

Student Writing Awards
Freshmen Composition

Fort Lewis College

Year 2010

Education for a healthy world: inspired
by information or relationships?

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Education for a healthy world: inspired by information or relationships?

The current educational system promotes, and develops paradigms that are inherently unhealthy for the natural world and for humans. Even the current environmental education programs are not successful because they try to solve environmental problems using the same paradigms that created environmentally destructive behaviors in the first place. However, there are many authors who offer an array of crucial ideas on how education may help to promote paradigms and actions that are less ecologically destructive. Chet A Bowers, Mike Mueller, and Raven Lefay all contribute many ideas for how education can change our paradigms so that we may restore the health of the environment. Although they all contribute many ideas that lead education in the right direction, there is a crucial element that they have left out. These authors all argue that information - based on ecological principles and sustainable design - needs to be the foundation of environmental reform. The problem is, information alone will not inspire people to change their paradigms. People need to have a direct relationship with the landscape so a paradigm shift is motivated by a sense of care rather than obligation. Peter Forbes suggests that the only way to change the paradigms that lead to an unhealthy planet is to restore relationships between humans and the land so that people care about the land and want to restore the health of the land. This essay explores ideas about educational reform and how a change of paradigm must be motivated by care. Why is it so crucial in this moment to focus on developing

relationships between humans and the land? How can fostering relationships contribute to educational reforms?

How do we change our education system so that education may shift the cultural paradigms that lead to degradation of the natural environment? In his essay *EcoJustice as Ecological Literacy is much more than being "Green!"* Mueller argues that education needs to reveal current thought patterns that promote environmental destruction.

Furthermore, education needs to offer alternative thought patterns that do not harm the environment.

“The primary goal of schools should be to renew and revitalize the commons by making explicit the root metaphors that reify thinking patterns and behaviors that contribute to accelerated ecological devastation, and ultimately, to redirect students towards sustainable cultural assumptions (i.e., thinking patterns and activities that have a lesser impact on the Earth, in general)” (Mueller 158).

Mueller suggests that our paradigms are a result of metaphors that are embedded in our culture. In order to change our ecologically destructive behaviors, Mueller argues that educational reforms need to focus on revealing these metaphors and thought patterns to students so that they know how to stay away from them. Mueller is suggesting that in order to change our paradigms, education must simply expose the thought patterns and behaviors that are ecologically destructive. Mueller is implying that knowledge alone is enough to shift people’s paradigms; once they have been discovered that their thought patterns and behaviors are ecologically destructive, they will feel obligated to change their ways.

Lefay would agree with Mueller that education needs to provide students with different information, but she also argues that new information needs to infiltrate the entire education system rather than just the content that students receive. In her essay *An*

ecological critique of education Lefay argues that our entire educational system needs to be based on ecological principles.

“That is, the education system must be radically redesigned using ecological principles at every level: curriculum, pedagogy, philosophy, organization, management, and architecture, and in its relationship with the wider community and environment. It is not enough to teach ecology as a ‘subject’ in a still fragmented and industrial oriented ‘curriculum’; education systems must embody ecological principles in their total design” (Lefay 43).

Lefay is implying that providing students with information about ecology in one class - while the rest of the student’s classes undermine ecological principles - is a fragmented approach that continues our current paradigm. Indeed because humans are an integral part of ecology, Lefay suggests we allow ecology to guide all aspects of education. We have a tremendous amount of scientific knowledge about ecology and according to Lefay, if this knowledge/information guides education, we will be able to change the paradigms of our “industrial oriented” culture. Lefay suggests that we must reform our education system so that information/knowledge about ecological principles serve as a foundation for school. Ultimately if we provide students with the right information, we will be able to change our paradigm.

Similarly, Bowers agrees that education needs to fundamentally change in order to shift our paradigm, however he offers different criteria for creating this change. In his essay *Educating for Eco-Justice in an Era of Ecological Uncertainty*; Bowers argues that our educational practices must be built upon the idea that humans and nature are interdependent.

“Instead of educational reforms based on the environmentally destructive assumptions that have guided the process of modernization over the last 300 or so years, we (and the world) need to adopt approaches to education that are genuinely conserving in orientation. This will require basing educational reform on the following assumptions... that humans are not separate and thus not in

control of nature, but are integral and thus dependent upon Nature's self-renewing capacities" (Bowers 3).

In other words, if our education system were to be based on the assumption that humans and the environment are interdependent, then our thought patterns and actions would be less ecologically destructive. If this is so, then all education needs to do is to teach students that humans are not separate from nature, and that we must ensure that our actions do not prevent "nature's self-renewing capacities". Like both Lefay and Mueller, Bowers suggests that the education system needs to provide students with information that will obligate them to change their paradigms so that our collective thought patterns and behaviors are not ecologically destructive.

Ultimately Bowers, Lefay, and Mueller all propose that educational reform should be based on providing students with information for how to live in a way that causes less ecological destruction. There is a crucial element that none of these authors have addressed. What is the motivation for changing our behaviors and paradigms, is it a sense of obligation or care... "demand or inspiration" (Forbes 12)? I would argue - along with Peter Forbes - that information might make students feel obligated to change, however, true change occurs when people care. Peter Forbes articulates "People who care conserve; people who don't know don't care. What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known the wren?" (Forbes 4). What does Forbes mean when he says "people who don't know don't care"? He is suggesting that to know is to have a personal understanding, or a direct connection to something. If this is so, then when people care about something they will conserve it, when they don't personally know something, they don't care enough to conserve it. Hence, in order to change the ecologically destructive paradigms that are embedded in our culture, education needs to

move beyond transference of information, to fostering relationship between kids and the natural environment.

Peter Forbes recognizes that Lefay, Mueller, and Bowers are correct in saying that we need to replace the paradigms that guide our culture, however he offers a different idea for how to achieve a cultural paradigm shift. He believes that in order to shift our paradigm, people need to have a relationship with nature so that they are intimately familiar with the land that that needs to be cared for. According to Forbes, “We will never replace the dominant culture of fear and emptiness with a culture of care and attention until more Americans, of all colors and class, carry the land in their hearts and minds... and all of us, have a relationship to nature” (Forbes 19). Forbes is telling us that our only hope for changing our ecologically destructive behaviors is to connect people’s hearts to nature. Forbes implies that information is not enough; people need to feel compelled to change from their hearts. Since information is not enough, Forbes would argue that educational reform needs to focus on developing relationships between humans and nature. Fostering relationships between humans and nature ensure that change will take place and it will be motivated by a sense of care.

Ultimately, Chet A Bowers’, Mike Mueller’s, and Raven LeFay’s ideas for how to reform education would be much stronger and more complete if they integrated the idea of fostering relationships between humans and the land into educational reform so that change is motivated by a sense of care rather than a sense of obligation. As Peter Forbes writes, we need to “inspire action rather than demand it” (Forbes 12). In order to truly initiate changes in our ecologically destructive cultural paradigms, education needs to foster relationships between humans and nature.

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