

“Just an excuse to have fun.”

Thinking about the role of environmental education

Whilst the title statement might raise a wry smile for those of you who work with young people it illustrates a perception amongst some colleagues that “education”, whether formal or informal, isn’t *real* work. This article offers an analysis of some of the thinking behind ‘environmental education’ to help you put your education programmes into context – both the context of your conservation work and the theoretical background to environmental education.

First a few words about definitions.

Some people get concerned about the use of the term ‘education’ and believe that it should only be applied to curriculum driven, formal schools-based learning. Others take a more relaxed view and include lifelong learning, informal education all the way through to interpretation. It’s a good idea to reflect on your own practice and where you might choose to be on this range of views.

For the purposes of this article ‘education’ will be an all embracing term, for reasons which will become apparent when we look at the environmental education theory.

“What’s education got to do with me?”

If you open any newspaper these days there will often be an article about human kind’s impact on the environment; current headlines particularly focusing on Climate Change. Croall as long ago as 1995 started to document evidence that society (as opposed to a few ‘green’ individuals) had begun to realise that it was slowly killing off the very resource on which it depended.

Whatever you think of progress at Earth Summits the 1992 summit in Rio de Janeiro did ratify the earth action plan called ‘Agenda 21’. This had (amongst others) the specific aim –

“– to promote consultation on sustainable development with the whole community *and that should include young people.*” (My emphasis.)

Grundy and Simpkin (1996) further highlight that Agenda 21 calls for the participation of today’s young people in environmental and development decision-making. They recognise that this involvement is critical in moving towards a more sustainable way of life. According to Ali Khan (1995) placing a value on the environment is the first step towards developing a commitment to active environmental citizenship. Since duties and obligations stem from values, whilst first hand experiences assist an appreciation of environmental value. .

In summary, here’s **why** we should be involved in environmental education:

It helps young people connect to the natural environment in a way that allows them to change their personal value system and enables them to take informed environmental decisions.

There is a word of caution here – there can be a danger of becoming too evangelical and preaching *your* messages. Education should be about opening opportunities to help people make better informed decisions, not about propaganda!

“ How does mucking about in the woods deliver?”

Environmental Education has been defined and re-defined in academic literature over the past 30 years (or more). If you want to while away the hours check out the web or your local University library. However, if you don't want to pore over dusty volumes I have found the following 'construct' useful. The Schools Council's Project Environment (1974) used three categories of environmental education:

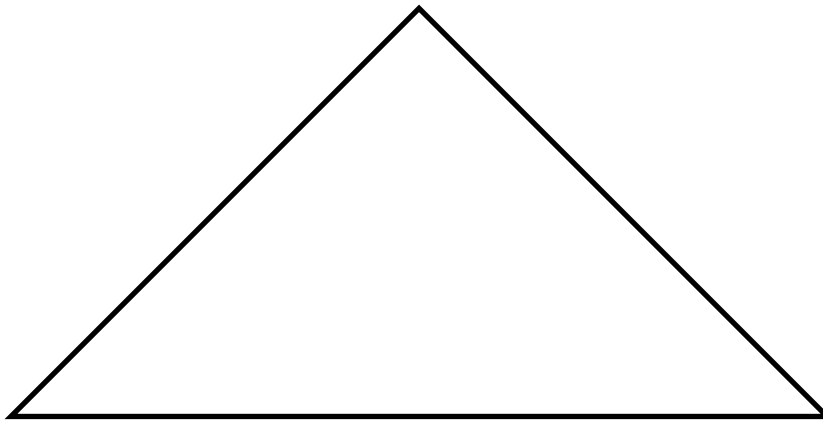
Education **about** the environment. This aims to develop awareness and knowledge about the environment and/or human-environment interactions through investigation and discovery. It affects pupils' environmental awareness, knowledge and possibly understanding.

Education **in** or **from** the environment which involves using the environment as a teaching resource for material and using first-hand experience to enhance environmental awareness. This may in turn encourage environmental concern.

Education **for** the environment relates to developing an informed concern for the environment. This approach goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, to the development of attitudes and values which lead to a personal environmental ethic. This ethic would positively benefit the environment. The aim is to mould environmental concern into environmental responsibility and action.

It may help to visualise these three aspects of environmental education:

CONSERVATION MESSAGES
(Education for the environment)



FORMAL EDUCATION
(Education about the environment)

ENJOYMENT
(Education in the environment)

This is just one way of thinking about environmental education. There are alternatives and there are theoretical 'holes' you could pick in this construct but I have found it a useful way of helping people look at any educational activity or programme they are developing. In most cases there are elements of all three types of learning and it could be argued that using all three as part of a learning cycle will give a richer experience.

For example – a simple interpretive / educational guided walk on Dartmoor will have some element of enjoyable challenge using first hand experience to explore a locality.

The guide will pass on specific knowledge about this environment and there may be opportunities for participants to reflect on their own behaviour and their impact on the habitats visited.

Homework

Apologies – but I have “Education” in my job title; so here’s a suggestion for a further activity that will allow you to develop these ideas for yourself.

Think about either some of your recent children’s events or your whole education programme:

- Reflect on where you feel **your** definition of education activities falls in the range from the “formal, taught” category to the “informal”.
- Consider where within the ‘environmental education triangle’ your main focus lies.
- Try doing your next event with a completely different focus....and evaluate the results.

Finally don’t forget to ***Have fun!***

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Photographs – separate CD with photos illustrating education in, for and about the environment at high resolution being sent in the post: low-res photos below just to show you what to expect.

References:

Ali Khan (1996) as cited in Huckle. J & Sterling. S. (1996)

Education for sustainability. Earthscan Publications Ltd.

Croall. J. (1995)

Preserve or destroy – tourism and the environment.

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, London.

Grundy.L & Simpkin. B. (1996) as cited in Huckle. J & Sterling. S. (1996)

Education for sustainability. Earthscan Publications Ltd.

Schools Council’s Project Environment (1974)

Photographs



Education **for** the environment



Education **about** the environment



Education **in** the environment