

OPINION ESSAY

ESD in Higher Education, the Professions and at Home

Copyright © 2012
SAGE Publications
(Los Angeles, London, New Delhi,
Singapore and Washington DC)
www.sagepublications.com
Vol 6(1): 49–57
10.1177/097340821100600111

Debating Education for Sustainable Development 20 Years after Rio

A Conversation between Bob Jickling and Arjen Wals

BOB JICKLING AND ARJEN E. J. WALS

Abstract

In this dialogue between two friends and colleagues with different takes on education for sustainability, Canadian environmental education scholar Bob Jickling argues that education *for* any cause is not true education, which should strive to prepare minds to create new ideas, not follow a doctrine. Since we don't have solutions to sustainability, we should prepare

Editorial Note: In 1992, the year the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was hosted in Rio de Janeiro, Bob Jickling, a noted Canadian Environmental Education scholar at Lakehead University, published a controversial article called, 'Why I Don't Want My Children to be Educated for Sustainable Development' (Jickling 1992). In it he questioned the merit of using education to promote a particular philosophy or practice and called on education to adhere to the higher goal of preparing minds to create new ideas.

Jickling and Wals are close colleagues and friends and have written collaboratively on ESD. Jickling has sought change primarily through scholarly critique, while Wals has chosen to encourage and support change 'from within' by working with agencies promoting education for sustainable development.

When asked to submit essays to this issue, they suggested a dialogue, preceded by introductions stating their positions.

Bob Jickling is Professor of Education at Lakehead University, Ontario, Canada. Email: bob.jickling@lakeheadu.ca

Arjen E.J. Wals is Professor of Social Learning and Sustainable Development, and UNESCO Chair at Wageningen University, the Netherlands. He is UNESCO's global report coordinator for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

students to create them. Wageningen University professor and UNESCO's global report coordinator for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, Arjen Wals, argues that education is only useful when we reflect on what kind of education and for what purpose. Otherwise, as David Orr pointed out, more education will only 'equip people to become more effective vandals of the Earth'.

BOB JICKLING: WHY I DON'T WANT MY CHILDREN TO BE EDUCATED FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: SOME REFLECTIONS 20 YEARS LATER

It is two decades since publication of my paper, 'Why I Don't Want My Children to Be Educated for Sustainable Development' (Jickling 1992), on the heels of the Rio Earth Summit Conference. The paper has been provocative, often generating strong responses and bemused interest. Like most people who like to write, I frequently do so as a way to think through a problem. That was the case with this paper, and still like it. Importantly, I think it points to questions that remain relevant. The preparation for Rio + 20 seems an appropriate time to reflect on the original paper and the relevance of its enduring questions.

First, to contextualise the paper, it might be useful to know that it was written as part of a sequence of papers critiquing environmental education, not as a defence of this field. One of the other papers in the series was critical of behaviourist literature (Jickling 1991a) and yet another took a critical look at the problem-solving orientation prevalent at the time (Jickling 1991b). The central concern in all three papers was education itself; that is, were approaches to environmental education extant in the literature, actually educational?

One of the criticisms of this paper is that it appears to present education as a value-free activity, and as a single conceptual metanarrative. This criticism is often framed by the question: 'Who's conception of education counts?' Such questions were once interesting provocations, but they have become clichés and, worse, conversation stoppers. The effect seems to have brushed aside questions like: 'What is education?' and 'Is this educational?' For me, early signs that this trend was becoming a problem were revealed in colleagues' comments such as: 'Let's not talk about education, it doesn't have meaning any more', or 'Education means just about anything to anybody now'.

Recently, I was shocked by a colleague's response when asked to describe her own assumptions about education. Her first response was that she 'didn't like to talk about that kind of question' and then she gave the usual disclaimers about how she felt education varied among individuals, and was time and context dependent. When these concerns were acknowledged, and she was again asked to clarify her own assumptions at the present time and place, she ultimately answered that she was 'a critical postmodern scholar', again brushing aside questions about education. Whether some scholars like it or not, 'What is education?' and 'Is this educational?' are legitimate questions, and their answers are implicitly enacted through their own pedagogical practices.

I am well aware of concerns about meta-narratives, sensitivities to context, and individualities, and I began to address them shortly after 'Why I Don't Want My Children to Be Educated for Sustainable Development' was published (e.g., Jickling 1997). More recently, Arjen Wals and I have developed a heuristic designed to encourage scholars and practitioners to construct their own conceptions of education (Jickling and Wals 2008). However, I am just as concerned about the other end of the spectrum—a realm of fragments and relativism, where education is eviscerated of meaning. While I acknowledge that education is not value free, this does not mean anything goes.

Much contemporary scholarship has problematised meta-narratives to the point that I find skepticism has often slipped into cynicism and fragmentation has nudged many scholars and practitioners in the direction of educational relativism. I think that we collectively need to take up this problem of relativism, including developing ways to talk thoughtfully about education as an idea (cf, LeGrange 2004; Jickling 2009), however inconvenient this may be to some of our own agendas. In this task, I think 'Why I Don't Want My Children to Be Educated for Sustainable Development' is as important as it ever was. The very idea that education should be *for* something like sustainable development remains as questionable as ever. The concerns I raised have been interesting to many scholars and practitioners who still read what I've said with interest; but, more often than not, the issue remains under-engaged.

There are two pragmatic reasons to take a look at questions raised in 'Why I Don't Want My Children to Be Educated for Sustainable Development'. First, there is push back. Whatever scholars and environmental educational practitioners may think, there is broad public sentiment in many parts of the world that education should exclude actions that smack of indoctrination. Typically, when environment-related education makes political and practical advances, there can be significant push back. When this happens, environmental education and associated 'educations' are damaged (e.g., Butcher 2007; Cushman 1997; Sanera 1996, 1998.) Some of the criticisms may not be fair or accurate, but they tend to stick.

Second, I'm doubtful that the idea of sustainable development is adequate to the task of enabling thoughtful and effective responses to local and global issues. Recently, Andy Stables introduced me to a new metaphor for education, that it is 'about doing the impossible' (Pers. Comm. December 2010). I like it. At worst, education can be compared with schooling and its social reproduction of existing norms. However, when infused with Stables's more optimistic analysis, education reflects, amongst other things, an acquisition of knowledge and understanding—whether received and/or socially constructed, critical and imaginative reflection, and an impulse to act on the seemingly impossible. It also means thinking and doing things that haven't been done before. When seen this way, why should we be satisfied with aiming for the perceived, and by now somewhat tired, 'wisdom' of sustainable development when more powerful ideas are needed?

Interestingly, wherever I go, I am still approached by people who have read 'Why I Don't Want My Children to Be Educated for Sustainable Development' and still seem to find it useful. Frankly, this surprises me because I recognise that in 1991, when I wrote the article, I did not include careful qualifications about many things, not the least of which was a discussion of the limits of generalisability. I agree that education

changes over time, that it is context-dependent, and that it is something for folks to decide for themselves. However, I also see that there may not be such a collective fragmentation about education's meaning as might be expected. Sure, there are differences, but not a free-for-all either—except when the question about the nature of education is ignored, dismissed, or seen as beneath critical postmodern scholars.

ARJEN E.J. WALSH: EDUCATING CHILDREN IN POST-NORMAL TIMES—RE-IMAGINING EDUCATION WITH SUSTAINABILITY IN MIND

What has changed since Rio in terms of the engagement of people and education systems in issues of environment, nature, development? Has the focus on sustainable development, and the more recently and more commonly used 'sustainability', strengthened this engagement around the globe? What role has the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) played so far?

Needless to say, it is difficult if not impossible to provide solid and single answers to these questions. Most scientists monitoring the health of the planet confirm that the state of the planet today is worse than in 1992, especially in terms of humanity's footprint. Today, more than seven billion people are using precious resources, some of which are not renewable or are regenerated at a pace slower than the rate at which they are used. Furthermore, the use of these resources creates byproducts that are harmful to the planet's ecosystems, if not in the short run, then certainly in the long run. Issues of inequity, marginalisation, loss of diversity, poverty and so on, are arguably more severe now than in 1992. The rapid rise of 'emerging markets and economies', formerly referred to as 'developing countries', has improved the material lives of many people in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, it is also contributing to an increased gap between rich and poor, an accelerated use of natural resources, and a rapid increase of CO₂ emissions, e-waste, etc.

We also see a worldwide increase of interest in ideas like: 'sustainability', 'triple bottom lines of people-planet-profit', 'the greening' of virtually anything, and 'corporate social responsibility' in the world of business and industry. These ideas put the concerns of many environmental and sustainability educators on the agenda of groups that, before Rio, tended to dismiss them. Of course, some question the underlying motives of those who have newly adopted these concepts—are we witnessing forms of 'green washing' and 'feel-good sustainability' that leave intact inherently unsustainable routines and planetary systems? Or, on the other hand, is this the beginning of a major shift or transition towards a more just, fair and, indeed, sustainable world that does not rely on consumerism, growth and materialism but (re)discovers humanism, dynamic equilibriums and spiritualism?

As far as education is concerned, consider David Orr's observation that more education is only useful when we reflect on what kind of education and for what purpose. Otherwise, he suggests, more education will only 'equip people to become more effective vandals of the Earth' (Orr 2004: 5). The UN's 'Education for All' program as well as the DESD, should be considered with this in mind. Most education around the world focuses on preparing people for playing their roles in the global economy. Only at the margins are there still spaces for things like citizenship, democracy, arts,

and humanities, philosophy, ethics, change and transformation, and so on. Martha Nussbaum's book, *Not-for-Profit* (2010), points out the consequences of using business models for organising education and privileging private and economic interests in public education.

What has EE, E/S and ESD been able to do in re-orienting education and learning since Rio? In several recent publications (Wals 2009a, 2009b, 2010), I pointed out that there have been many provisions for supporting ESD, but also for EE and, as is the case in some countries, EESD. There are great regional differences in interpreting what these educations mean and how they should be strengthened. On the ground, we do see some innovative and promising approaches emerging from whole-institution/school approaches to sustainability, to hybrid, cross-boundary forms of learning around local issues, to the development of educational sustainability applications for smartphones. However, most of it is in the margins and not yet in the mainstream.

With my good friend and colleague, Bob Jickling, I have co-authored a few papers in the post-Rio era on the role of ESD in strengthening engagement in what we both believe are the key issues of our time (Jickling and Wals 2008). These papers have been critical of both sustainable development as a concept and of ESD as the UN-preferred form of education to engage people in sustainable development. Bob had already questioned sustainable development and ESD before the Earth Summit took place in his infamous 'Why I Don't Want My Children to Be Educated for Sustainable Development' (1992). The paper resonated around the globe for a number of reasons. Over the years he has consistently argued against ESD and sustainable development. In the meantime, I have moved more to the inner-circle of the DESD by accepting a role of global report coordinator for the DESD commissioned by UNESCO. I continue to support and share Bob's critique of sustainable development being a conceptually flawed and internally inconsistent concept. I, too, question the colonialisng instrumentality that characterised ESD, certainly in its early years when it was superimposed on countries and communities as the new 'flavour of the day'.

I am, however, perhaps a bit more pragmatic and less convinced that underneath ESD and sustainable development lies a conspiracy to eliminate environmental education and to distract people from more fundamental matters (e.g., societal critique, deep democracy, questioning capitalism, (re)connecting people with each other and with the natural world). Whereas in the early years of the DESD, there appeared to be a strong push for replacing EE with ESD and for arguing that EE was too narrow in its focus, the people behind the DESD and the early advocates of ESD recognise that: (a) EE in the spirit of Tbilisi highly resembles what many consider to be ESD, (b) in some parts of the world it is more generative to work under the umbrella of a well-established EE movement and infrastructure, and (c) what is actually done on the ground in terms of teaching and learning is more important than the label under which these activities and actions take place. Nonetheless we need to be cautious as educators of ESD, or EE for that matter, becoming a part of the neo-liberalist project, especially now that we are entering 'post-normal' times.

Post-normalism refers to the emerging tentativeness of knowing and (scientific) knowledge, the contested and value-laden nature of inquiry and its products, the inevitable uncertainty, complexity and, indeed, cynicism and scepticism, surrounding

governance, decision making and lifestyle choices. How, for instance, do citizens need to handle ‘sustainability confusion’? Questions like: ‘Has the Deepwater Horizon oil spill led to irreversible ecological damage or will nature take care of itself and self-heal? Can organic food production feed the world or is the use of genetically modified crops inevitable?’ do not have simple and single answers that can stand the test of time. Who is right or who is wrong? How bad or good are things, really? What to do? What not to do? How about the idea that what might be right in one place or situation might be wrong in another? What if scientists don’t agree and science becomes just another opinion in a fact-free debate? Clearly, living in times of uncertainty, complexity and contestation, but also in times of ICT-mediated hyper-connectivity and information overload, inevitably has consequences for education, learning and the role of research and science and society. This will be the post ‘post-Rio’ challenge for educators and researchers with a planetary consciousness. In the years to come, this challenge will require a re-imagining of education and the development of new forms of learning that require the fields of EE and ESD to enter unknown terrain.

A DISCUSSION BETWEEN BOB JICKLING AND ARJEN WALS

Bob Jickling: Arjen, it is good to know that we agree on most things! But, I would like to take up a few things in your opening remarks. First, I think you are guilty of a little hyperbole in suggesting that I might be some kind of conspiracy theorist. It is true that I am concerned about the combined consequences of the education for sustainable development phenomenon, but some of these concerns are implicit in the activities and may not even be conscious. In many cases the connections between people and events are more serendipitous than planned. Where they are purposeful, I suspect the links are more like Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizomes—more random and wandering in nature, than concerted and highly orchestrated.

It is true that I have found some initiatives particularly troublesome. For example, the Thessaloniki conference organisers did seem to aggressively seek to displace EE and replace it with ESD. This struck me as damaging and divisive. More recently, I couldn’t help but notice that the UN resolution on behalf of the DESD didn’t reference the importance of the environment or ecology. That may or may not have been purposeful, but in the end it is not value-neutral. And then there is the network of Regional Centres of Expertise that has been ‘mobilised to deliver education for sustainable development (ESD) to local and regional communities’ (UNU-IAS u.d.).

I wouldn’t call this assemblage of initiatives, including others like them, a conspiracy, but still they pull a combined weight. When I think of this, I’m reminded of Hebert Marcuse (1964). According to Marcuse, the kinds of cultural products described above ‘indoctrinate and manipulate—promote a false consciousness’ (p. 57). And, the ‘indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; becomes a way of life’ (p. 12). Marcuse calls this the ‘music of salesmanship’ where ‘[e]xchange value, and not truth value counts. On it centers the rationality of the status quo, and all alien rationality is bent to it’ (p. 57). In other words, the combined weight of the activities, intentional or not, pulls attention in the direction of education for sustainable development, and, I think, the larger status quo.

As you rightly point out, it is impossible to know what impact EE, ESD, or other educations have had over the past two decades. I also acknowledge that some practitioners and scholars are more concerned with what is actually done on the ground than the labels attached. I can see that many folks are trying to infuse ever more educational ideas into the inherently problematic ESD. I cannot help thinking, however, that we could be better off if we began with greater emphasis on what is more likely educational. This would be true in EE, as well as sustainability education, place-based education, and other constructions. As you and I have already argued (Jickling and Wals 2008), ESD may be infused with good educational ideas, but in the end it is a kind of 'feel good' education—because, it is ultimately constrained by the idea of sustainable development.

On the last point, Anthony Weston (1992) claims that environmental ethics is a new field and that it would be a mistake to constrain our discussions about where we might go, or to converge on particular assumptions. He argues that our challenge is not to systematise values, but to create opportunities for new values to evolve. We need, then, to create conceptual, experiential and physical space to move and think. If, following Andy Stables, we need future generations to do the seemingly impossible; we will need to create conditions under which they are able to generate ever more powerful ideas.

In light of these concerns, I do note that in your comments and in your reporting (Wals 2009), that those who back the Decade are beginning to soften their stance. You point out that they recognise there is an important place for EE and other educations, in global discourse and practice. This is the best news in two decades! But, can we now go a bit further? For example, can these same folks take some concrete action? I'd love to see, for example, UNESCO and the United Nations University (UNU) modify the conception of regional centres. Instead of having Regional Centres of Expertise in ESD, why not allow individual centres to decide how to frame their expertise, and then encourage them all to flourish. This movement could then include centres of expertise in environmental education, sustainability education, ecological education, place-based education, and others. This is a strategy that would speak much louder than words, and would help enable the kind of intellectual and practical diversity that is the cauldron for creating powerful new ideas. That is something that I could really get behind.

Arjen Wals: I do support your concern about education and the way educational possibilities are limited when education is framed in terms of sustainable development, particularly when sustainable development is narrowly interpreted and forcefully prescribed. Still, I do believe that the people within the UN system involved in the DESD and ESD, as well as the people who put their energy in things like RCEs, are not consciously limiting choices. Many of them are willing to engage with ideas and perspectives other than their own, particularly from those who are inspired by a genuine concern about the well-being of the planet, and not by self-interest and strategic motives.

The people behind the Thessaloniki Declaration may have gotten carried away in their enthusiasm for what they saw as a breakthrough innovation—ESD. But, they didn't mean to be damaging and divisive, even though that may have been the unintended result in some places. The fact that the UN resolution on behalf of the

DESD does not refer to the importance of the environment or ecology is unfortunate, but there are many UN documents and, indeed DESD-related documents,¹ that do have such references, and also references to environmental ethics. In particular, the Mid-DESD Bonn Declaration has many references of this kind:

Through education and lifelong learning we can achieve lifestyles based on economic and social justice, food security, ecological integrity, sustainable livelihoods, respect for all life forms and strong values that foster social cohesion, democracy and collective action.²

So it's there.

However, there is a need to remain alert and critical to make people aware of the values and assumptions of their expressions and positions—including our own. And, there is a need to make clear that choices strengthen particular vantage points at the expense of others that might hold (more?) promise in co-creating a world that is more sustainable than current prospects. Finally, there is a need to point out the contradictions between what we state and what we do. I think these needs are the responsibility of education, and I think this is what you have been doing so well over the years.

Bob Jickling: Thanks for that Arjen. As we move to close this conversation, for now at least, it seems that we are again in agreement on many things. Importantly, we share the views that educational potential is limited when framed by education for sustainable development; we seem to agree that forceful promotion of ESD has, at times, been damaging and divisive, whether this was intended or not; and, that it is unfortunate that the UN resolution for the DESD fails to mention ecology and the environment. This last point does, however, illustrate how plastic the sustainable development rhetoric can be, and how it can be easily manipulated, or inadvertently bent, in ways that favour the global status quo.

I acknowledge, too, that we have both agreed, here and elsewhere, that there are folks doing good work 'on the ground', trying to infuse good educational qualities into what we both feel is an educationally limiting conception. I like the idea that the discourse is softening and that there is, again, a greater interest in increasing diversity in the languages of education to better reflect a breadth of interest. But, is this real? I'd love my university to be invited to become a Regional Centre of Expertise in *Environmental Education*. That could be an important practical and symbolic step towards bridging some of the divisions that have occurred.

However, to finish, I return to Martha Nussbaum's (2010) book that you cited earlier. She argues that we do not need, 'reliable servants of any ideology, even a basically good one', and that we should, as artists do, 'ask the imagination to move beyond its usual confines, to see the world in new ways' (p. 24). This idea resonates with our ideas about education, and seems a good way to tackle the 'impossible'.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/science-and-technology/environmental-ethics/>
- 2 Bonn Declaration, www.esd-world-conference-2009.org/fileadmin/download/ESD2009_BonnDeclaration080409.pdf

REFERENCES

- Butcher, J. 2007. Are you sustainability literate? *Spiked*, 13 September. Available at <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/article/3821>. Accessed 13 January 2009.
- Cushman, J. 1997. Critics Rise Up Against Environmental Education. *New York Times*, 22 April 1997. Available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E05EFD7143EF931A15757C0A961958260#>. Accessed 15 January 2009.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. (Brian Massumi, Trans.). University of Minneapolis Press. (Original work published 1980).
- Jickling, Bob. 2009. 'Environmental Education Research: To What Ends?', *Environmental Education Research*, 15 (2): 209-16.
- . 1997. 'If Environmental Education Is To Make Sense For Teachers, We Had Better Rethink How We Define It!', *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 2: 86-103
- . 1992. 'Why I Don't Want My Children To Be Educated For Sustainable Development', *Journal of Environmental Education*, 23 (4): 5-8.
- . 1991a. Environmental Education and Environmental Advocacy: The Need For a Proper Distinction. In R. Lorimer, M. M'Gonigle, J-P. Revéret, and S. Ross (Eds), *To See Ourselves/ To Save Ourselves: Ecology and Culture in Canada*. (pp. 169-76). Montréal: Association for Canadian Studies.
- . 1991b. 'Environmental Education, Problem Solving, and Some Humility Please.', *The Trumpeter*, 8 (3): 153-55.
- Jickling, Bob, and Arjen E. J. Wals. 2008. 'Globalisation and Environmental Education: Looking Beyond Sustainability and Sustainable Development', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40 (1): 1-21.
- Le Grange, L. 2004. 'Against Environmental Learning: Why We Need a Language of Environmental Education', *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*, 21: 134-40.
- Marcuse, H. 1964. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Nussbaum, M. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Orr, D. 2004. *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect*, 2nd Ed. Chicago: Island Press.
- Sanera, M. 1998. 'Environmental Education: Promise and Performance', *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 3: 9-26.
- Sanera, M. and J. Shaw. 1996. *Facts Not Fear: A Parent's Guide to Teaching Children about the Environment*. Washington, DC: Regnery.
- UNU-IAS. (u.d.). Available at http://www.ias.unu.edu/sub_page.aspx?cat ID=108&ddlID=183. Accessed 17 November 2011.
- Wals, A.E.J. 2009a. *Review and Contexts and Structures for Education for Sustainable Development*. Paris: UNESCO
- . 2009b. 'A Mid-Decade Review of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development', *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 3 (2): 195-204.
- . 2010. DESD 'We Can? Some Lessons Learnt from Two Mid-DESD Reviews', *Global Environmental Research*, 14 (2): 109-18.
- Weston, A. (1992). 'Before Environmental Ethics', *Environmental Ethics*, 14 (4): 321-38.