



Sigtuna Think Piece 10

Reflections on the Sigtuna Climate Change Education Research Symposium

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Abstract

This think piece provides a short reflection from two Master's level students who participated in the symposium on Climate Change Education held at Sigtunastiftelsen on 28 March 2009. It summarises (from our point of view), some of the major points discussed. Our contribution to the think pieces also provides a 'lens' for reading or thinking about how young students are embarking into the world of both the challenge of climate change and the necessary transformations that need to be made in education to reflect the required knowledge to both prevent and mitigate the effects of climate change in the future.

Introduction

On 28 March 2009, a variety of interested researchers gathered at the Sigtunastiftelsen in Sweden to discuss the topic of education for climate change. The symposium was organised by the Institute for Research and Education in Sustainable Development (IRESD) in cooperation with Uppsala University and the Sigtuna Foundation. The participants came from a variety of cultural backgrounds and research fields. We were selected as student observers to watch the proceedings and to give our account of the content and process of the workshop at the end.

One of the most important aspects of the workshop was the equality principle between participants. Each was encouraged to leave their titles and respective hierarchies behind before the workshop began. This small measure was a pointer towards the fruitful, interesting and educational discussion that was to take place.

The workshop combined accounts of theoretical and research experience from Swedish universities, along with practical application and experiences from Africa, although in both contexts theory and practice were evident. In this short paper, we have made a summary of the main issues raised throughout the three days of the workshop and represent our observations and interpretations of the participants' work.

Some Perspectives on the Presentations and Discussions

The purpose of education

Akpezi Ogbuigwe, from the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), raised some fundamental questions in the beginning of the conference regarding the conference topic on Climate Change Education: What is Sustainable Development? Who are we talking about?

What do we want to reach? What do we want to see in the future? These questions led her to the heart of the question: why do we in the North; that have the most knowledge, still have the biggest ecological footprint? She noted that in raising this question, it is valid to discuss the importance of action and change within ourselves to start with. It is easier to say or wish what other people should do, but the issues and questions on climate change are highly complex. This again leads to a more normative question: can we discuss how others should change if we cannot change ourselves? (Linking this to the conference content, climate change can barely be talked about without mentioning carbon-dioxide emissions from airplanes and the implications of this. Not only at this conference, but all over the world people are taking airplanes to fulfil their desires, whilst contributing to climate change in a way. How can we say that others cannot fly, if we cannot find a better substitute ourselves? Does this lead us to being hypocrites?)

Professor Heila Lotz-Sisitka at Rhodes University questioned: should we all be activists? In relation to climate change education the need for wanting to do the right thing is the key, not to force people to do what is the best, thus activist approaches to education may not lead to desired democratic results, a point also made by Professor Öhman. Education on climate change issues needs to be 'taught' in pluralistic ways that enable us to make a good choice for people around us and for the future of the world. Such education should equip us with capabilities to evaluate and reflect on how we act ourselves and how our actions may affect others.

These and other presentations led us to reflect on the way that courses at universities today are highly fragmented; the topics are taught in singular subjects of biology, geography, law, maths, economy, etc. The links between these courses, however, are very important for the resolution of complex problems such as climate change, and these linkages between disciplines and different forms of knowledge are not adequately valued in the education system today. This subject-separation does not reflect real life and is hard to apply in practical situations, especially in the context of climate change in a continuously changing world. The need for an interdisciplinary education form is crucial now and even more relevant for the future.

The separation between theory and practice, too, is big when it comes to the current education system, both at universities and in other forms of education. During the symposium it was obvious that the need for education to address issues associated with climate change is an urgent and vital area for future curriculum development and implementation. The discussions raised the issues of what the current situation is today. Firstly, a basic question on vision was raised: is it the role of universities to address what is right or wrong? This brought the discussion back to Professor Ogbuigwe's questions at the beginning of the workshop, namely what is our vision and how does this influence purpose and practice in education? In our view there are barely any interdisciplinary, reflective or evaluative discussions in universities and other parts of the education system today, yet education that brings in these topics is important. Discussion of what is right or wrong, what is human value, what do people value most and how are people conceptualising their relationship to nature are topics that could involve students and their teachers and professors in reflective processes that could affect education, and also the choices they make in life. This is in no way implying that education should tell us what is right or wrong, but rather that it should equip us to be more reflective over our actions.

Spaces for engaging with values questions in education

Despite the need for such educational renewal, Professor Leif Östman from Uppsala University said there is hardly any space for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the university's teacher education school. Our question was then: what department or institute at the university should include education that addresses climate change questions, if it does not even fit into the department for teachers' education? As the curriculum is decided by the state, it tends to reflect the values of the state. But, since we live in a democracy this should reflect the people's thoughts. What does this tell us? Does this reflect the real values of the people?

In this context, we discussed to what extent the values and questions of people are represented in schools. When I (Ida) went to school, the only topic that touched upon questions of ethics, was the class called 'religion' where we discussed differentials between Islamism, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The alternative form was called 'view on life' (humanism) where they discussed world-views and views of life, which raised moralistic issues. To be honest I do not think this has changed much since I (Ida) went to lower secondary school in 1992. There was a separation between the 'Christian' children and the 'non-Christian' children. Three out of a total of 20 went to the 'non-Christian' class, where they discussed views of life and more moralistic questions. This reflects a trend towards secularisation in Sweden, and this leads us to the question: is secularisation a factor in decreasing the interest of ethics in school?

Unfulfilled knowledge

Another topic that was discussed in the symposium was the concept of unfulfilled knowledge; that is, the ability to educate while the subject and learning outcomes are in a constant state of flux. There is currently a significant element of scientific uncertainty associated with the projected effects of climate change, its localised effects and the speed at which these effects will become apparent. This presents both opportunities and threats. Opportunities are in the ability to combine education more closely with the surrounding world, allowing communities to have a much greater role in the education of the next generation, and giving ownership of the possibilities which education accrues to the entire wider community. However, the threats are not to be underestimated, these can be primarily a vague and unfocussed curriculum, a reduced sense of achievement as the outcomes are not very specific leading to a variety of interpretations of the outcomes, which can be a positive or a negative.

Measuring performance

The symposium also discussed methods of measuring performance. This related not only to direct outcomes but also to indirect community wide outcomes. Several questions were posed by the various contributors; for example, what is the purpose of education? How can we be systematic in an emergent field? In our view, the question of measuring performance is a vital one in an educational programme. The relative success of a curriculum such as one that addresses climate change and sustainability issues must also face the issue that success is not merely measured in exam results and correct answers. It must be measured more in community activities, critical thinking, applied solutions and a possession of leadership skills.

Moral questions, values and ethical deliberations play an immensely important part in such education, all of which cannot be readily judged with traditional examinations or performance measurement approaches that are popular in education today.

Different contexts: Adaption/mitigation

Different contexts were also one of the main debate points. Here there were two separate concepts, that of different contexts in terms of North/South and also that of mitigation or adaption. The first concept is of course familiar to all, whilst the second is an important emerging factor, which will significantly alter results, goals and methodology. In differing circumstances it will be appropriate to have differing strands; however the process through which this is decided is yet to be formulated. Also, in each case there is a temporal element, i.e. we may move from mitigation to an adaption-based system. This is a further issue that ties into the difficulties in measurement; i.e. when should we choose mitigation or adaption strategies? Local knowledge and local leaders may prove to be the best judges of this; however this leads to an issue of formulating a comprehensive education curriculum, which leads to common learning outcomes whilst being sensitive to localised conditions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are several challenges and opportunities to take forward out of this symposium. The breadth of work being undertaken by the contributors underlines the expansive nature of climate change education. It questions both the basis and reasoning behind education. The difficulties and dilemmas posed in linking ethics and education systems should not be underestimated. However, in order to give students the opportunities to make a difference in their own lives and those of others, education must produce critically aware, well-rounded individuals. The current delineations between subjects do not adequately prepare students for the reality of complex interrelated problems. By linking learning to real life situations the student may learn by doing, such 'indirect' learning produces greater knowledge, as the student must understand the connections between education and knowledge. From the symposium, we can understand the objectives to be achieved by both North and South, while work on the indicators of these objectives continues.

Notes on the Contributors

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