, Leal Filho writes affirmingly of Towner's findings that "many people's understanding of environmental issues can be reversed by using positive messages" (p. 19) — which sounds unintendedly like brainwashing — and he emphasizes the importance of helping people to "revitalize and reinforce" their commitment "to the concept of sustainability," without mentioning the importance of helping people to critically explore different conceptions of sustainability. What is lacking here is an emphasis on environmental education as helping people to think and decide for themselves what values to hold, and how to assess among themselves the claims to environmental knowledge presented in the "information" they receive.

In the background of this and other discussions, one can glimpse the still unexorcised shadow of environmental education as the transmission of values and knowledge from the teacher or curriculum developer, who *knows*, to the student, who does *not* know and whose job is to *receive and be transformed* — to be led to behave in ways determined from on high to be environmentally sound. I don't for a moment think that Leal Filho would subscribe to these characterizations, but their presence in the vocabulary of this discourse indicates a need for explicit discussion of these issues.

Against the behaviourist/dissemination approach accidentally hinted at in these articulations and omissions, there stands the emphasis on critical thinking, constructive learning and action competence found in papers like Schnak's, Lang's, Payne's, and in most of the papers exploring student participation in greening projects, where students are recognized as being important co-constructors of environmental knowledge. It is unfortunate that Leal Filho felt it unnecessary to begin with a discussion of what he takes environmental education to be, as this may have led to a helpful confrontation with the traces of authoritarian, behaviourist approaches. But in any event, the presence of these traces shows how important it is for international conversations about environmental education to continue. Although this volume does not reflect much in the way of feedback and uptake between the various contributors, and although some of the contributions reveal a serious need for greater attention to conceptual analysis (including of 'sustainability'!) and atten-

tion to recent developments in educational research, I think this volume can provide an impetus for expanded conversations in the future. Anyone consulting it will certainly walk away with a richer sense of the variety of approaches to environmental education practice and research in the world today.



Cobb, W.H. (2000). *Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College, 1922–1940*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University. Pages: 288. Price: \$34.95 USD (hardcover).

Reviewed by Samuel Mitchell, The University of Calgary.

The period between the two wars produced a series of radical alternatives in higher education. The folk school model led to the best known survivors: the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee and the Antigonish movement in Nova Scotia. The Labor Singing School and its support for the civil rights movement made Highlander memorial, while Antigonish used traditional arts for survival and developed the cooperative movement. There were others in remote and romantic mountains of the South that did not follow the folk pattern and failed to survive including the experiential rural camp run by at New College, Teachers College Columbia, the original art and liberal arts program at Black Mountain College, and the radical attempt at social reconstruction at Commonwealth College.

Commonwealth tried to be a labor school in Ouachita Mountains, near the Ozarks of Arkansas. Its remoteness limited its appeal but it did develop an alliance with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union for several years. Beginning with a liberal education focus, it followed the Ruskin model from England and had a farm and shops where students and teachers worked for part of their day. Its most famous student, Orval Faubus, who later became governor of Arkansas, said he never experienced so many people with so many ideas and so little practical sense. Faubus attended but was not enrolled and was not typical of the many students drawn to Commonwealth from far away to realize their dreams.