

Environmental Education

Should Action Be A Goal? No

By Jo Kwong

What should be the role, if any, of "public action" or "activism" in environmental education? This question hits at the heart of the "great divide" on environmental education perspectives. So-called critics of environmental education (I, apparently, am one) have decidedly different ideas about the behavioral and action components than do many full-time environmental educators.

Generally speaking, environmental education or EE is an interdisciplinary process with the goal of equipping people with the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and motivation they need to help resolve environmental issues. As two EE experts, John Disinger and Martha Monroe, have pointed out, environmental education is "at odds with traditional educational practice" (Disinger and Monroe, p. 7). It is more than education. It's about effecting behavioral change. This aspect is the source of endless controversy in the EE community.

The emphasis on values and attitudes stems from the EE community's frustration with environmental inaction by today's citizens. Research suggests that despite twenty or so years of environmental awareness and education, people have not substantially changed their value systems. This has led some educators to believe that since knowledge alone will not foster responsible behavior towards the environment, they must change people's values and attitudes. More and more, environmental literacy is defined not by knowledge, but by observable behaviors (Roth, Ch. 2). This is simply going too far in my perspective. We're getting into the very area that I am uncomfortable with. I agree that children should be taught about the environment starting from a young age, and it should be an ongoing, integrated process in their formal and informal education. But I do believe that proper education in the traditional sense provides a sufficient basis for developing sound and acceptable human beings. I support an educational system that fosters a diversity of values, not only in the classroom, but in our communities as well. Such diversity allows for the greatest exploration of solutions to problems. Few problems have only one "right" solution. If a discipline comes with its own set of values, how do we decide whose values are to be taught? What should parents do if they disagree with the selected values?

Perhaps this gets at the crux of the controversy. As one colleague said to me, "We were so-called traditionally educated and look what it got us. A grossly polluted environment." But that may simply be another way of saying, "We don't like the choices people have made and we'd like to ensure that future generations don't have that range of choices to make." I'm not arguing that we've done a perfect job in preserving and protecting the environment, but people have generally done the best they could with the knowledge they had. Their choices may not be the ones that environmental educators wish had been made. Yet I would argue that the school system is not the place to wage this battle! The market system in which consumers choose goods and services and the democratic system in which voters choose to support or reject laws, regulations or candidates, offer far better opportunities.

Some colleagues insist that an emphasis on values, skills, and behavior is needed to teach such citizenship skills. But why do we need an entire environmental education discipline to teach citizenship skills? Isn't there enough substance to teach without the overwhelming focus on behavioral changes and action? And there is no shortage of civics teaching in the grade schools.

Now, the EE behaviorists may contend that it's not specific behavioral changes, but simply the intellectual and psychological psyche, that is being pursued. Here again, I disagree. Let me use the example of recycling.

Starting with the very first crop of pre-school children, songs are sung, dances are danced, and games are played--all to the tune of recycling. But most young kids seem to think recycling means putting paper in the recycling bin or toting newspapers to the curb for pick up. The recycled stuff disappears and is no longer their concern. I personally had a hard time broadening my kids' understanding of recycling. When their first grade teacher gave them the assignment to create an object from a recyclable material, I reminded them that we're not doing the environment any favor by recycling just to create things for the act of recycling. We have to use what we recycle! My kids wanted me to discard the milk out of the carton so they could use the container. That's recycling?

Children are learning a behavior--to look for a recycling bin rather than a trash can--but they don't necessarily understand the broader context. Another example came up at an environmental conference for congressional staffers. When the topic of letter-writing campaigns came up, a round of chuckles and smiles flowed around the room as each shared their stories of receiving buckets of identical letters. How broad was the knowledge base and how narrow was the range of acceptable behaviors?

At a conference for environmental educators sponsored by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, I was pleased to see a session on critical thinking that offered a multi-step process for getting high school students kids to look at all perspectives of a problem. How disappointed I was to work through the process, however, and see the very directed and limited range of thinking. The teacher proposed the hypothesis: "Overpopulation is the source of all environmental problems." Her perspective was quite clear, so I asked her if she would have accepted well-reasoned arguments contrary to her position. Thinking that I could not possibly disagree with her view that overpopulation is the root of all problems, she responded, "Of course, I'd never let them get that far. I'd control them with the books they'd be allowed to read."

Already, I hear the screams of "Anecdotal!" coming from those that disagree with me. Nonetheless, my point is that the emphasis on behavior, while perhaps well-intended and laudable if properly executed, can easily be misused.

Environmental education is valuable and necessary. Starting from a very young age, children should be taught about the environment that surrounds them. As they grow, their environmental backyard and awareness should grow. Their education should be sequential and integrated with core disciplines. In addition to a sound knowledge base, students should be taught critical thinking skills and recognize that they have the right to act on their beliefs if they so choose. But environmental education should be education, not advocacy. Their action and behavior should not be a dictate handed down by a ruling establishment. Such is the privilege of living in a free society.

References

Disinger, John F., and Martha Monroe. 1994. "Defining Environmental Education." *EE Toolbox*. Ann Arbor: National Consortium for Environmental Education and Training.

Roth, Charles E. 1992. *Environmental Literacy: Its Roots, Evolution and Directions in the 1990s*, rev. ed. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse for Science, Mathematics, and Environmental Education.

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