

Globalization and environmental education: looking beyond sustainable development

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This study contends that environmental education is being significantly altered by globalizing forces, witnessing the effort to convert environmental education into education for sustainable development. This internationally propagated conversion can be challenged from many vantage points. This study identifies anomalies that have arisen as international organizations such as UNESCO have championed this conversion, and discusses issues arising from these anomalies in light of the nature and purposes of education. This study presents a heuristic that has helped one to support a better understanding of the relationships between sustainable development, environmental thought, democracy, and education.

Keywords: education for sustainable development; environmental education; globalization; sustainable development.

Globalization and neo-liberalism

It has been argued that many of the world's people live in what may be described as a corporatist society with soft pretensions to democracy. Globalization affects them in tangible and intangible ways. The neo-liberalist forces that tend to shape and frame globalization in terms of markets and opportunities for growth result in power slipping away from citizens to corporate elites. In examining this argument, Saul (1995, 2005) suggests that globalization refers to the rise of economic ideologies embodied by the corporate sector, and to the erosion of grassroots democracy. In fact, he argues that the corporatist movement was born in the 19th century as an alternative to democracy. He is not alone. As Crossley and Watson (2003: 103) assert:

It is the executive directors of these powerful banks [i.e. International Monetary Fund and World Bank] and transnational corporations (TNCs) that can direct, or at the least influence, the policies of individual countries and national economies by integrating them into regional or global economies, and

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by making it increasingly impossible for them to regulate and control their own affairs.

In effect, Crossley and Watson are pointing out that multinational corporations are now richer and stronger than nation states, and international trade agreements are more powerful than the will of elected governments.

Globalizing ideologies and the corresponding material effects are also having an impact on education. The powerful wave of neo-liberalism rolling over the planet, with pleas for 'market solutions' to educational problems and universal quality-assurance schemes, are homogenizing the educational landscape.¹ Ross (2000: 12) illustrates this development when describing the impact of the corporate curriculum:

While your local high school hasn't yet been bought out by McDonalds, many educators already use teaching aids and packets of materials, 'donated' by companies, that are crammed with industry propaganda designed to instil product awareness among young consumers: lessons about the history of the potato chip, sponsored by the Snack Food Association, or literacy programmes that reward students who reach monthly reading goals with Pizza Hut slices.

Goodman and Saltman (2002: 68) characterize BP-Amoco's iMPACT middle-school science curriculum² as a diversion from the company's core business. 'Amoco's curriculum produces ideologies of consumerism that bolster its global corporate agenda and it does so under the guise of disinterested scientific knowledge, benevolent technology, and innocent entertainment'.

In response to this and other manifestations of globalization, Gough (2000: 335) seeks ways 'in which diverse local traditions can be sustained and amplified transnationally while resisting the forms of cultural homogenization for which McDonalds and Hilton Hotels are emblematic'. This search becomes even more important when powerful agencies such as the World Bank propagate this corporate agenda by shaping educational policies and influencing international research agendas in neo-liberalist ways (e.g. Crossley and Watson 2003). For institutions such as the World Bank, education appears simply and solely about preparing individuals to join the local labour market to nourish the global marketplace and satisfy corporate needs. As a result, education is less and less seen as a public good, and the state's role in providing citizens with the best possible education is diminished. Put another way, Saul (1995) claims that these neo-liberal authoritarians are fond of order and contemptuous of legitimate doubters.

While the public sector becomes more privatized, the private sector is being reframed as essential for public well-being. The emergence of socially responsible corporations is fuelled by a demand for kinder and gentler companies that are in tune with people, planet, and profit (the so-called 'Triple-P' bottom line). Companies are orchestrating their own education and training schemes for developing their 'human resources' as 'Triple-P' jugglers. They can even be certified as a company that is environmentally sound by applying for International Organization for Standardization (ISO 14001) certification.³ The environmental education sector, increasingly dependent upon private funding to support its work, at least in some

countries, sees the corporate world as a new 'market' with new 'customers' or 'clients'.⁴

As environmental educators and researchers, we follow these trends with suspicion. They seem to engulf education and make it a contributor to, or even a catalyst for, more exploitation of 'human' and 'natural resources', as the 'P' for profit silently has become an undisputed component of the triple bottom-line. Even if education does not become absorbed by these trends, and if it is able to help people to reflect critically on what is happening to the planet and to themselves and provide some space for alternatives, the economic forces of consumerism are so much bigger that these efforts may all be in vain. After all, for the 10% of the Earth's population that uses well over 90% of its resources, the drive to consume is greater than the drive to sustain (Brown 2005). Orr (2003) describes this imbalance as walking north on a southbound train. Although environmental educators do good and important work, they are still passengers on this accelerating train moving in the opposite direction (Orr 2003). Although we take issue with the use of 'north' and 'south' in his analogy, we recognize the phenomenon Orr describes. The coupling of globalization and neo-liberalism affects all education. In this paper, we examine the idea of education for sustainable development that is presented by UNESCO as the successor of the more established environmental education. We are concerned with the impact of this coupling of globalization and neo-liberalism on environmental education in particular. We believe that some of our concerns, and some of our responses to these concerns, transcend the field of environmental education.

Converting environmental education to education for sustainable development

Many believe that the effects of globalization in education are positive. As some contend, 'There is no greater context for educational change than that of globalization, nor no grander way of conceptualizing what educational change is about' (Wells *et al.* 1998: 322). In this spirit, Waks (2003) suggests that the impact of globalization upon curriculum will lead to fundamental change as opposed to the incremental and piecemeal change that characterized the 20th century. For Waks, fundamental changes imply changes not only in subject-matter selection, but also in instructional methods, technology utilization, organization, and administration.

It is not surprising that there are those who applaud educational policy decisions arising from global initiatives to 'improve' education. Although they tend to recognize difficulties and challenges, they basically have faith that good educational change can arise from the creative tensions and uncertainties which accompany the multicultural context and vague language. UNESCO's Education for All movement, millennium goals, and its decade for Education for Sustainable Development, for instance, are seen as opportunities for educational change.

Education for sustainable development was launched by the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987), *Our Common Future*. It was propelled forward by the 1992 World

Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, and was the focus of attention again at the World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg in 2002. Throughout this period, with the assistance of numerous additional conferences, concerted efforts have been made to transform environmental education into education for sustainable development. In December 2002, the United Nations passed *Resolution 57/254*, that declared a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development beginning in 2005. Interestingly, aside from the preamble that recalls the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the resolution makes no reference to 'environment', 'environmental', 'ecology', or 'ecological'. Fundamentally important elements for many educators are not present in this resolution.

The response by the environmental education community to these concerted efforts to convert environmental education into education for sustainable development has been varied (Hesselink *et al.* 2000). Some, who for a long time have claimed that environmental education has to examine issues related to inequity, North–South relationships, and sustainable use, welcome the move as a legitimization of their interpretation of environmental education. Others reject the move, somewhat ironically for the same reason. They suggest that environmental education is a well-established field that already examines the issues education for sustainable development is supposed to examine. 'Why throw away the baby with the bathwater?' they seem to say. Others, including ourselves, display more principled resistance. They question globalizing trends based on a vague and problematic concept such as sustainable development. They also see a downside to the homogenizing tendencies of these global policy movements and take offence at prescriptive constructions such as 'education *for* sustainable development' that reduce the conceptual space for self-determination, autonomy, and alternative ways of thinking. Although these three types of responses can all be found in the environmental education community, by and large education for sustainable development has become widely seen as a new and improved version of environmental education, most visibly at the national policy level of many countries.

We regard as problematic the emergence of education for sustainable development in educational policies and the pressure on the environmental educators around the world to re-frame their work as contributions towards sustainable development. Globalization, we fear, can be viewed as a process that strengthens the instrumental tendencies of environmental education to promote a certain kind of citizenship, particularly one that serves, or at least does not question, a neo-liberalist agenda. At the same time, globalization can also be seen as a process that allows powerful world bodies, such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and UNESCO, to influence educational policy agendas on a global scale with lightning speed.

With these developments in mind, we make the following arguments. First, we identify anomalies that have arisen as world bodies such as UNESCO and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) have championed the conversion of environmental education to education for sustainable development. Second, we discuss these anomalies in light of an emancipatory interpretation of

education. Third, we present a heuristic that emerged while improving our own understanding of relationships between sustainable development, environmental thought, democracy, and education. We hope that the heuristic will be helpful to others when wishing to examine their own frames for making sense of sustainable development, and other global issues.

Anomalies

Sometimes policy follows innovation; at other times innovation follows policy. Many trends in education seem policy-driven, rather than innovation-driven. Trends such as lifelong learning and competence-based education are inspired by national and international policies (and corresponding economic incentives). Environmental education is no different. The conversion from environmental education to education for sustainable development may be seen as a policy-driven transition. However, externally triggered change often results in resistance from within, as illustrated by the outcomes of an international, on-line debate on education for sustainable development referred to as the 'ESDebate' (Hesselink *et al.* 2000). In all, 50 invited experts from 25 countries registered for the debate and its five rounds of questions. Through a series of provoking (although somewhat leading) questions, organizers of the debate were able to elicit many ideas about potential meanings of education for sustainable development, examples of good practices of education for sustainable development, and ideas for implementing sustainable development education.

An anomaly was revealed when participants were asked, 'Should ESD [education for sustainable development] be abolished as a concept?' (Hesselink *et al.* 2000: 49). More than half of the responses were yes. Of course, ideas cannot be abolished, but this reaction suggests some strong misgivings about the appropriateness of making sustainable development the new focal point of environmental education. Some of those with misgivings suggested that making sustainable development the new aim of environmental education, and using education for sustainable development as an instrument to change people's behaviour in a pre-determined direction, would leave less space for reflective self-determination about educational outcomes, autonomous thinking, and exploration of more contextual pathways towards a 'better' world.

While there is a constellation of ideas as to what sustainable development might entail, the lack of consensus about the implications of an exact meaning in variable contexts prevents global prescriptions. Forcing consensus about an ambiguous issue such as sustainable development is undesirable from a democratic perspective and is essentially 'mis-educative'. Democracy depends on differences, dissonance, conflict, and antagonism, so that deliberation is radically indeterminate (Saul 1995, Goodman and Saltman 2002). The conflicts that emerge in the exploration of sustainable development, for instance, reveal the inevitable tensions among the Triple Ps (people, planet, profit) or the three Es (efficiency, environment, equity). From a learning perspective, these tensions are prerequisites rather than barriers to education (Wals 2007).

A spokesperson for United Nations Environment and Development, United Kingdom Committee (UNED-UK) (Education events 2002) who attended the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, observed there was no critical exploration of notions of sustainable development. It was as if engaging in this discussion could potentially ruin the 'whole idea' and slow down its world-wide implementation. The focus of this international gathering, instead, seems to have been on how to *promote* education for sustainable development, and how to set standards, benchmarks, and control mechanisms to confidently assess progress towards its realization. Rather than discussing and exposing underlying ideologies, values, and worldviews, the general consensus at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and the many meetings that were organized in its slipstream, seemed to be that educators have passed the reflective stage, and that they must roll up their sleeves and start implementing! However, it can also be argued that at best they are implementing a chimera—a fanciful illusion—or worse. It could also be argued that many educators have become agents in a trend towards economic globalization.

These examples indicate that there is cause to be somewhat uncomfortable with the sustainable development agenda. We believe that a similar discomfort might be justified when considering other transitions in education that are inspired by global agendas.

Education and sustainable development: suitable alliances?

The ESDebate (Hesselink *et al.* 2000) showed that environmental educators are divided on how to respond to the emergence of education for sustainable development. Some appear quite comfortable with the term and seek to infuse it with meaning, or use it to examine issues under-represented by traditional environmental education. Others are clearly worried by the continued sustainable development focus, and express concerns about the ideological and globalizing nature of this agenda and stress the need to nurture alternatives. From another perspective, Sauvé (2005), in her analysis of trends in environmental education, has concluded that education for sustainable development is just one of 15 trends or currents in environmental education. Yet others, while recognizing limitations to this terminology, seek to accommodate pragmatically the global political agenda. As a tentative step in this direction, Smyth (1999) spoke about education 'consistent' with *Agenda 21* (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development [UNCED] 1992)—the action plan arising from the World Conference on Environment and Development in 1992.

How educators and curriculum theorists respond to these varied perspectives about education for sustainable development will depend on how they think about 'education' and the role education plays, or needs to play, in society. It will also depend on their image of 'educated persons', and their interactions within respective societies—in particular, the perceived role people are to assume in decision-making processes.

Conceptions of education

Whether or not ‘sustainable development’ is an appropriate aim for education depends on how education is conceptualized. Reflecting on educational theories in the 20th century, scholarly analyses have articulated tensions between dominant tendencies and emerging perspectives that were increasingly prevalent as the century came to a close (Shepard 2000). These tensions, and ultimately contesting views about the nature of education, can be characterized in several ways. One such characterization is to think of education as being essentially *transmissive*—that is, the transmission of facts, skills, and values to students. Here, content and learning outcomes are predetermined and prescribed by a small group of experts. Learning is, by and large, a closed process, a unidirectional transmission of information from the teacher to the student. Education is about social reproduction and social efficiency. Working within this transmissive perspective, much contemporary rhetoric now rests on the assumption that education is an instrument for getting one’s ‘message’ into impressionable young minds—for implanting a particular agenda. In this case, education leads to an authoritatively created and prescribed destination. Engineered by governments, special-interest groups, or industry, education inculcates the preferred message, agenda, ideology, or consumer preference.

In contrast to this transmissive view of education, some theorists⁵ argue that education is increasingly reflected in emergent and more transactional, or *transformative*, perspectives sympathetic to cognitive and socio-constructivist learning theories. Here, knowledge and understanding are co-constructed within a social context—new learning is shaped by prior knowledge and diverging cultural perspectives. Such a socio-constructivist, transformative learning mode of education is more open and provides some space for autonomy and self-determination on the part of the learner. Knowledge is not fixed, cut up in pieces and handed over, but rather (co)created by transacting with prior tacit knowledge, the curriculum, and other learners. In this sense, a function of environmental education is to enable students to become critically aware of how they perceive the world with a view to fostering citizen engagement with social and environmental issues and participation in decision-making processes.

Shaul (1970: 15) articulates this sentiment as follows:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes ‘the practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Taking a somewhat less binary view than Shaul’s on the functions of education, we maintain that education, including environmental education, is not just about social reproduction, but also, and perhaps foremost, about creating the ability to critique and transcend social norms, patterns of behaviour, and lifestyles without authoritatively prescribing alternative norms, behaviours, and lifestyles.

Conceptions of the 'educated' citizen

Much traditional debate has turned on whether education is about social reproduction or about enabling social transformation, and this debate is reflected in the way educators imagine the educated citizen interacting within society. If social reproduction is the inherent expectation, then citizens should work efficiently within existing frameworks. Taking this view of the 'educated' citizen, we expect to see individuals well prepared to accept their role within society and the workforce. They are obedient, deferential, and compliant as they take their place within hierarchical and authoritative social structures and power relationships. From this vantage point, individuals are content to participate in democratic processes at electoral intervals while daily choices are made by decision-makers and their supporting bureaucracies.

If enabling social transformation is the inherent expectation, then we would expect to find 'educated' citizens who are active participants in ongoing decision-making processes within their communities. They would be democratic practitioners in the sense that democracy is more than selecting a government, but rather:

a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his [or her] own action to that of others, and to consider the actions of others to give point and direction to his [or her] own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept [people] from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey 1966: 87)

Dewey suggested that more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual can respond. We, too, put a premium on variation in persons' actions.

In 1916, Dewey spoke of the role of democracy in finding balance between individualization and a sense of community and belonging. According to his view, democracy in education is crucial in realizing a sense of self, a sense of other, and a sense of community; it creates space for self-determination, as individuals or members of groups, and greater degrees of autonomous thinking in a social context. As such, education cannot be reconciled with notions of deterministic, instrumental, and exclusive thinking as embodied by the international policy statements on education for sustainable development. Instead, we can imagine the 'educated' citizen enacting democratic practices in a caring community that shares features with other communities but is also unique (Shepard 2000).

Using the two composite conceptions of education, and the two corresponding views of an educated citizen, we have constructed a heuristic as pictured in figure 1. For continuing heuristic purposes, we suggest that the dynamic framed by ideas represented along these two intersecting axes creates interpretive possibilities within each of the four quadrants delineated. These interpretive exercises can serve to frame and reframe perspectives on education for sustainable development.

Education is a complex and messy business and a two-axes heuristic is not sufficient to capture the shape and scope of the entire enterprise. Nonetheless, the heuristic we present here, as an analytical tool, has provided us

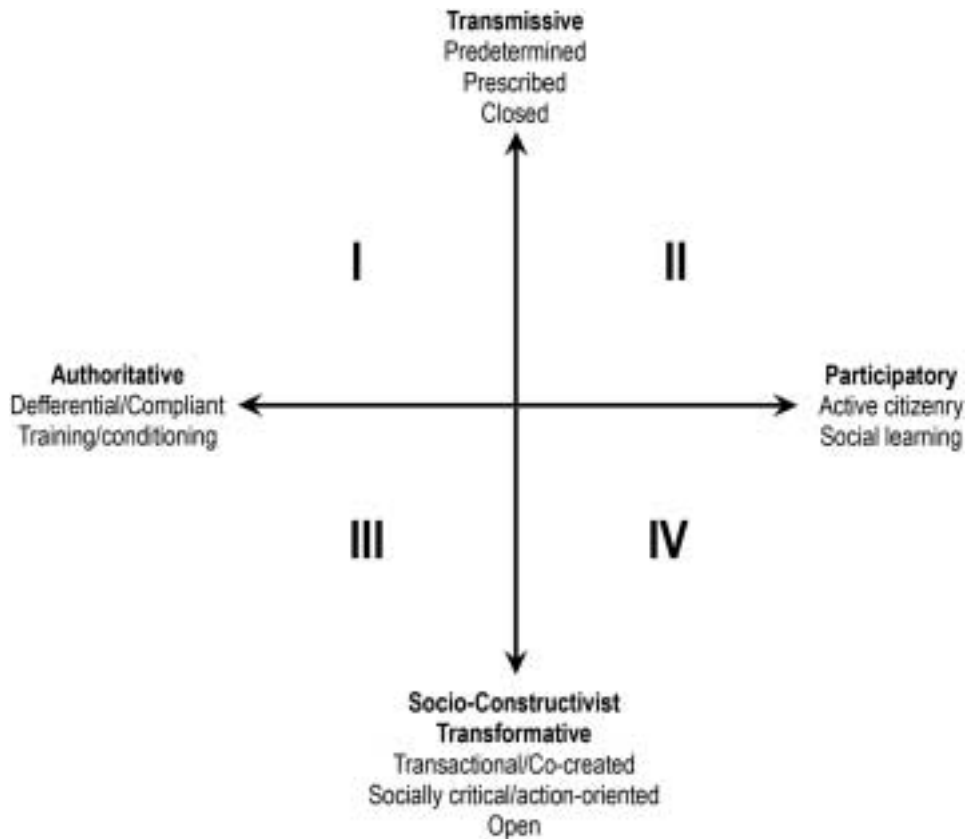


Figure 1. Positioning of ideas about ‘education’ alongside the social role of the ‘educated person’.

with access to important questions and has increased our reflexivity. That we have called it a heuristic, rather than a framework, is important. As a heuristic, its intent is generative—to engage people with educational tensions related to the sustainable development agenda and to challenge them to frame and reframe their own perspectives and questions. Although we work from the position that sustainable development can be seen as only one of many stepping stones in environmental thinking, we believe that this does not negate the generative potential of the heuristic. In the section that follows, we discuss some educational implications associated with these dynamics.

An emergent heuristic

Out of the preceding discussion, three realms of possibility have emerged that can serve to focus discussion around relationships between sustainable development and education (see figure 2). We describe Quadrant I as ‘Big Brother Sustainable Development’, reminiscent of Orwell’s (1989) metaphor for extreme state control, where even language used by citizens was

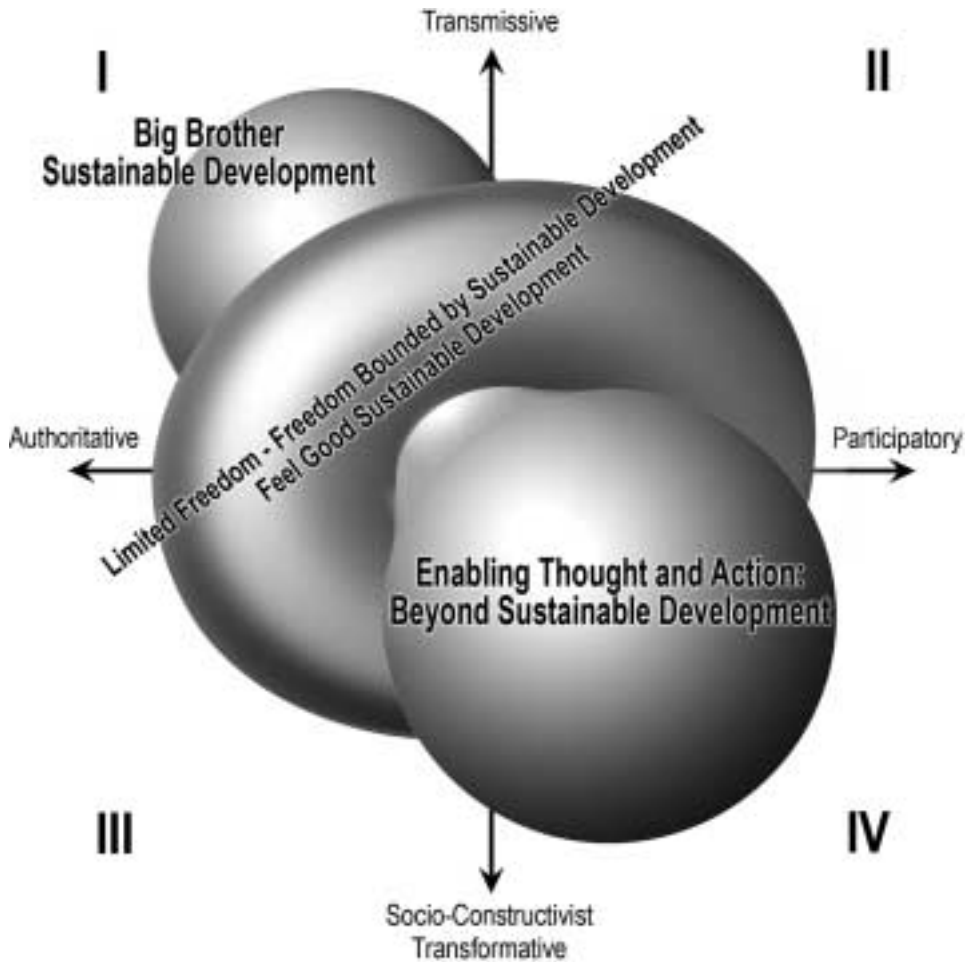


Figure 2. Positioning sustainable development in education within two force fields.

controlled by the ‘thought police’. Quadrants II and III differ in some characteristics, but, in the end, share important qualities. In Quadrant II, participatory approaches to learning are taken up, yet the approach delineated by this conceptual space also tilts towards transmissive goals. In Quadrant III, socio-constructivist or transformative goals are moderated by authoritative approaches to teaching. It can be argued that while participatory learning and socio-constructivist goals promise possibilities for conceptually transcending education for sustainable development, the transmissive and authoritative tendencies still constrain possibilities. And, as such, both Quadrants II and III suggest a kind of ‘feel-good sustainable development’, in the sense that citizens are given a limited, or false, sense of control over their future and their ability to shape the future while in fact authorities of all kinds remain in control. We will discuss these two Quadrants together under the heading ‘Limited freedom—freedom bounded by sustainable development’. Finally, we will discuss Quadrant IV possibilities under the heading ‘Enabling thought and action: beyond sustainable development’.

Relationships such as these do not occur in such flat, one-dimensional, depictions. With this in mind, we have redrawn the heuristic in a three-dimensional fashion to convey more multi-dimensional and dynamic relationships. However, both representations are simply tools for reflecting on the nature, goals, and processes associated with education for sustainable development and, for that matter, environmental education.

Big Brother sustainable development

When located within Quadrant I of figures 1 and 2, bounded by a transmissive approach to education and an authoritarian and hierarchical view of social interactions, this area can be called 'Big Brother sustainable development'. This characterization is reminiscent of the Orwellian metaphor for the ever-present, and ever-powerful, state—in which directives are to be followed and deviants are to be eliminated. Here 'authorities' have determined the correct course of action and the purpose of education is to implement this course. Often, standardization techniques are used to create a consistent and unambiguous message and benchmarks that can be used measure progress towards the pre-determined goals and objectives. Think, for instance, of national and even global standards for sustainable development, or elements thereof, such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO 14001), environmental standards for business and industry (ISO 2007), International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) standards for organic agriculture,⁶ and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) labelling for hardwood.⁷ Not unlike Orwell's 'thought police', bodies are created to check and control these, often externally created, standards.

In Quadrant I, education is a tool or an instrument among several other instruments (e.g. economic and legal ones) that can help realize the sustainable development agenda. Under the influence of governments, special-interest groups, or industry, 'education' inculcates the preferred message, agenda, ideology, or consumer preference. This 'destination view' of education is both instrumental and deterministic in that some segment of society decides what is best and it uses education as a tool to disseminate its conception of 'best'. The problem faced by advocates of education for sustainable development, who find themselves working in conceptual space delineated in varying degrees by transmissive goals and authoritative approaches to learning, is that such determinism is not consistent with how many environmental educators interpret education. While education can also be thought of as a process that can enable social transformation (as would, for example, be described in varying degrees in Quadrant IV space), critics find it anathema that education should serve such pre-determined ends. Sustainable development is a normative term and placing it as a desired outcome is sometimes seen as reducing education to a struggle between contesting ideologies, or to indoctrination (Jickling 1992, 2001, Hattigh 2002).

Some educators have tried to examine issues of indoctrination through definitional stipulations and qualifications, sometimes requiring awkward circumlocutions (Jickling and Spork 1998). Hopkins (1998: 172), for

instance, advocates education that 'should be able to cope with determining and implanting these broad guiding principles [of sustainability] at the heart of ESD'. From the perspective of those working to varying degrees in conceptual space delineated by transformative goals and participatory approaches to learning (Quadrant IV), it can be argued that using education to 'implant' guiding principles is essentially 'un-educative' at best and 'mis-educative' at worse. After all, from a transformative perspective, education is more about teaching students how to think than what to think. Yet, there are educators, especially under the wings of powerful global organizations such as UNESCO and IUCN, who pragmatically adopt and promote education for sustainable development because it conforms to the aspirations of many non-educators who set policy agendas and control funding opportunities.

For example, there are some educators who take inter-governmental approval of *Agenda 21* as an example of global leadership with education as a legitimate tool for implementing this agenda. This seems to be the message reflected by the spokesperson for UNED-UK (Education events 2002) who attended various stakeholder events at the World Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 and reported the main interest and focus of these events was in finding ways to take the education for sustainable development agenda forward.

Another example is found in the Fundamental Programme Principles of the newly developing University of the Arctic (University of the Arctic 2000: 7) that promote 'an understanding of sustainable development...'. This language, too, can be read as authoritarian, prescriptive, and, as such, deterministic. While 'sustainable development' is a social construct that warrants study, it may not be so important that it should be elevated to the status of privileged doctrine. Some in the circumpolar world who may find Næss's work on 'deep ecology' more compelling (e.g. Næss 1989).

From a transformative perspective, *a priori* elevation of a particular pathway or destination to the status of privileged doctrine is objectionable. Alternative perspectives, however controversial, should not be at an *a priori* disadvantage; the dissonance created by exposing learners to a wide range of perspectives is what triggers reflection and meaningful learning. From a more transmissive perspective, however, this might not be seen as problematic—that is, as long as the pathways and destinations are seen as non-controversial, widely supported, agreed upon, and legitimate.

Furthermore, Dobson (1996) provides challenges to perceptions of stability around the meaning of sustainable development. According to his research, there were, at the time, more than 300 available definitions for sustainable development and sustainability. It appears that after nearly a decade of work to bring meaning to these terms, there was less coherence and understanding, and perhaps even more divergence, than recognized by global organizations, non-governmental organizations, and national governments promoting education for sustainable development. With this in mind, it seems that arriving at some common understanding that can be transmitted globally, irrespective of whether this is even desirable, is more remote than ever and perhaps an illusion.

Aside from the determinism inherent in this destination view of education, it can also be argued that this view also rests on the assumption

that governments and governmental organizations can and do provide environmental leadership. In an era of scepticism, and indeed cynicism, few take seriously the idea that governments generate vision (Cleary and Stokes 2006). As one critic suggests, when so many environmentally-aware politicians favour 'sustainable development', one suspects they do not understand what it means (Cairncross 1991).

We do, however, have a caution. Some may be quick to denounce the approach to education described by Quadrant I of our heuristic that tilts in degrees towards transmissive goals and authoritative approaches to learning. It should be noted that many educators emerged from an educational system much as has been described. This has been a foundational experience for many persons now committed to transformative educational practices. People apparently are able to overcome the boundaries of the systems they are part of, even when such systems do not encourage them to do so.

Limited freedom—freedom bounded by sustainable development

The areas delineated by Quadrants II and III of Figures 1 and 2 provide more freedom for creating new understandings and citizen participation—in Quadrant II through participatory approaches to learning, and in Quadrant III through socio-constructivist, or transformative, aims. Yet this is a bounded freedom—freedom still framed by the language of sustainable development. For some, like aspirant academics at the University of the Arctic (2000) who value academic freedom, this might seem like a 'feel-good freedom', yet it is a false freedom.

Educators may choose to work in territory demarcated by these two quadrants for pragmatic reasons. Government support and funding often are more readily available for projects aligned with the sustainable development agenda. Such pragmatism does not necessarily preclude the emergence of transformative learning activities. Yet, as we have suggested, the knowledge and value bases of sustainable development and sustainability are variable, unstable, and questionable—characteristics that tend to be ignored, denied, or at least downplayed in (inter)national policy-arenas and documents promoting education for sustainable development. It is perhaps the denial or downplaying of these characteristics that is most problematic because it easily leads to a false globalizing consensus that denies diverging perspective and negates contextual differences. However, when these characteristics are recognized, a sustainable-development orientation may become a stepping stone to transformative learning about existentially relevant issues.

When handled with care and reflexivity, recognition of the unstable and questionable value bases can enhance the concept's educational potential. Dreyfus *et al.* (1999) suggest that 'sustainable development talk' potentially brings together different groups in a society searching for a common language to discuss environmental issues. Where different ways of looking at the world meet, dissonance can be created and learning is likely to take place—learning at the edge. This dialogue also allows the socio-scientific dispute character of emerging knowledge and values to surface. Participation in such a dispute

is an excellent opportunity to learn about a highly relevant, controversial, emotionally charged, and debatable topic at the crossroads of science, technology, and society (Dreyfus *et al.* 1999). This appears a sound argument provided that all voices *could* have equal access to these conversations; otherwise, in the absence of such dissonance, the outcomes may well retain Orwellian overtones.

The more ominous, and Orwellian, outcomes can be anticipated when the interests of groups with radically different ideas about what should be sustained, are masked by illusions of shared understandings, values, and visions of the future. Put another way, sustainable development talk can lead people in the direction of Orwell's (1989) famously satirical notion of 'double-think' whereby ordinary citizens can increasingly hold in their minds contradictory meanings for the same term and accept them both (p. 223). The power of universal discourse in reducing meaning to a minimum is such that, as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, antagonistic concepts can be conjoined in a single phrase ('war = peace', 'sustainability = economic growth') or concept (i.e. 'sustainable development'). Big Brother's 'Newspeak' was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum' (p. 313). In Newspeak, concepts capable of opposing, contradicting, or transcending the status quo were liquidated. As a result of this devaluation of language, the people in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* found themselves in a state of linguistic dysfunction that was exactly what Big Brother wanted (Jickling 2001). Seen this way, 'sustainable development' and 'sustainability' tend to blur the very distinctions required to evaluate an issue thoughtfully. Comparing the sustaining of ecological processes with the sustaining of consumerism reveals inconsistencies and incompatibilities of values, yet many people, conditioned to think that sustainable development is inherently good, will promote both at the same time.

Two examples, one from Northern Canada and one from Southern Africa, illustrate the concerns raised herein. In many parts of the world, conflicts between those who wish to develop resources and those who wish to protect ecosystems are common. In Northern Canada, there is a particular large wilderness area as yet without roads and home to healthy populations of carnivores, spawning salmon, and myriad other species that define the ecology of this intact watershed. Those wishing to protect the area oppose the building of a road to enable development of a mine. A powerful argument in their campaign is based on the need to sustain ecological processes and the ecological integrity of the watershed. Another interest group called 'Concerned Atlin Residents for Economic Sustainability' also mobilized to defend mining from ecological activists (Simpson 1999). A similarly powerful argument, based on an appeal for sustainable economic activity and jobs, was launched. Interestingly and ironically, what unites the environmental community arguing for regional ecology and the mining community for economic development is the word 'sustainability'. Their differences are absorbed by use of this single term and the concept is rendered a cliché. With public approval, both environmental advocates and mining promoters can use the term sustainability to support radically different ideas.

Similarly, Price (2002) provides a critique of 'sustainability' as used by the Electricity Supply Commission of South Africa (ESKOM). For this Commission sustainability is a process that 'provides the strategic framework for projections of supply-side and demand-side options that will need to be implemented to meet future energy demands' (ESKOM 2000, cited in Price 2002: 79). In Price's assessment, sustainability for ESKOM has more to do with the business of energy production than environmental sustainability. In this instance, it seems that the interests of the company, and not the Earth, are being sustained. She suggests that, when sustainability is used to serve the interests of business rather than the Earth, ideological contradictions are presented which legitimate and ameliorate the premises of domination. For her, it is important to both show the complexity of environmental issues and to break open for debate some of the hegemonic discourses currently being used in support of sustainable development.

Interestingly, Dobson (1996) notes that most of the work done in developing the more than 300 definitions for sustainable development and sustainability has been undertaken in the private sector. When we step back to look at the overall picture, we might well ask how effective this economic sector has been in neutralizing those struggling to promote ecologically-oriented versions of sustainability and sustainable development. We might also ask, 'Why do governments, multiple stakeholder groups, and industry representatives continue to favour sustainable development in light of such confusion over meaning?' To answer this question, we are drawn to work by Chomsky, particularly as presented in the film *Manufacturing Consent* (Achbar and Wintonick 1992).

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky spoke about diversions, or activities that people pay a great deal of attention to—professional sports, for example. Diversions, he suggests, are useful to governments and other power elites because they can distract people away from paying attention to other important issues and then doing something about them. A critical citizenry is difficult to control. However, group cohesion can be fostered through inculcation of what he calls irrational jingoism—narrow-minded self-promotion, or chauvinism. One example of this might be found in the proceedings from an international conference held in Thessaloniki in 1997 and hosted by UNESCO and the Government of Greece. In spite of a variety of extant critiques of education for sustainable development, an observer is hard pressed to find citations of such critiques in the voluminous and somewhat self-promoting document (Scoullous 1998).

It is possible that sustainable development is so well tolerated because it, too, is a diversionary concept. We can see anecdotal support for this thesis in the young and disillusioned who find these terms hollow and incapable of imposing sanctions on government or industry. And, sustainable development is, indeed, contentious when expressed as an aim of education. As the examples in the previous section show, philosophical or political evaluations—mediations between contesting values—cannot logically be subsumed by sustainable development. Yet, with continued promotion of sustainable development, jingoism and doublespeak effectively converge and capacity to think is diminished.

In some responses by environmental education scholars to education for sustainable development, at least two examples of work point beyond the limited, or constrained, freedom described by the Quadrants II and III of figures 1 and 2. These scholars have clearly been influenced by debates about this concept. Yet, while working near the edge, they have chosen, at least some of the time, to work within the bounds of sustainable development. The first scholar is the late statesman of Scottish environmental education, John Smyth. Smyth (1999: 79), who sought to avoid some of the problems associated with education for sustainable development, proposed a compromise through use of the term 'education consistent with Agenda 21'. Later, however, he framed many of his recommendations in the language of 'sustainable development education' and 'sustainability' (Smyth 2002). He did, however, suggest that educators need an initiative to meet, discuss priorities, and 'provide a non-adjectival label for what is being done, acceptable to all; and at best a vision of education to capture imagination and commitment' (Smyth 2002: 13). While we recognize that in a pluralistic society 'acceptable for all' is neither possible nor desirable, we feel that, in the context of his comments, Smyth was seeking more inclusive language that would allow room for 'respectful dissensus' or 'dissent' between environmental educators and advocates of education for sustainable development. Finding such terminology seems an important imperative, and a possible antidote to the hegemonic influences of the sustainable-development discourse. This idea foreshadows a theme picked up again in the next section.

The second scholar, Scott (2002), in a short paper titled 'Education and sustainable development: challenges, responsibilities, and frames of mind', responds to some of the issues raised here and provides some hints for resolving them. Scott's arguments call for a choice *within* sustainable development education (our emphasis); schools and teachers must be free to mediate government policy, free from *a priori* certainties about outcomes and instructions about what and how to teach. He contends that doing nothing is not an option, and that schools ignoring sustainable development will prove an inadequate response. In the context of these comments, he posits four responsibilities for educators (Scott 2002: 2):

- (1) To help learners understand why the idea of sustainable development ought to be of interest to them;
- (2) To help learners gain plural perspectives on issues from a range of cultural stances;
- (3) To provide opportunities for an active consideration of issues through appropriate pedagogies which, for example, might begin from learners' and teachers' different interests, helping pupils understand what they are learning and its significance; and
- (4) To encourage pupils to continue to think about what to do, individually and socially, and to keep their own and other people's options open.

To do less, he suggests, would seem neglectful, while doing much more risks indoctrination.

In examining these comments, we note that Scott shows concern for previous critiques about the doctrinaire tendencies of education for sustainable

development. Point 3 suggests constructivist predilections, and point 4 is a harbinger of a transformative education and educated citizens who are actively engaged in social issues. Yet, point 1, insisting that sustainable development ought to be interesting, does not seem essential to the other three points. Points 2–4 feel good, but the freedoms inherent in them still appear bounded—still *within* sustainable development education. It seems that, if one is consistent in valuing academic freedom, and the kind of intellectual liberty that Scott (2002) holds as a cornerstone value, it is odd to pre-suppose that ‘sustainable development’ ought to be of such privileged importance, especially when there are alternative organizing frameworks for examining environmental and social issues.

Enabling thought and action: beyond sustainable development

The final emergent force-field in our heuristic, as represented by the boundaries of Quadrant IV in figures 1 and 2, concerns itself with emerging, or enabling, environmental thought. Inspired by socio-constructivist and transformative views about education and actively engaged citizens, it points to possibilities *beyond* sustainable development. Here, sustainable development is seen as just one stepping-stone in the continuing emergence of environmental thought. These emergent concepts will be useful to discuss, critique, and employ as devices to stimulate effective and creative dissonance across disciplinary boundaries. They will not be seen as pre-eminent ideas, or organizational frameworks, but simply as more or less useful conceptual tools. As we think about essentials for inclusiveness and collaboration with this realm of enabling environmental thought, we can move forward from John Smyth’s thoughts.

Smyth (1999, 2002) has consistently sought to find language that can reach across conceptual divides and generate respectful dissensus and dissent. This is precisely the intention that guided much of the thinking about, conceptualizing of, and writing of Canada’s national environmental education plan, *A Framework for Environmental Learning and Sustainability in Canada* (Government of Canada 2002). Nobody is claiming that this is a perfect document, and some might complain that too much emphasis was given to the term sustainability. However, it is the result of efforts to find a conceptually acceptable compromise with more inclusive language. Environmental learning is joined with sustainability by ‘and’, acknowledging it as a significant social construct of our times but not as an objective or end-statement about education or even of environmental education. Educators should not feel overwhelmed by pressure from this document to frame all of their work in terms of sustainability and sustainable development, yet those who seek to infuse these terms with meaning, and use them as learning aids, are invited to do so. And, this does not seem a neglectful document in spite of having avoided sustainable development.

Another example of avoiding, or ignoring, sustainable development is found in Bowers’ (2002) paper ‘Toward an eco-justice pedagogy’. What adds particular interest to this document is that it was first presented at a

seminar, ‘On the possibility of education for sustainable development’, at the European Conference on Educational Research in 2000. Bowers writes about ‘eco-justice’ and explores ‘right relationships’—questions of philosophy, ethics, and justice. Like others working in this heuristic location, he appears to feel no need to place these issues within the sustainable development agenda. He is interested in cultural perspectives, active engagement with contemporary issues, and action, without feeling the need to convince anyone that they ought to do so within a sustainable development framework.

When Carson (1962) wrote *Silent Spring*, no one had heard of deep ecology. When Næss (1973) coined the term ‘deep-ecology’, nobody had heard of the term sustainable development. When sustainable development became popular (WCED 1987), ecofeminism, with origins in earlier feminist writing, was beginning to make inroads into fields such as environmental ethics and education. And now, drawing on those who have gone before him, Bowers gave increasing attention to eco-justice. In other words, environmental thought and environmental ethics is dynamic. It is evolving, and people have no idea where they might go next, and they do not know what new language and metaphors will—or ought to—shape policies of the future. With this in mind, educators wishing to operate in Quadrant IV of our heuristic would find it counterproductive to build a sustainable development fence around environmental thinking.

Once again, we propose a little caution. Many will feel confident about the educational prospects arising from working in this quadrant. Yet, confidence can breed dogmatism, and a dogmatic insistence on the correctness of the Quadrant IV approach would be wholly inconsistent with the quadrant’s own premise. By the same token, we recognize that in the description of this quadrant we privilege ‘environmental thought’ over other kinds of thought, which some might argue is also limiting. We are happy with this for now, but recognize that we should always be prepared to explain, defend, and re-evaluate our positions.

Investigating the debates

We find that the sustainable development agenda within environmental education is problematic. We view education for sustainable development as a product and a carrier of globalizing forces. This globalizing agenda has instrumental and deterministic tendencies that favour transmissive arrangements for teaching and learning over more transformative ones. In the process, traditional (e.g. environmental education) and alternative (e.g. eco-justice) ways of engaging people in existential questions about the way human beings and other species live on this Earth run the risk of being marginalized or excluded. The same holds true for individuals and communities wishing to deal with such questions in a self-determined, relatively autonomous, and contextually grounded way.

With this in mind, we have created a heuristic for educators wanting to investigate the education-for-sustainable-development debate. We are most concerned about tendencies towards obedience—acquiescence in the face of

hegemonic discourses. As Saul (1995: 194) notes, ‘Equilibrium [characterized by resistance to ideology], in the Western Experience, is dependent not just on criticism, but on non-conformism in the public place’. So, this heuristic is a critical tool that can be used to critique current discourses, evaluate new initiatives, and find one’s own place within present debates, but also to support non-conformism. We encourage readers to adapt, develop, or re-invent this heuristic to suit their needs, and to aid in the evaluation of education initiatives concerning poverty, health, social justice, development, and other global agendas.

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Notes

1. See Apple (2000), Goodman and Saltman (2002), and Kenway and Bullen (2001).
2. See Danker (2004).
3. For information, see International Organization for Standardization (ISO) (2007).
4. E.g. Hirayama (2003) and Weisbrod (1998).
5. E.g. O’Sullivan (1999, 2002) and Shepard (2000).
6. For information, see IFOAM (2007).
7. For information, see FSC (2007).

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