Viewpoint
On the Personal, Social and Environmental… A Response to Alistair Chadwick's Viewpoint Responding to Destructive Interpersonal Interactions: A way forward for school–based environmental educators

Eureta Rosenberg,
Rhodes University Research Fellow, South Africa

There seems to be an emerging dislocation in views on environment.
This is manifesting in a tendency to separate out the social from the biophysical and
social becomes an environmental issue in its own right, and because
social issues are so prominent and dominant in society, the
biophysical seems to be… oppositionalised and discarded as…
'irrelevant' or something we should attend to once the social issues
have been resolved.
(Lotz–Sisitka, 2004, pers. comm.)

Abstract

A decade or so ago, at the Earth Summit and the advent of South Africa's democracy, there were great efforts to help us understand ecological issues in relation to social issues. Much work was done to reorient those initiatives which taught about nature and ecosystems as if people and politics did not matter. Now, as we enter a 'Decade of Education for Sustainable Development', we run the danger of finding environmental education apparently everywhere, but actually nowhere. Environmental education processes must develop and deepen our understanding of the interrelationships involving our bio-physical world. This is a unique contribution to education and its reorientation. Yet we may lose this contribution in the wake of a movement to re-direct environmental education activities to focus on the dire personal and social problems affecting learners and teachers. This Viewpoint briefly considers aspects of this trend and its possible causes and consequences. It also suggests how environmental educators can get on with their particular task, and bring it appropriately to bear on the personal problems and social issues so prevalent in our schools.

Introduction

There is a trend in South Africa (and perhaps more widely in the region) to describe a broadening range of processes as environmental education – even if their focus and substance have no or only very indirect bearing on the 'environment', that is, the inter-relations between our social and bio–physical worlds.[1]

The Viewpoint by Alistair Chadwick in this volume may be part of the same trend. When one writes something, it reflects only a tip of an iceberg. When one responds to that writing, you may have to respond to more than the tip.

Elsewhere (*EEASA Bulletin*, August 2004) I have expressed concern about this trend. It is likely to create an unfortunate situation where environmental education processes are in theory 'everywhere', but in reality 'nowhere'. Here I reiterate my views on the trend of indiscriminately lining up educational activities which exclusively address social issues like abuse and intolerance under the banner of 'environmental education'. I will go on to explain why I regard as inappropriate Chadwick's proposed response to such issues, which is to diagnose and treat them as 'intra- and inter-personal'.

First, I should explain that I do not deny the prominence of grim social issues in South African schools, nor the importance of emotional and relational matters in environmental issues and responses.

Emotional Matters

Emotions undeniably play a role in our ability to learn, and in our responses to environmental issues. So does our ability to form sound inter-personal relations. We need a range of social and intellectual skills and emotional abilities in order to engage effectively in our worlds, for example to understand and tackle a pressing environmental issue. This is part of the basis for Chadwick's Viewpoint, and is not being disputed. The importance of getting along effectively with others, of understanding emotions and of tackling unconstitutional values, is indeed well recognised by the South African Department of Education, as I'll elaborate later.

Also, few South Africans would not regard violence, crime and the development of constitutional values as key concerns in almost every context across the country. The British research quoted by Chadwick is an indication of the global nature of these concerns, but South Africa might be a special case in point... here the senior politician tasked with leading government's moral regeneration initiative remains popular despite mounting allegations of the improper use of public funds, including an arms procurement transaction which had itself been questioned on ethical grounds in the context of national priorities like poverty.

Environment Matters, Too

With the advent of political change in the early 1990s, there were great efforts to help South Africans understand ecological issues (like polluted water) *in relation to* social issues (e.g. polluting industries which disregard human and environmental health). Much work was done to reorient those environmental education initiatives which taught about nature and ecosystems as if people and politics did not matter (see Box 1).

At our current point of growth as an educational endeavour (including the introduction of a United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development), there is need to caution against treating social issues as if they can be *separated from, oppositionalised with and prioritised above* ecological issues. This would mean losing all the ground we gained by exploring and

demonstrating *their inter-connectedness*. Similarly, we cannot start orienting environmental education initiatives to focus on learners' personal feelings and inter-personal problems as if these must be addressed *before* we can consider the socio-ecological environment in which we live and relate.

There is a common perception that 'you first need to take care of yourself before you can take care of the environment', as stated at a drug counselling talk at a recent World Environment Week event. Why does one preclude the other? When even Grade 1 learners[2] can be expected to close a tap tightly after they've washed their hands, because 'water is precious; it keeps us clean and healthy'? What would happen if governments argued that they must *first* address poverty, employment and health, *before* they can address land degradation and pollution? Consider how one would do this, and you'll realise what an inappropriate choice is being set up here. Poverty, for example, cannot be addressed without tackling the land degradation processes which exacerbate it (see Rosenberg, 2004, for an elaboration). Many governments do argue this way, and continue to fail to solve poverty and unemployment. Juxtaposing 'loss of biodiversity' with 'child abuse' is therefore, in my view, an irresponsible rhetorical strategy.

Box 1. Historical perspective on 'environment' in environmental education

In the early 1990s there was a strong critique of those environmental education practices which failed to recognise that people were part of nature, and that politics had to be examined in order to tackle environmental issues. Many embraced the idea in the groundswell of politically progressive environmental education that followed the 1992 Earth Summit, and the policy processes surrounding South Africa's socio-political transformation. As part of the Environmental Education Policy Initiative, Rob O'Donoghue published a diagramme (Figure 1) to help us clarify that *there are connections* between the biophysical base of life and its economic, political and other social dimensions.

The aims were to probe the inter-relatedness relevant to environmental education and to show that the biophysical world was indeed important in processes of social development, because it could not be separated from them. Now the same diagramme is used to claim that we can teach about social matters without any reference to biophysical connections, and still validly call our activity environmental education.

Figure 1. A diagramme (adapted from O'Donoghue, 1993) developed in the early 1990s as a tool to help us clarify the inter-relationships relevant to environmental education
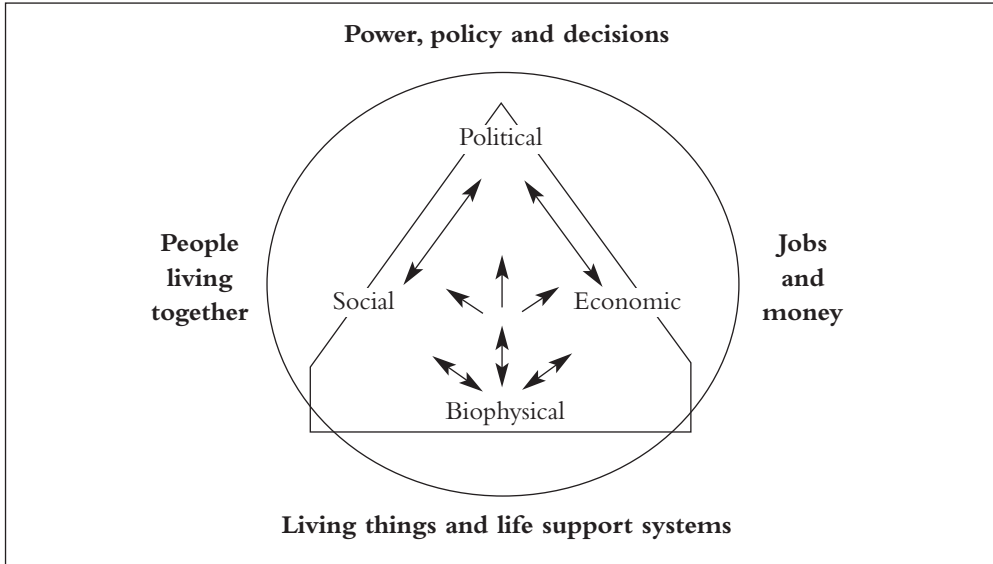
Similarly inappropriate is the following 'slippages' in Chadwick's Viewpoint (and their corollaries in our wider professional community):

- Using the term 'a healthy classroom environment' in relation to the principle of 'a healthy environment' which underpins the Revised National Curriculum Statement[3] (Department of Education, 2002a).
- Referring, in the same context, to 'a safe environment' while meaning a safe space for expressing feelings.

A supportive atmosphere is certainly necessary, and hard to find in many schools. But children *also* need a clean atmosphere free of pollutants, and a space safe from harmful wastes. When will we talk about these matters, if environmental education processes are now also required to focus on emotional upsets?

The consequences of bundling every necessary educational focus under the label 'environmental education' include:

- Diffusion creating confusion: If we call our initiatives 'environmental education', but we do nothing different from life skills educators or social workers, how should teachers and education officials understand our particular contribution? Suggesting to a teacher that creating an atmosphere conducive to learning is a way of addressing the curriculum principle 'A healthy environment' misinterprets the policy and does the teacher a disservice; s/he needs to do both, and s/he needs to understand the difference!
- Ecological matters receiving scant and/or inappropriate attention in schools, if teachers come to call everything they do environmental education, because we submit that 'environment is everything'.

- Lack of accountability to funders who support environmental education initiatives because they have a mandate to address socio-ecological (environmental) issues; it is hard to see how they would distinguish the kind of work Chadwick proposes from other social development and educational support initiatives.

Education and environmental education

Dewey's suggestion that education must be 'holistic' is widely accepted, and often stated as the need to develop 'skills, values, attitudes and knowledge' and 'educating the whole person'. In the South African education system, teachers are meant to be not only subject specialists, managers and administrators, but also 'pastors' (Department of Education, 2002b:9), indicating their role in giving moral guidance and responding to the emotional needs of learners. In recognition that the emotional and spiritual development of the learner cannot be adequately addressed through the general subjects, a Learning Area which specifically addresses life skills (among other aspects), is part of GET. Life Orientation, as it is called, is one of only three subjects which are compulsory also in the FET band – indicating that country-wide calls for helping learners to understand, deal with and rectify emotional and ethical concerns, have indeed been heard at a policy level.

The Department of Education (2001) produced a *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* which highlights fundamental values of the Constitution, including:

- Democracy.
- Social justice and equity.
- Respect.
- The rule of law.
- Reconciliation.
- Non-racism and non-sexism.
- *Ubuntu* (human dignity).
- An open society.

The *Manifesto* identifies 16 strategies for familiarising young people to these values, including:

- Nurturing a culture of communication and participation in schools.
- Role-modelling: promoting commitment as well as competence among educators.
- Promoting anti-racism in schools.
- Dealing with HIV/AIDS and nurturing a culture of sexual and social responsibility.
- Making schools safe to learn and teach in and ensuring the rule of law.
- Infusing the classroom with a culture of human rights.
- Ensuring that every South African can read, write and think.
- Promoting ethics and the environment.

South Africa's Constitutional values find expression in the new curricula through the required critical outcomes, developmental outcomes and learning outcomes for each of the learning areas. As those familiar with South African schools know, however, these policy ideals are in reality not always evident, and Chadwick reminds us of the daily incidences of racism,

sexism, intolerance, lawlessness, abuse and other forms of violence which many teachers and learners experience. His suggestion includes taking the national policies into school policies, structures and processes. This could be a useful dimension of the multi-pronged approach which is undoubtedly required.

I have not yet seen the value of more local-level policies and structures, but they might make a difference in some situations. School policies could remind those teachers who fail to promote constitutional values and sound interpersonal relationships, of the national policy directive. As Chadwick hints, part of the problem is that many teachers themselves lack the desired values, emotional insights and interpersonal skills. These are however difficult to 'enforce' with policy directives. What I have seen time and again is the value of the 'role-modelling' of commitment, care and respect which so many environmental educators embody in their way of work. Environmental education processes which focus on helping learners understand and respond to socio-ecological issues can address most of the strategies outlined in the Department's *Manifesto*. I am much less confident about the value of environmental education processes which 'include a focus on interpersonal problems and... explicit opportunities for learners to express difficult emotions constructively'. I will explain why in the next section.

The above has shown that South African teachers have indeed been tasked to address the personal and social development of learners as part of general and further education. Chadwick acknowledges this, but indicates that not enough is being done, and therefore environmental learning should also be rallied to address the cause. His quest seems to be that, since life skills activities are not succeeding in resolving personal traumas and improving inter-personal relationships in schools, the principle of a healthy environment, and the resources and learning outcomes meant to address environmental learning, should also (or rather) be used to develop learners' life skills for recognising, expressing and handling emotions and social issues, and for understanding the way these impact on learning.

Environmental educators should get on with the job of environmental education: planning and conducting environmental education processes with recognition of the role of personal and inter-personal issues, but not side-tracked to *focus* on these, or bundling them into an unwieldy burden of 'important things to address'. It has long been argued that 'good education is environmental education', meaning that sound, holistic educational processes will address environmental concerns and responses centrally. This does not imply that 'environmental education is all the education a person needs'. Chadwick notes that 'environmental education processes are central to good education' and proceeds to interpret that as 'environmental education is synonymous with (equivalent in meaning to) good education'. With this conceptual slippage we turn environmental education into a meaningless concept and destroy its *raison d'etre*.[4]

The concepts of 'education' and 'environmental education' are related, but they are distinct. One of the relations between the two concepts is that environmental education is aimed at re-orienting education (in general). The question now is – in what way?

The role of environmental education processes in dealing with interpersonal matters
The re-orientation of education (in the interest of environmental sustainability) is not in my view best served by focussing more on the self and personal emotions. This particular approach

to 'life skills' has a number of limitations relating to the 'pscyhologising' of issues and individualism.

Diagnosing issues ranging from the neglect of children to domestic violence as 'psychological' is a dangerous form of reductionism. It ignores, for example, economic circumstances and social norms which can create and support such situations.[5] It positions individuals as singularly responsible for problems and their resolution. This way of understanding problems is part of the individualising turn which is traversing the globe along with the Oprah Winfrey Show, Northern-sponsored educational reform and market economy principles. Significantly, individualism as a social value has been implicated in many environmental issues (see Orr, 1990) ranging from consumerism to unjust wealth creation by exploiting workers and natural resources in the interest of 'shareholder values'.

In developing the Life Orientation curriculum for South Africa's GET band we tempered the individualising orientation of the life skills movement. Thus the departure point for this version of Life Orientation is not 'The Self', but 'Self-in-Society', in keeping with the curriculum principle that 'a person is a person through other people'.[6] This means, for example, that the learning outcome for Personal Development requires learners to understand their personal and interpersonal concerns in relation to communal and wider contexts.[7]

Environmental education makes us aware of inter-relatedness: between plants and soils; between people and plants; between people, plants, prosperity and policies; and so on. It helps us understand that our actions are constrained and enabled by socio-ecological circumstances including political history, cultural traditions and economic resources. That is why, in a rubbish-strewn settlement, environmental education processes would go beyond treating people as simply 'unaware', to engaging them in dialogue about how best to improve facilities and resources, and critically reviewing traditions and influences which shape actions and habits like dumping and littering. Such dialogue and critical reflection also helps people move beyond the rhetorical blaming of systems (like apartheid or poverty) which can prevent us from making those improvements which are within our power.[8]

The Life Orientation curriculum includes three learning outcomes: Personal Development, Social Development, and Health Promotion; the last of these looking at the health of the individual, the community and the environment. These learning outcomes should be taught in combination, rather than separately. For example, in a group project in which learners explore a local environmental health problem (such as water pollution) they might also explore conflict resolution and problem-solving strategies (assessed towards Learning Outcome 3, Personal Development, and not towards Learning Outcome 1, Health Promotion), and tolerance for diversity in the group (assessed as Learning Outcome 2, Social Development).

It is the role of environmental educators who work with school-based educators to strengthen teachers' capacity related to environmental health (in this case, water pollution in all its social, economic, political and ecological complexity). If we additionally, or instead, take upon ourselves the role of life skills educators, counsellors and social workers, we can only hope that someone else continues with environmental education.

Box 2. Re-orienting educational responses to personal issues – an illustration

Leti cannot concentrate on her environmental project. She is thinking about her boyfriend, T.K. Her parents think he is a no-good criminal and, true, he does have a rough side, but she does not really mind, because he spoils her with cash and clothes. The problem is, last night he beat her badly and now her parents are going wild.

How does a teacher approach the situation?

The approach proposed in Chadwick's Viewpoint would entail getting Leti to express her feelings in a supportive situation, and reflect on her feelings and those of the other role players. What would be the likely result?

I believe that Leti might learn from such reflections that she has a right to be happy, and perhaps also that she has a low self-esteem. She might reflect (rightly or wrongly) that her father is jealous because he cannot provide for his family as well as T.K. As far as T.K.'s feelings are concerned, she might simply reflect that he was angry with her, that he knows he can get any girl and that she should toe the line if she wants to stay his favourite. She might note that her mother and teachers care deeply for her, but also that they cannot keep her safe in the world out there – and even an education cannot guarantee her future security. Having her right to be happy and secure affirmed, but learning little new from her reflections, Leti might just confirm that she needs money in her wallet and to look good by T.K.'s side, and that no one has much else to contribute.

This scenario is fictional (though supported by reviews of women's experiences[9]). I use it to illustrate the possible – I believe likely – outcomes of the proposed 'express and reflect' educational strategy for dealing with issues.

Reflection is a critical capacity not widespread in our society. It is perhaps best taught in the context of issues and information which provide learners with principles and parameters. To simply express and reflect on feelings with little input from a teacher does not necessarily constitute dialogue and is not sufficient for learning better ways to respond to issues. Dialogue would engage learners and encourage them to look behind and beyond feelings; reviewing their origins and probing their consequences against a range of considerations and alternative possibilities. Leti might develop a more useful understanding of her inter- and intrapersonal relationships through dialogue and reflection on how sexism in traditional and contemporary cultures *shapes* her 'personal' feelings about what is right, wrong and possible – for example.

What is the environmental educator's approach to the above scenario? If her environmental project was well supported by an educator, Leti's understanding of herself and the world could have benefited from exploring how advertising that fuels the consumption of natural resources, plays into deep-seated values and shapes a common understanding that consumer goods are the ultimate route to happiness. Learners (and therefore their teachers) need considerable information (of the kind often described as 'environmental') to be able to understand these and

other ways in which dominant economic systems and underlying values create the situations where young women need the goodwill of men for a sense of (and real) security. Environmental education processes must help us develop and deepen our understanding of such wider inter-relationships. It is still a unique contribution to education and to the re-orientation of education, as a review of the South African education policy illustrates. We are not only failing to implement this policy if we reduce environmental education to simply dealing with what seems most prominent in the moment; we are also failing our beleaguered youth.

Notes on the Contributor

Dr Eureta Rosenberg is a consultant on environmental education and research based in Cape Town. She served in the Working Group who developed the Life Orientation curriculum for the Revised National Curriculum Statement for GET in South Africa. Her academic background includes an Honours Degree in Psychology. Email: eureta@worldonline.co.za.

Endnotes

1   I draw here on the ever-useful definition of 'environment' by Giovanna DiChiro (1987).

2   See Learning Outcome 1 of the South African Life Orientation (Life Skills) curriculum for Grade 1s, which requires learners to 'Explain steps to ensure personal hygiene and link these steps to environmental health' (Department of Education, 2002a:16).

3   The South African curriculum for GET is underpinned by the values, described as inter-related, of A Healthy Environment, Social Justice, Human Rights, and Inclusivity (Department of Education, 2002b). This curriculum dictates to all Learning Areas (subjects) learning outcomes which directly and indirectly address environmental learning, in which 'environment' is interpreted as the biophysical world on which people and their economies depend. The curriculum refers to environmental issues as distinct from (although related to) social issues, social justice and human rights issues. That is, one issue can have both environmental and human rights implications, but *not all social justice or human rights issues are necessarily also environmental issues.*

4   The reason for or purpose of a thing's existence (Oxford Paperback Dictionary, 1994).

5   Chadwick refers briefly to the historical and social roots of 'interpersonal' issues, but does not include them in his educational approach to these issues.

6   Attributed to the Nguni value of *Ubuntu*, which has equivalents in many other African societies.

7   Grade 6 learners must explain causes of communicable diseases (such as HIV/AIDS) '*in relation to community norms and personal values*' (Department of Education, 2002a:29). Grade 7 learners must 'Discuss the personal feelings, *community norms, values and social pressures* associated with sexuality' (p.40, emphases added).

8   Individual learners are seldom able to resolve social and even interpersonal issues (e.g. violence from the father of a poverty-stricken household); the individual's power to deal with such matters constructively is increased by an understanding of the bigger picture (e.g. understanding patriarchy and unjust economic relations helps to overcome shame and empowers the individual to seek help).

9   See, e.g., Leclerc-Madlala, 2001.

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