International Journal of Educational Research 62 (2013) 220–228

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

Schooling the World: Exploring the critical course on sustainable development through an anthropological lens

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 June 2013
Received in revised form 26 September 2013
Accepted 7 October 2013
Available online 6 November 2013

Keywords:
Anthropology
Education for sustainable development (ESD)
Environmental education
Indigenous knowledge

ABSTRACT

This article reflects on formal education for sustainable development (ESD), demonstrating how critical course on culturally diverse ways of relating to nature can contribute both to an appreciation of alternative ways of relating to nature and to a more nuanced understanding of one's own cultural and ideological positioning. This article will focus on the analysis of student reactions to the film Schooling the World, shown to students as part of this critical course. The film stimulated the discussion of the effects of Western-style education on indigenous communities. In their evaluation, the students have demonstrated their critical ability to look beyond their own neoliberal education and cosmopolitan culture. The course described in this article can serve as a blueprint for educational initiatives that combine both ethnographic insights and critical scholarship addressing environmental education and ESD.

1. Introduction

Most studies reported in Environmental Education Research (EER), The Journal of Environmental Education (JEE), Canadian Journal of Environmental Education (CJEE), as well as Journal of Education for Sustainable Development (JESD) and International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education (IJSHE) explore education in formal settings and rarely address informal, traditional or indigenous learning.

The early literature on indigenous environmental education used to focus on how to get indigenous people to acquire the wisdom of the Western scientific view of the world (Darnell, 1972; Orvik & Barnhardt, 1974). Post-colonial educational initiatives, such as missionary schools or learning facilities established by development agencies, tended to present traditional cultural learning as irrelevant for the modern world and even backward (Norberg-Hodge, 2009; Sarangapani, 2003). Rare studies have focused on recognition of traditional ways of knowing as constituting knowledge systems in their own right, with environmental learning occurring without formal regulations or standardized curriculum (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Norberg-Hodge, 1996). Instead, students were often learning nature facts actually distancing them from the emotional experience of nature known in traditional societies (Anderson, 2012; Milton, 2002). As opposed to more traditional forms of learning about environment, modern learning takes a short-term, narrow view of resource management instead of a long-term, global view of "ecotopia"—a conception in which the destructive corollaries of consumerism are curbed by emotionally grounded policies and ethics of sustainability, social justice, and stewardship (Anderson, 2010). In a similar vein, many anthropologists have argued that the idea of 'progress' embedded in mainstream discussion of

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0883-0355/$ – see front matter © 2013 Published by Elsevier Ltd.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2013.10.002

sustainable development, is relative to the culture that produces it and that the enterprise of development actually creates social inequalities and imbalance between humans and environment (Lewis, 2005).

Additionally, students of Western-style education for sustainable development (ESD) are often exposed to the essentially instrumental and anthropocentric view of nature as a 'natural resources' or 'ecosystem service' (Kopnina, 2012b). In the words of Bonnett (2013, p. 195), in the age of metaphysics of mastery, it is the 'scientism' that 'increasingly allowed to presume a fundamentality in terms both of setting up environmental issues and of structuring the environment of education'.

Until recently there was little literature that addressed how to get Western educators and students to appreciate the alternative cross-cultural worldviews in relation to nature (Noblit, 2013). Neither is there extensive literature on how the education helps students approach environmental sustainability through deeper understanding of cultural and biological diversity (Shao-Chang Wee, 2013).

This article attempts to fill this gap reflecting on the case study is based on classroom ethnography (Watson-Gegeo, 1997) of the critical course for the Bachelors students of the International Business Management Studies (IBMS) at The Hague University in The Netherlands for twelve weeks during September and December 2012. This critical course involved viewing the documentary film *Schooling the World* by Black (2010), which was used as one of the many exercises in self-reflection for a group of international business students who followed sustainable business minor.

The film presents the case of the development agency-sponsored Western-style school in a remote village in Ladakh, a small country in the northern Indian Himalayas. The question posed in the film is: if you wanted to change an ancient culture in a generation, how would you do it? According to the filmmakers, the answer to this question is 'You would change the way it educates its children'. The film commentators are, anthropologist and ethnobotanist Wade Davis, a National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence; Helena Norberg-Hodge and Vandana Shiva, both recipients of the Right Livelihood Award for their work with traditional peoples in India; and Manish Jain, a former architect of education programs with UNESCO, USAID, and the World Bank. The film presents Western education and the rhetoric of (sustainable) development as a form of neo-colonialism, in which students are increasingly indoctrinated in neoliberal ideology. Commentators in the film suggested that indigenous learning may provide an alternative.

This film was used to trigger in-class discussions, making alternative visions of culturally variable relationship to nature comprehensible to international students of (sustainable) business.

In the following sections we shall briefly discuss formal and informal education and reflect on how anthropologists can contribute to the research in these areas. We shall then turn to the in-class discussions and written assignments to reflect upon the critical course, and particularly the film Schooling the World.

2. Schooling the World: Educating for sustainable development

The United Nations declared 2005–2015 to be 'the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development' (UNESCO, 2009). Cepek (2011) argues that not governments but communally and culturally significant practices mark success of environmental learning and questions the concept of "environmentality"—the idea that environmentalist programs and movements operate as forms of governmentality in Michel Foucault's sense.

Some educational researchers have highlighted that the concept of sustainable development neglects traditional forms of environmentality and reduces our relationships with nature to instrumental use of it. ESD tends to focus on social and economic aspects of sustainability, emphasizing absolute poverty reduction, social equality, and other aspects of social justice that tend to relate to environment as natural resource that would enable transformation toward a more just society. For example, Adams (2012 in Blewitt & Tilbury, 2013, p. 134) identified seven global frames where education needs to be a meaningful ingredient: ending poverty, equity and inclusion, economic growth and jobs, getting to zero, global minimum entitlements, sustainable development, and wellbeing and quality of life. Education for conservation and sustainable development often mentions the same aspects, without explicit mention of biodiversity conservation (Blewitt & Tilbury, 2013). In this context, sustainability simply becomes a matter of human welfare in preserving human resources for future generations of humans (Kronlid & Öhman, 2013), a manifestation of 'metaphysics of mastery' (Bonnett, 2013). The normalization of idea of natural resources embedded in the concept of sustainable development, according to its critics, negates traditional values that saw humans to be part of nature and perpetuates the idea of human superiority According to Crist (2012), the foundational belief of human supremacy manifests itself most clearly in the attitude of total entitlement that can hardly be challenged because it claims both consensual power *and* morality on its side. In this paradigm, the paradoxes of sustainable development are rarely discussed.

> While "raising the standard of living" may be nebulous shorthand for the worthy aim of ending severe deprivation, translated into shared understanding and policy the expression is a euphemism for the global dissemination of consumer culture-the unrivaled model of what a "high standard of living" looks like. But to feed a growing population and enter increasing numbers of people into the consumer class is a formula for completing the Earth's overhaul into a planet of resources... (Crist, 2012, p. 143).

In his article on the role of nature in ESD, Bonnett (2007, p. 720) has argued that ideally environmental education should be essentially concerned with an understanding and appreciation of the environment and the significance of the natural