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Think Piece
Re-badged Environmental Education: Is ESD more than just a slogan?

Ian Robottom, Deakin University, Australia

Introduction

In the field of environment-related education, the period from the early 1970s to the present is marked by both continuity and contestation. There has been a remarkable continuity of interest in linking education and environment (especially, but not only, in schools); and there has also been contestation and resultant evolution in the language of the field, with terms like ecology education, environmental education and education for sustainable development becoming highly visible at different times. Environment-related education represents an interesting case in educational innovation – one being played out at an international level.

In particular, we are currently in the throes of a situation in which the environment-related work formerly known as 'environmental education' (EE) is being aggressively and extensively 're-badged' as 'education for sustainable development' (ESD). There are strong attempts internationally to supplant the use of the term EE with the newer term ESD; most of these attempts are associated with the current international United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) runs for the period 2005–2014, and is gathering pace across the world (Selby, 2006). Speaking at the international launch of DESD in New York in March 2005, UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura suggested that

> The ultimate goal of the Decade is that education for sustainable development is more than just a slogan. It must be a concrete reality for all of us – individuals, organizations, governments – in all our daily decisions and actions, so as to promise a sustainable planet and a safer world to our children, our grandchildren and their descendants… Education will have to change so that it addresses the social, economic, cultural and environmental problems that we face in the 21st century. (UNESCO, 2005:2)

Now that the United Nations has taken this concept on board in such a significant way in proclaiming a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, ESD is clearly supplanting environmental education in the language of environment-related education.

What does this change in language mean, and what lessons can be learned from the 'environmental education' experience for the proponents of the newer term 'education for sustainable development'? We could ask whether the evolution in the language of the field has been accompanied by real change in educational practices beyond the changes in descriptors

– beyond mere language (including its more institutionalised forms of discourse and policy) to levels of organisation and, especially, practice. And if these changes in language, discourse and policy are not attended by related qualitative changes in practice, how may the significant time and expense involved in the Decade be justified? Vocationally, in terms of opening up new careers for academics and international policy consultants? Politically, in terms of creating at least a perception of development in the field? Or economically, in that the changes in language/descriptors of the field have resulted in more palatable terms and concepts for potential funding agencies?

In this paper I'd like to present a perspective on the effects of the language of the field of environmental education, and from this to pose some critical questions concerning the re-badging of 'environmental education' as 'education for sustainable development'. How may this major shift in language be understood? What are we to make of the UNESCO Director-General's assertion that 'The ultimate goal of the Decade is that education for sustainable development is more than just a slogan'?

The Slogan System in Educational Reform

The work of Tom Popkewitz on 'slogan systems' in educational reform may be useful in seeking to understand the major shift in language in environment-related work.

In exploring instances of school reform and institutional life, Popkewitz (1982) refers to the 'myth of educational reform' and proposes the role of 'slogan systems' as one key agent in the maintenance of changeless reform:

> In many cases reform activities take on ceremonial or symbolic functions. The rational approach offered by reform program demonstrates to the public that schools are acting to carry out their socially mandated purpose, and that the procedures and strategies of reform offer dramatic evidence of an institution's power to order and control change. But the ceremonies and rituals of the formal school organization may have little to do with the actual schoolwork or with the teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom…
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> The legitimizing function of reform can be clarified by examining the symbolic nature of slogans. The terms 'individualization', 'discovery approaches,' and 'participation' are slogans, each of which symbolizes to educators a variety of emotions, concepts and values, just as terms like 'democracy' and 'national security' symbolize the values and aspirations of political groups. Slogans, however, are symbolic, not descriptive: they do not tell us what is actually happening… Reform ban be a symbolic act that conserves rather than changes. (Popkewitz, 1982:20)

The slogan system notion was originally proposed to expose changeless reform (adoption of a new and high-impact name in absence of any real change in practice). For Popkewitz, adoption of an active, high-profile slogan has at times been associated with a process whereby practitioners seek the benefits accompanying a concept that carries contemporary popularity

(and an instantly recognisable name-as-slogan) by simply adopting the slogan symbolically, while retaining practice in largely unchanged form.

The Slogan System in Environmental Education

As is well known, environmental education has been defined in terms of three dimensions, 'education *about* the environment', 'education *in* the environment', and 'education *for* the environment'. Interpretation of environmental education in terms of either of the first two dimensions ('about' or 'in') enables, encourages and justifies certain environment-related activity to be engaged in – and environmental education said to be happening because these activities are taking place – within teaching/learning situations that are conventional in terms of their disciplinary structure, informational content and teacher/student interactions. These activities are recognised as being environmentally *educational* (their coherence with educational structures and practices fosters this interpretation); they are, however, not distinctively *environmental* education in the sense of 'education *for* the environment'. Of the three dimensions, 'education *about* the environment' is far more readily assimilated into existing structures and practices than 'education *for* the environment'. The generic nature of the term 'environmental education' permits an equivocation about what will actually happen and thus encourages change that is symbolic only.

That is, in the case of environmental education, precisely because there have been three accepted approaches to environmental education practice (of course there is overlap between these) it is possible (and completely acceptable) for EE practitioners to employ the label of EE to describe their practice in any (or all) of these approaches. Given that 'education *about* the environment' is closest to established practice for most teachers, is closely aligned to existing school structures and is perhaps less demanding, it is no surprise that most activity conducted in the name of environmental education is along the lines of 'education *about* the environment'. The slogan system in EE permits and perhaps encourages practitioners as a group to emphasise 'education *about* the environment' to a greater extent than the more reformist 'education *for* the environment'. An outcome of this is that environmental education tends to reproduce a conservative scientific (and perhaps scientistic) perspective on environmental issues and their resolution.

This situation then invites critique from commentators who perceive an emphasis in environmental education practice on awareness development ('education *about* the environment') as a failure, noting a lack of attention to social and economic considerations. Some authors (for instance, Walker, 1997) suggest that the 'social change' agenda of 'education *for* the environment' is too demanding for teachers and schools, while others base a warrant for another environment-related reform effort (education for sustainable development) on this perceived lack of attention to social and economic considerations. For example, Tilbury (2004:103) argues that:

> [ESD] differs from commonly practiced environmental education approaches in that it [ESD] goes beyond addressing values and attitudes of the individual to build their capacity for instigating and managing change.

And the UNESCO Director-General in 2005 is even more direct:

> Education will have to change so that it addresses the social, economic, cultural and environmental problems that we face in the 21st century. (UNESCO, 2005:2)

However, what is interesting about these arguments for ESD is that they are not comparing apples with apples. Inspection of the institutionalised language of environmental education reveals that it is in fact clearly concerned with social, economic and political dimensions of environmental issues. For example, UNESCO reports in 1978 assert that:

> 1. Whereas it is a fact that biological and physical features constitute the natural basis of the human environment, its ethical, social, cultural and economic dimensions also play their part in determining the lines of approach and the instruments whereby people may understand and make better use of natural resources in satisfying their needs. ...
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> 3. A basic aim of environmental education is to succeed in making individuals and communities understand the complex nature of the natural and the built environments resulting from the interaction of their biological, physical, social, economic and cultural aspects, and acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, and practical skills to participate in a responsible and effective way in anticipating and solving environmental problems, and the management of the quality of the environment. ...
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> 5. Special attention should be paid to understanding the complex relations between socio-economic development and the improvement of the environment. (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978:2)

In criticising environmental education, ESD protagonists cannot base their warrant for ESD on the basis of a critique of the established *language* of environmental education; rather they point to what they see as inadequacies in environmental education *practice*, and then proceed to argue for a *new language* of environment-related work (ESD). This leaves unaddressed the issue of just what form successful ESD practice would take.

In summary so far:

- the language of environmental education embraces three dimensions of environment-related work, which in turn invite a range of interpretations at the level of practice;
- one of these dimensions emphasises engagement of social and economic aspects of environmental issues;
- practice in environmental education is perceived as failing to adequately engage the social and economic aspects emphasised in the language of environmental education;
- this situation is advanced as an argument for a new language of environment-related work – education for sustainable development; and
- this argument depends on a comparison of ESD language with EE practice.

A relevant question now is whether the language of education for sustainable development is

any more effective than environmental education in enabling reform in environment-related educational practice, or will it constitute yet another slogan system, contrary to the expectation of UNESCO that: 'The ultimate goal of the Decade is that education for sustainable development is more than just a slogan'?

The Slogan System in Education for Sustainable Development

According to recent literature, the ESD concept rests on 'the three pillars' of ecology, society and economics. Put another way, ESD sees sustainability issues as located conceptually at the intersection of three sets of contending human interests – ecological, social and economic (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004; UNESCO, 2004; DEH, 2005). Sustainability issues consist of arguments among proponents of these three kinds of interests. In addition, an important consideration when resolving these contending interests is the need to reconcile the rights of current and future generations in terms of their access to natural and social environments. So, if ESD is to be regarded as a distinctive form of environment-related education, it must focus on adopting an educative approach about sustainability issues – to improve the capacity of learners to comprehend, participate in and hopefully become better at resolving the contentious clash of ecological, social and economic interests in our environments. In short, ESD focuses on environmental issues for which there are discernible ecological, social and economic interests in dispute, and to provide learners with opportunities to engage with and witness the resolution of these issues.

ESD is a comfortable term in that it suggests a continuation of what we value and what works for us. There need be no real challenge in the idea of sustainability – we can relax in the comfort of a continuation of our current living conditions. It is comfortable because it is open to interpretation in ways that remain unchallenging for established practice whatever that may be (whether it reflects ecological, social or economic interests). In other words, the language of ESD, like that of environmental education, serves as a three-dimensioned slogan. Just as the term 'environmental education' may be interpreted in any of several ways (including as 'education *about, in* and *for* the environment'), the ESD slogan may be interpreted as promoting any or all of ecologically sustainable development, socially sustainable development, or economically sustainable development.

The lesson that may be gained from the way in which the slogan system expresses itself in the field of environmental education is that where there is a slogan system that invites different interpretations at the level of practice, the interpretation most likely to dominate is the one that coheres most closely with dominant interests in the context of implementation. In the case of EE, this is 'education *about* the environment'; in the case of ESD it is economically sustainable development. Having defined sustainability issues in terms of their residence at the intersection of competing ecological, social and economic interests, we cannot assume that the contest is played out on a level playing field. By their nature, economic interests are easier to state in precise and compelling terms than social and environmental interests (Selby, 2006). The result is that the debate about what we should be sustaining has, for the most part, been cornered by the economists (Dobson, 1996). In this sense, it can be argued that the tripartite nature of the ESD

language serves as a slogan system (in a similar way to the tripartite language of environmental education) to sustain environment-related educational practice that is not necessarily in the best interests of the environment.

Conclusion

Institutionalised language becomes very powerful, especially when the institutionalisation is conducted by an intergovernmental agency of such high visibility as UNESCO. Like EE, ESD may operate as a slogan system. These slogans actually invite, support and justify several interpretations, the effect of which is self-justified and field-justified continuity of practice. Ironically, a focus on the intersection of interests that is allegedly distinctive about ESD also presents a problem for this field of environment-related work. A problem with the descriptor 'education for sustainable development' is that it can serve as a slogan that is capable of supporting several interpretations. The idea of 'sustainability' itself is a comforting one for most people; it suggests a continuation of living conditions, however we value these. At the very least, this slogan may be interpreted as promoting any or all of ecologically sustainable development, socially sustainable development, or economically sustainable development. However, it is likely that the form of ESD most commonly enacted is economically sustainable development.

In the re-badging of environmental education as ESD, we have a situation in which individuals in the field are invited and encouraged to engage in environment-related work, and may take on the legitimating language of the field in doing so in any of a variety of ways. ESD proponents find an opportunity to critique existing environmental education practice in terms of the language of ESD, and yet also find justification for promotion of economic sustainability in terms of the new language of the field, thus wittingly or unwittingly becoming part of the 'problem' (if it is constructed as such) of failing to fully engage the pressing environmental issues of the age.

What this analysis suggests is that the challenge for research in ESD is to produce instances of ESD practice that address environmental, social and economic issues without privileging economic interests and in a way that is qualitatively different from the practices of EE. It is insufficient for the warrant for ESD is to be based on a comparison of ESD language with environmental education practice.

So what is the problem with the aggressive re-badging of EE? It is the problem spoken of by Popkewitz – that the slogans can be used to justify a lot of activity at the levels of language and organisation without actually leading to any real or lasting change. There is a danger that ESD will not lead to an improvement of environment-related education. This is the lesson from environmental education – that when there is a slogan system operating, there is every chance that change will be symbolic only. The language itself will enable a continuity of established practice: resources will be expended, careers developed, associations formed, journals filled – and environment-related practice will not necessarily change for the better. The challenge for ESD is to promote ESD practice in schools and elsewhere that is qualitatively different from established environment-related practice and that is more balanced than ecologically sustainable development. There is a clear challenge here for research in ESD – to make a proper case

for ESD by demonstrating the distinctiveness of ESD practice, and to thereby provide some empirical basis for the UNESCO assertion that ESD 'is more than just a slogan'.

Notes on the Contributor

Ian Robottom is the associate dean (international) in the Faculty of Education at Deakin University. He has strong research and teaching interests in environmental education, having coordinated a number of environment-related research and development projects in Australia, Scotland, Vietnam, South Africa, Brazil and Canada, as well as Australia's first off-campus Master of Education in environmental education. He serves on the editorial boards of a number of international journals in environmental education and is currently coordinating a research project on 'Seachange and Sustainability' in Victoria's surf coast region. In 2005, he received the NAAEE Research Award for Outstanding Contributions to Research in Environmental Education. Email: ian.robottom@deakin.edu.au.

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