

**A do-it-yourself guide to dismantling Trojan horses:
a response to national curriculum initiatives in environmental
education**

Environmental education is presently experiencing two kinds of climate change. The most obvious of these is global warming, a change that is widely anticipated (that is, imagined) but not yet experienced by most of us. The other change is in the political climate of education. Unlike the prospect of global warming this political climate change is real, immediate and chilling. Put crudely, the political climate for education no longer is dominated by 'liberating' democratic imperatives but by repressive economic considerations. I will suggest here that environmental educators may be responding to both changes in inappropriate ways.

The environmental education movement has tended to be narrowly instrumental in its responses to climate change. Predictions about global warming resulting from the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion have induced widespread community concern which many environmental educators have been all too willing to exploit for their own ends. For example, a senior office bearer in the Australian Association for Environmental Education wrote recently: 'Thank God for the greenhouse effect! While global warming isn't great news for the planet, it's worked wonders for environmental education. After the cutbacks of the 1980s... governments have finally been convinced of the importance of community education'¹. Similarly, a former Director of the Commission for the Future has claimed, with no hint of irony, that 'the Greenhouse Effect... is actually a blessing in disguise' because it has been instrumental in 'forcing us to think 40 years ahead' and promoting 'cooperative globalism' (Ellyard 1989: 2). These are not isolated examples, and the unscrupulous opportunism they represent is no more defensible than peace educators welcoming the threat of war. Even if delivered tongue-in-cheek, such statements betray a naïve instrumentalism that reduces education to being a mere palliative for social and environmental ills. Worse, the willingness with which environmental educators have (to use a particularly appropriate term) *capitalised* on community fears illustrates the extent to which civil virtues can be corrupted by the kinds of rationality that support the current economic order.

The responses of many environmental educators to changes in the political climate are no less problematic. Australia-wide moves toward a free enterprise system of education have been embraced by environmental educators willing to sacrifice their democratic social ideals for the sake of 'legitimizing' environmental education through increasingly centralised approaches to curriculum policy and program development.

Since 1975 the federal government has taken advantage of the national taxation system to make selective funding arrangements through which it has influenced various aspects of educational provision. The states have been motivated to cooperate with the federal government by economic imperatives and the desire for cost efficient ways of dealing with shared problems of teacher supply and demand and the portability of teacher and student credentials. The formation and subsequent work of the Australian Education Council (AEC) has typified the tendency for curriculum policy decisions to be made mainly by politicians and

bureaucrats rather than by educators and those who are served by education systems. This change at the national level has been replicated in most states and territories and many significant policy decisions recently have been made with little or no participation by professional educators or other members of the community.

The AEC's national goals for schooling are an exemplary product of this change in the political climate of education. A statement of national goals developed through broadly-based participatory democratic processes might have served some useful purposes in formalising directions and priorities for educational policies and programs, but this is not what the AEC has accomplished. Rather, the goals were formulated by members of the AEC and its committees and presented to the Australian people as a *fait accompli*. The process of goal formulation provided no opportunities for participation except by AEC members and the goals do not necessarily represent the aspirations of the broad constituency of stakeholders in education. For these and other reasons, the goals as they now stand are problematic. For example, the purposes which the AEC ascribes to education are predicated only on the 'social and economic needs of the country', yet these 'needs' and the collective responsibilities and interests of the nation are not articulated. The priority which the AEC accords to economic interests is characterised by goal 6 (i): '[to develop in students] an understanding of balanced development and concern for the global environment'. I doubt if the placement of 'balanced development' before 'concern for the global environment' was an arbitrary decision and environmental educators are clutching at straws if they see this goal as some kind of 'greening' of the AEC. Environmental educators should also be concerned that the goals contain no reference to issues of social class or gender and that references to Kooris and other disadvantaged groups do not extend to an interest in confronting forms of exploitation and discrimination.

Centrally prescribed goals are hazardous policy instruments for effecting any form of educational change and hold particular risks for environmental educators. Such statements tend to foreclose debate on the nature, purposes and practices of environmental education and supplant local innovations and variations with uniform prescriptions. Moreover, the hierarchical and antidemocratic patterns of authority and decision-making embedded in the AEC's mode of operation are incompatible with the collectivist and communitarian ideals of environmental education. The potentially deleterious effects of the AEC's initiatives can to some extent be anticipated from a consideration of comparable developments in the UK.

Last year the British Council for Environmental Education (CEE)² claimed that 1989 was 'a milestone year for environmental education' in the UK because 'designation as a cross-curricular theme within the National Curriculum... brought EE to the forefront of policy making in... education'. What kind of 'milestone' is it for environmental education to be incorporated into the regressive policies and structures of Britain's National Curriculum? What kinds of Faustian bargains are implicit in such 'recognition'? Acceptance of environmental education as a cross-curricular theme in the National Curriculum may not so much signify what one CEE spokesperson called 'the legitimisation it has sought for over two decades' but, rather, the assimilation of environmental education into the antidemocratic structures of social and political power nurtured by Thatcherite conservatism. The extent of

such assimilation is apparent when a prominent green activist like Jonathon Porritt (the UK Director of Friends of the Earth) is prepared to say that 'it is good to see that... the [Thatcher] government has set about defining the place of environmental education in the geography and science syllabus'. The prospect of any government (let alone the Thatcher government) 'defining the place of environmental education' in any area of school curriculum should be anything but welcome and, indeed, should be treated with a great deal of caution, suspicion and resistance.

While some environmental educators in the UK admit to feeling some apprehension about the delivery of environmental education through the National Curriculum, few seem to be alarmed. There is a lesson here for Australian environmental educators who assume that the AEC's apparent interest in environmental education is evidence of increased recognition and support for their cause. If the UK experience is anything to go by, this kind of 'recognition' is likely to be a Trojan horse. By accepting, accommodating and adopting the language of curriculum control through which economic rationalist governments pay lip-service to environmental education, environmental educators may be conspiring in the political neutralisation of their own practice.

For example, environmental educators have cooperated with the AEC's 'audit' of curriculum materials in environmental education and are continuing to collaborate in the curriculum 'mapping' exercise. There has been little criticism of either exercise (and it can be argued that the audit is deeply flawed even within its own limited terms of reference) and even less of the assumptions that underpin them. Why have the terms 'audit' and 'mapping' been used and what meanings attach to them? Is environmental education (or, indeed, any curriculum) amenable to 'auditing' and 'mapping' (with all the economic and geographic conceptual baggage that their metaphoric use insinuates)? What distortions of meaning result from subjecting (and then accommodating) the discourses and practices of environmental education to the processes of 'auditing' and 'mapping'? What essential qualities of environmental education are ignored, neglected or distorted by the AEC's mechanisms of 'auditing' and 'mapping'?

Environmental educators have a particular reason for being deeply suspicious of the arrangements for curriculum control that the AEC has initiated. The causes of many global environmental problems can be traced to the 'forms of economic production and development determined by small minorities with considerable power' and 'any genuine attempt to resolve environmental problems should therefore focus on the democratization of social structures' (Huckle 1990: 37). Thus, the only 'good' that might result from attempts by the AEC, as instruments of the existing economic order, to assimilate environmental education is the stimulus it gives to criticism of such attempts. With respect to the UK, Huckle (1990: 38) argues that:

Just as green consumerism raises questions about what constitutes 'environmentally friendly' production and consumption, so an emphasis upon environmental issues within the science or geography National Curriculum raises questions about what constitutes 'environmentally friendly' schooling. Current developments in both sites throw up contradictions to explore and generate the space within which we can advance critical forms of environmental education.

One way in which we can do this is to deconstruct the language that the AEC is imposing on environmental education and attempt to reconstruct it in ways that are more hospitable to the environmental and educational values we espouse. My preference is to use a poststructural approach (see, for example, Cherryholmes 1988, Gough 1991). The AEC's language is riddled with structuralist assumptions (such as order, accountability, systematisation, rationalisation, expertise, specialisation and line management) and ideological positions (such as commitments to economic efficiency, bureaucratic control, instrumentalism and utilitarianism). Strategically, an initial step for environmental educators to take to the AEC's initiatives is not to adopt this language uncritically but to (i) structurally analyse the meanings that are being promulgated through the AEC's language and practices, (ii) locate these meanings from historical, political, economic, cultural and linguistic perspectives and (iii) illuminate, explore, analyse and criticise the categories of discourse, modes of expression, metaphors, argumentative styles and literary allusions that this language values and celebrates.

This may seem like a tall order, but the quality of criticism which can be brought to bear on attempts to assimilate environmental education into the drive for an education-led economic 'recovery' is one of the few hopes that can be entertained for liberating environmental education from repressive power arrangements in education. There is, of course, an even more tantalising prospect: that environmental education may itself become a Trojan horse within the AEC's national curriculum initiatives. For this to happen, those who shape the discourses of environmental education must resist the erosion of their critical language and practices by the structuralist rhetoric of economic rationalism. We can attempt to do this by *insisting* on the interruption of dominant discourses and the insertion of alternative meanings into these discourses. This is already being done successfully in regard to such social justice issues as gender equity. Critical feminist educators have gone a long way towards dismantling patriarchy and reconstructing gender relationships. With a similar degree of enthusiasm and effort, critical environmental educators should be able to go some way towards deconstructing anthropocentric humanism (and the dislocation of humans from nature that is embodied in the modern Western scientific and industrial worldview) and reconstructing our relationships with the earth.

Notes

- 1 *ozEEnews: Newsletter of the Australian Association for Environmental Education*, 41, 1990, pp. 4
- 2 For full bibliographic references to all of the quotations and citations in this and the following paragraph see Gough (1990).

References

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