PAPER

The legitimate role of advocacy in environmental education: How does it differ from coercion?

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the controversy in the field of environmental education over the role of advocacy versus presentation of scientific information. The former involves a view of education as process, while the latter perceives education solely as content. Environmental issues involve ethical concerns and value judgments. Scientific information cannot give us the answers to our environmental questions, as these questions have all the inherent complexity of any social issue. Advocacy differs from coercion, bias, and prejudice. Coercion, bias, and prejudice have no place in environmental education, while advocacy for ecological systems does.

KEY WORDS: Advocacy · Bias · Coercion · Prejudice · Process · Dialogue

INTRODUCTION

I am an environmental educator—not an ethicist—but I perceive ethics as the connecting fabric for all interdisciplinary work with environmental issues. Since its inception, the environmental education field has struggled with the issue of education versus advocacy. Recently this struggle has been highlighted by the current US administration's proposal to discontinue, in effect, the Environmental Education Office of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and move the funds previously allocated there to the National Science Foundation.

The reason for this proposed move is the allegation that under the EPA environmental education has been involved in advocacy, while science education presumably remained untainted by this suspect activity. The US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) further

concluded that due to this support of 'environmental advocacy rather than environmental education,' the efforts of the EPA's Environmental Education Department have been 'ineffective' (North American Association for Environmental Education [NAAEE], March 7 and March 18, 2002, internal comms.). In an electronic communication to its membership, the NAAEE states: 'In the Appropriations section of the CRS [Congressional Research Service] it is noted that the OMB's assessment was not based on an audit of EPA's grant awards, but rather was the result of criticisms by special interest groups' (Environmental Education Communicator, March 18, 2002, internal comm.).

Several questions are connected with this issue: the nature of advocacy, connections between advocacy, value judgments and ethics, connections between science and social issues, and the debate concerning the difference between bias, coercion and advocacy. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines advocacy as pleading for or supporting. In current popular view, environmental advocacy is often perceived as involv-

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ing issues of value judgments and ethics, as opposed to presenting factual information devoid of moral implications. Environmental advocacy can thus be seen as incorporating the value judgment that ecosystems are important and worth protecting, conserving, restoring and treasuring. In this sense, environmental education does, indeed, often merge with environmental advocacy.

SEPARATING SCIENCE FROM SOCIAL ISSUES

The dominant Western industrialized culture promotes dualistic thinking and does not often cultivate holistic approaches. Westerners are beginning to realize that the belief that minds and bodies are separate is misleading and unhealthy. Another dominant myth is that science is totally separate from social issues and therefore remains 'pure' and 'non-judgmental.' This illusory division between the social and biological sciences is long-standing and has acquired the status of a commonly accepted 'rule,' similar to the age-old belief that the earth was flat. Tooby & Cosmides (1992) argue that use of the Standard Social Science Model promoted this division:

> The Standard Model therefore frees those in the biological sciences to pursue their research in peace, without having to fear that they might accidentally stumble into or run afoul of highly charged social or political issues. This division of labor is, therefore, popular: Natural scientists deal with the nonhuman world and the 'physical' side of human life, while social scientists are the custodians of human minds, human behavior, and, indeed, the entire human mental, moral, political, social, and cultural world. Thus, both social scientists and natural scientists have been enlisted in what has become a common enterprise: the resurrection of a barely disguised and archaic physical/mental, matter/spirit, nature/human dualism, in place of an integrated scientific monism.   (p. 49)

This apt description illustrates the commonly accepted, yet artificial, separation of science from social issues. The separation of science from social issues is a product of a reductionistic approach, in which one examines things separately and in progressively smaller and more specialized contexts, rather than looking at connections for a more holistic overview. The second approach mirrors a truly ecological approach of interconnections and systems, rather than discrete independently functioning entities.

Scientific researchers may describe their approach as 'pure research,' presumably unsullied by contamination with messy social issues. This presentation has fostered a public perception of science as purely factual and removed from the complexities of social issues, decisions, and ethical considerations. Often people mistakenly believe that science 'proves' things,

whereas scientists know this is not possible. Tooby & Cosmides (1992) describe the past prevalent view of science as a reductionist process and propose a more useful model of the scientific potential for a holistic and unifying process, in which disciplines have much to contribute to each other for the benefit of all. In this model there is no separation of science from social issues, as holistic thinking involves inter- and cross-disciplinary approaches, in contrast to reductionistic thinking which promotes separation between and division within disciplines.

Several well-known early educators fought valiantly against this apparently inherent fondness for reductionism. In 1929 Whitehead wrote that education should be about connections between subjects, connecting fragments into cohesive wholes. In that same year Dewey pondered the way our culture made an artificial separation between knowledge and action, with knowledge and science valued and action devalued. Dewey argued that the social sciences and philosophy could be the means to unite science with action. The separations between science and social sciences, body and mind, and knowledge and values mirror and contribute heavily to the artificial separation between humans and nature. The separations that we cling to are factors in keeping us confused, our knowledge fragmented, and leaves these arenas weakened, where they could be strengthened through acknowledging and supporting their interdependence. Bowers (1996) wrote that the dominant use of science is to explain and does not include moral values, let alone support and connect with cultural issues. However, often the choices in science of what and why to study are connected with cultural, social and environmental issues.

Science and 'factual knowledge' are perceived as valuable, yet value and judgment free. However, to maintain this artificial purity, scientists must stay away from the messiness of values and ethics, and thus are of little help in the real world with its plethora of complex social issues. One of these concerns that includes almost every other social issue is environmental literacy, otherwise known as environmental education or education for sustainability.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ARE SOCIAL ISSUES

Environmental issues include all the problems, concerns, joys, and beauties that are part of the fabric of our communities and social issues. Environmental issues include poverty, war, racism, justice, immigration, population, consumption, mental health and well-being, beauty, and connections beyond the self. Leopold (1949) wrote that 'Ecology is the science of

communities, and the ecological conscience is therefore the ethics of community life' (Flader & Callicott 1991, p. 340). He felt that what he termed the 'ecological conscience' combined ethics and aesthetics with economics. Leopold did not see nature as separate from people, defining community as including people, animals, soil and water.

Many scientists have been vocal in calling for bridging the artificial gap between science and social issues and between environmental and social issues. Wilson (1998) argued eloquently for this in *Consilience*, saying that most real problems are a mixture of policy, ethics, social sciences, and biology and that ethics is the foundation for knowledge unification. Holsman (2001, p. 5) pointed out that environmental decisions are 'inherently collective value choices' and that, while we certainly need accurate information to make decisions, the information itself does not dictate which choice to make.

Leopold's Land Ethic included the notion that ethics are communally-determined cultural artifacts and change with the culture. That is, within a community, one person may argue from an economic value base while another stands for aesthetic values. This dialogue is both emotional and intellectual. The Land Ethic states clearly, 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold 1949, p. 224−225). Implementation of this Land Ethic would naturally involve heated dialogue about which actions are 'right' or 'wrong,' but we would not all agree. Some individuals value self-interest and economic concerns above 'the common good.' The biotic community includes people; some might value the rights of other species above those of people. These are all value-laden issues and ethical considerations.

Social issues and environmental issues are nested together, intertwined beyond the possibility of separation. These issues rest on ethical considerations, large and small, personal and global, and cannot be separated from choices, judgments and values. Every choice selected involves a choice rejected, and the reason for choosing one thing or idea or plan over another is based upon current cultural values and ethics.

Ken Wilber (1999) distinguishes between true compassion and what he calls 'idiot compassion,' through which a person might give alcohol to an alcoholic who desires it because one wants to meet this need. He states, 'Real compassion includes wisdom and so it makes judgments of care and concern: it says some things are good, and some things are bad, and I will choose to act only on those things that are informed by wisdom and care' (p. 100). Wilber believes that 'ranking is unavoidable in values, so at least do it consciously, honestly, and above board, and stop this

hypocritical stance that you are being "nonjudgmental," which itself is a colossal judgment' (p. 100). The concept presented includes the tenet that when people state they are 'nonjudgmental,' they are presenting this as more valuable than being 'judgmental.' Our current culture seems to echo this as we cling to the fantasy that science is free of values or ethical questions, and thus free of the dreaded 'advocacy' taint. From this misconception springs the myth that education must be free of ethics, values, and, again, 'advocacy.' To hold this view, one must perceive education as a strange jumble of pure, shining facts, free from culture and warped perspectives.

EDUCATION AS PROCESS

We do ourselves a disservice when we think of education as 'value free' or disconnected from real life and messy social issues. Orr (1994), who has written numerous thoughtful pieces on this topic, feels that we need to rethink education and its use/misuse, to redefine what type of knowledge is needed and how to make connections between fragments from various sources. Orr's basic premise is that humanity has been confusing facts and information with knowledge. This idea is connected with the problem that we have purposefully severed the connection between knowledge and responsibility and ethics. For Orr, environmental education must include knowledge from both the biological and social sciences, including society, communities, culture, and politics and political action.

Education is for a purpose. Our decisions about how and what we want our education to be are based upon the same 'collective value choices' mentioned earlier. Education is a process, never static. To confuse knowledge with facts is to view students, whether adults or children, as empty vessels into which the teacher pours factual knowledge. Whitehead, Dewey, Orr, and other notable educators, past and present, have argued for a different view of education, with the focus on dialogue, process, and connections, rather than sterile content. Dewey (1929) wrote:

> Man has never had such a varied body of knowledge in his possession before, and probably never before has he been so uncertain and so perplexed as to what his knowledge means, what it points to in action and in consequences. (p. 312−313)

He was not calling for science to become involved in value choices and ethical considerations, but rather for a united approach through the social sciences and philosophy. Dewey viewed the social sciences as the appropriate bridge to make sense of what he considered disorganized and fragmented scientific information and disciplines.

I suggest that the purpose of education should include education into citizenship. Nussbaum (1997) connects education for critical thinking with education into democracy or democratic citizenship. Nussbaum examines the aims of both democracy and education starting with Socrates, who thought democracy was the most enlightened form of government due to its emphasis on each citizen's need to be capable of understanding, reason, and moral decisions. Education is especially important in informing and preparing citizens for critical thinking and dialogue. Nussbaum sees argument as 'an essential tool of civic freedom' and further states:

> In order to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good, we must produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs.   (p. 19)

When we begin to think of education as a continual, life-long process, rather than as pouring information and 'right answers' into empty vessels, education becomes an even more valuable part of our cultural and social fabric. Education is how we learn to listen to each other, to value and accept multiple perspectives, and to pursue intelligent and caring dialogue across differences. Having values and ethics, being advocates of one perspective or another, is not the problematic issue. Rather, the problematic issue is what we do with information, how we talk with each other about our values and ethics, how we work together given that we do not all advocate the same position, even when given the same information.

Situated learning is the term used by Lave & Wenger (1991) to describe learning as a social process with an emphasis on comprehensive understanding that is part of evolving membership in a community. Situated learning was meant to bridge internal, individual cognitive learning and the learning that can only take place within the larger culture when we practice what we have learned. Both are process, rather than content, oriented. We also learn process when we participate in application of learning to real life situations in the social world. Foster (2001) speaks of the need to foster a learning society, in which learning is continual and process oriented, similar to the educational approaches of both Dewey and Whitehead years ago.

Decisions about environmental and social issues are not clear-cut. Even given the same information, different conclusions are probable due to the multiplicity of conflicting perspectives and values of the involved stakeholders. Personal and professional ethics dictate that we listen to others and respect their perspectives, especially when we disagree with them.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BIAS, COERCION, AND ADVOCACY?

Advocacy is pleading for and supporting something. To advocate for the environment is always to bear in mind the importance of the role of natural systems, including all the species within them. However, this advocacy does not mean promoting one answer to environmental issues and dilemmas. Due to their extreme complexity, there is no one right answer to any of these issues. Rather, advocating for the environment means having and teaching care, attention, awareness, appreciation, and respect. If we as environmental educators are teaching process and the importance of critical thinking, dialogue, and citizenship skills, we certainly are not teaching or preaching that there is one 'right answer.' While some alternatives are better for 'the common good' than others, this is often highly dependent upon cultural and social context.

According to the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (2nd edn), coercion involves the use of force or intimidation to obtain compliance and bias refers to having an inclination in one direction that prevents an unprejudiced consideration of a question. If I as a teacher tell learners that there is one 'right answer' and that I have it, I certainly am exhibiting bias. To be a teacher is to be in a powerful position that can be used to intimidate. It is my ethical responsibility as a teacher to constantly monitor for power issues inherent in the teaching relationship and my conduct related to these.

Every profession has inherent boundary issues, personal and professional, which are ethical considerations. In education, teaching someone how to think or vote or that the teacher has the only right answers are all examples that cross these boundaries. In contrast, the advocating of respect, care, learning, and process does not cross ethical conduct boundaries. Bellah et al. (1985) discuss America's current cultural emphasis on individualism and the use of the language of therapy, rather than on a culture of community and language of commitment. The language of therapy is seen as based on cost/benefit, rather than moral grounds and ethics. Use of this language leads us to fear the language of morals and ethics. The authors continue, 'But, the therapeutically inclined are wrong to think that morality itself is the culprit, that moral standards are inherently authoritarian and in the service of domination' and 'reason-giving moral argument is feared as inevitably leading to either conflict or coercion' (1985, p. 140).

Developing our forgotten language of community and commitment involves allowing differences and encouraging dialogue and discussion, in order to find a consensual meeting ground about our moral and ethi-

cal stances for decisions. Seeing strong connections between ecology and ethics, Bellah et al. use the terms 'social ecology' or 'moral ecology' (p. 284) to define this meeting ground and the process of finding it. Ecology here, as elsewhere, refers to communities and interdependencies within all levels of community. Respect for these connections and interdependencies must be based upon collaboration, rather than domination and coercion.

Educators, as well as researchers, have a professional responsibility for continual self-examination for both awareness and acknowledgment of personal bias. We all have biases. This is part of being human. However, when we are unaware of bias, when it is below the level of our consciousness, bias can become prejudice and damage the teaching relationship. Prejudice may be seen as unexamined bias, in education as well as in the therapeutic or mental health professions. To believe that our way of seeing is the only right or true perspective is to run the danger of becoming part of a dominating and oppressive culture.

Paulo Freire (1999) saw education as political, teaching freedom for both teacher and student. For Freire, oppression, coercion, and domination involve speaking *for* others, rather than with them. Oppression, which dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed, is based upon a paternalistic notion that one knows best and can choose for others. It devalues equality, dialogue, and freedom, and is very different from advocacy.

By its very nature, education involves issues of values and ethics. There are choices of what to include, what to leave out, what perspectives are involved and why. Choices always involve values. Education has purpose; it exists to fulfill a societal need. In her environmental education 'tool kit,' McKeown (2000) distinguishes between education as neutral factual information and education for change:

> An important distinction is the difference between education about sustainable development and education for sustainable development. The first is an awareness lesson or theoretical discussion. The second is the use of education as a tool to achieve sustainability. … Some people argue that 'for' indicates indoctrination. We think 'for' indicates a purpose. All education serves a purpose or society would not invest in it.   (p. 1–2)

CONCLUSIONS

We want the scientific base of knowledge to be as free from bias and prejudice as possible. Scientific methods spell out research standards to achieve this, while scientific knowledge provides the necessary base for our collective environmental decisions. We

have been clinging, understandably, to the forlorn hope that scientific information will dictate the 'right answers' to our environmental concerns. As Dewey (1929) pointed out, we thought knowledge would lead us to certainty, ridding us of our fears and avoiding risks. However, actions always will involve uncertainty, especially within the complex interactions of real life.

While knowledge must guide and inform our decisions, it cannot make these decisions or tell us which actions would be best. Decisions and actions need to be the result of collective process, of dialogue and understanding of the multiple perspectives and values involved. This process rests upon a foundation of self-awareness, personal and professional boundaries, respect and compassion. It rests upon the realization that there are no right answers, that there will always be uncertainty and risk, and that a foundation of ethics and values does not automatically lead to coercion and prejudice. We must not let our fear of coercion and prejudice lead us to pretending to wall off ethics and values as dangerous territory. Ethics and values guide our everyday life. Singer (1995) says it well:

> Ethics is everywhere in our daily lives. It lies behind many of our choices, whether personal or political, or bridging the division between the two. Sometimes it comes easily and naturally to us, in other circumstances, it can be very demanding. But ethics intrudes into our conscious lives only occasionally, and often in a confused way. If we are to make properly considered ultimate choices, we must first become more aware of the ethical ramifications of the way we live. Only then is it possible to make ethics a more conscious and coherent part of everyday life.   (p. 170)

Knowledge is more than information; it involves dialogue and process. Advocacy is part of the purpose of education. Coercion and prejudice are not.

To comment further on this: This paper was written as part of a process to help myself puzzle through the ethical questions within my chosen field of environmental education. As Singer (1995) suggests, there needs to be permission to explore the language and foundation of the ethics field for people such as myself, who are not ethicists, but are trying to make ethics part of our conscious daily lives. The reviewer correctly identified my lack of knowledge of the field of ethics: descriptive ethics, ethical relativism, prescriptive ethics, and pluralistic ethics. All of these are areas pertinent to this discussion but ones beyond my scope at present. The role of values in the development of knowledge is another area too enormous to explore in this initial attempt to describe making ethics conscious within my field.

Reductionistic approaches lead to discrete disciplines and increased specialization, which has its own rewards in terms of increased interior richness. However, this specialization may decrease the availability of the field to other disciplines as language becomes more particular to that field.

If we are to make ethics part of our everyday lives, those of us who are not ethicists must begin to learn the language and begin to communicate our thoughts. This process is similar to the beginnings of environmental literacy. For many people, the languages of the sciences and ecology present enormous obstacles to understanding. When this occurs, the tendency is often to retreat, give up, and 'leave it to the experts.' An alternative is opening the doors to communication and dialogue (an action the 'experts' can initiate) and nurturing attempts to make both environmental and ethical thinking part of everyone's daily life.

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