

Environmental Ethics in Education

Three ways in for plant ethics

Alasdair Reid¹

A plant ethics asks that we question the barriers which exclude non-human subjectivities from our spheres of empathy. At root, it asks us to question the limits of inclusion. For most people though, even discussing such an ethics is extremely radical. Whilst the scholarly debate on plant ethics is increasing, at best this occupies a niche (within the niche of environmental ethics) in academia. This distance from public debate is deeply frustrating. Despite the efforts of decades of environmental thought and discussion, environmental ethics is largely unheard of by the general populace. For a consideration of plant ethics, an essential part must therefore be to find effective ways to overcome this remoteness. Put simply, how do we get discussion of environmental ethics (and by extension plant ethics) into the mainstream?

Education

Logically, I believe, as many environmentalists do, that education is essential for the development of a greater awareness of environmental ethics. I approach the issue of education and environmental ethics from a practical perspective. I am a secondary school teacher in Scotland, teaching English to 12-18 year olds. In Scotland, secondary school is a time when many young people make significant choices which guide their roles in the world. Secondary school is a crucial time for the development of young people's moral norms and ethics. Confining environmental ethics to universities isolates many young people from participation in debates which may connect deeply with their existing environmental concerns – not to mention the university course-choices they might prefer to make, if they feel moved to contribute professionally to a more environmentally responsible world. Only a few will get anywhere near a discussion of “plant ethics”.

However, it is not the intention of this article to suggest that environmental ethics should be taught as a doctrine in schools. In an article titled *Why I Don't Want my Children to be Educated for Sustainable Development*, Bob Jickling importantly emphasises that “education can be contributory to the process of persuasion or coercion.... This raises the questions: Should education aim to advance a particular end such as sustainable development? Is it the job of education to make people behave in a particular way?”²

Jickling argues that the concept of education for sustainability in *any* form – let alone in the form of environmental ethics – may threaten the liberatory tenet of education, that being to enable learners to think for themselves:

The prescription of a particular outlook is repugnant to the development of autonomous thinking... [Education] is concerned with enabling people to think for themselves. Education for sustainable development, education for deep ecology, or education "for" anything else is inconsistent with that criterion.³

This suggests that any ideology of environmental ethics should be offered, and recognised, *as* an ideology, and not as an agenda within the classroom.* Any sound ideology of environmental ethics will be conscious of the practical social limitations that ideologies in general possess: ideologies never translate onto the real world perfectly, and the concept of a plant ethics is one ideology that must tread carefully to avoid alienating people who are unfamiliar with it.

I regard teaching as a frontline meeting of ideology and society, the classroom being the stage on which the practical social limitations of ideologies and philosophies expose themselves. Experience as a secondary teacher has taught me about the barriers and impracticalities which would surround "expository teaching"⁴ of the more "deep green" environmental philosophies. Behaviour management, curriculum demands and exam pressure have to take precedence over a teacher's own environmentalist agenda – as parents should rightly expect.

Expository environmental education, however, may indeed be effective in encouraging environmental awareness.⁵ Although it has been argued that over-exposure to facts and case studies can breed contempt for and de-sensitivity to environmental education,⁶ perhaps giving the tools to question and explore the reasons why so many people devote their lives to environmentalism may be more profound.

In *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*, David Orr asks three direct questions that an inquiry into environmental ethics must surely answer: "how can values be integrated into the learning process without jeopardizing objectivity and fair treatment of facts, data, and logic? ... Should we strive to teach values appropriate to sustainability, or should we present these as only one possible orientation to the world? ... The aim of education is often described as teaching people how to think. But think about what?"⁷ From an informed perspective of the very real pressures of the modern classroom, this paper suggests three ways in which an environmental ethics may integrate with mainstream education and address these questions. These are: through implicit values; through thematic study; and through teaching the thinking skills for learners to access such philosophy. The purpose of this paper is to discuss to what extent each of these approaches may be compatible with environmental ethics, and by extension a plant ethics.

An Implicit Approach

The "implicit" approach describes how the underlying ideological principles of a society may influence the everyday educational superstructure of the classroom. Values, of course, explicitly underpin existing curricula. Scotland's new curriculum founding document states that: "It is one of the prime purposes of education to make our young people aware of the values on which Scottish society is based".⁷ However, more interesting is to consider how the traditional pieces of work that are produced in a school classroom can represent a way of teaching values, without necessarily preaching these values. In *Ecological Literacy*, Orr describes "the integration of objectivity with a strong value orientation. Medical education, for example, has a clear bias towards human health, not disease".⁸ Governing cultural principles (assumptions about what are

* **PAN Editors' Note:** Insofar as environmental ethics is a philosophical discourse, its prescriptions rest on rational argument, and are only as strong as the arguments that support them; in this sense the teaching of environmental ethics should in no way over-ride the right and capacity of students to think for themselves.

desirable qualities to nurture within individuals maturing into citizens) can be similarly inferred from secondary school subjects. For example, a subject's "Assessment Criteria" can set (often abstract) targets for how an individual can "improve" him or herself. Logically, there must be implied societal values which govern what a curriculum determines to be most academically valuable.

The Assessment Criteria for Scotland's English Writing Folios offer an example. From Standard Grade to Intermediate and Higher (ages 12-18), a staple choice for many folios will be the Personal/Reflective writing piece.⁹ In Reflective Writing students must comment and reflect upon a significant event or a significant aspect of their life, and show how it has changed them as a person. A common writing task set to a class is often "Write about a time in your life when you felt guilty". The grading of this task will depend upon the variation between "bald statement of personal feelings or reactions"¹⁰ (i.e. "I felt really guilty") at the negative end of the assessment criteria, and "a strong sense of mature reflection"¹¹ (i.e. "Ever since this time, I have always loathed the feeling of causing someone else unhappiness. This is probably the most important time in my life because it has created who I am as a person.") at the positive end.

The task is framed in such a way that the more convincingly a student can demonstrate that they are capable of experiencing guilt, then the higher the grade they will achieve. Importantly this suggests a space in the classroom where a mainstream teacher not only maintains a professional obligation to direct students academically, but also is permitted to implicitly introduce the values of empathy in a society. This represents therefore a specific situation in a secondary context in which values can "be integrated into the learning process without jeopardizing objectivity and fair treatment of facts, data, and logic".¹² As such, if educators are mindful of Jickling's argument that "[t]he prescription of a particular outlook is repugnant to the development of autonomous thinking"¹³, such reflective writing could provide an opening for the introduction of environmental values and ethics into secondary curricula.

A Thematic Approach

Regardless of efficacy, any hint of "environmental indoctrination" through the "implicit approach" will always be sternly opposed by educationalists. However, in mainstream secondary schooling, the "arts" subjects allow a variety of cultural, social and political themes to be *explored*. Exposure to themes, and new concepts, give learners the necessary tools to question and explore their world. One cannot teach or learn about *Animal Farm* without knowledge of communism, for example; nor *To Kill a Mockingbird* without racism; *The Handmaid's Tale* without feminism. The theme itself is not important – rather, the requirements are skilled argument constructions and meaningful engagement with the given theme. Therefore, the theme itself is not taught as truth: the exercise is for students to decide on the validity of the theme based on the evidence they can find to support it. As Orr asks, whether we should "strive to teach values... or ... present these as only one possible orientation to the world",¹⁴ this pre-existing educational ethic of argument and reason may become important in reconciling the possibility of an environmental ethics in education which avoids indoctrination. Why should learners not be given the opportunity to explore an environmentally ethical theme, and access such an area of academic debate?

My second approach suggests that thematic elements of an environmental ethics (and plant ethics by extension) may permeate acceptable curricular interpretations of Arts and Literature, and may therefore be able to move into specific classroom lessons. In English, my own subject-specialism, I have first-hand experience of teaching the concept of "mastery" in strong literary characters. The theme was taught at Advanced Higher level, the highest academic level before undergraduate University in Scotland,

and hence a level at which divergence from more traditional themes may be encouraged. In one of my own English lessons, I have asked students to consider how prevalent “mastery” is within the class text, Robert Louis Stephenson's *The Master of Ballantrae*, whose central character is egomaniacal and attempts to master all those whom he meets.

The “mastery of nature” is a well-established theme in environmental philosophy,¹⁵ and refers to the dualistic domination of nature by man. In my understanding it also connects to the psychology of solipsism which allows a person to conceive of themselves as remote enough from their own environment as to inflict damage without empathy or recourse. Teaching the theme of “mastery” may be a “way in” to first encouraging reflective thinking in students about personal attitudes of how they relate to others, before asking them to look for textual evidence within the chosen text of characters that attempt to achieve a solipsistic mastery of both social situations and the way that they interact with the environment.

In Stephenson's text, “mastery” comes in three forms. Firstly, through characters: MacKellar (the narrator, in whose voice the story is told), the Master (the protagonist), and Secundra Dass (oriental master of all things mystical). Classroom discussion has allowed my students to recognise MacKellar's mastery through invasive editorial decisions which intervene in others' accounts and poetic licence concerning the situations he perceives. Secondly, the Master himself attempts to master social situations through an overwhelming dominance, in exercise of his egomaniacal control. Thirdly and most interestingly, however, Secundra Dass, the Indian character, tries to master nature itself, which ultimately becomes the Master's undoing.

Dass tries to take his knowledge from India and fake the Master's death by giving him a drug to slow his heart-rate whilst burying him in the land. This technique works well in India, but in the climate of North America the Master is killed by the severe cold. One reading shows that the attempted mastery of nature is hubris, and contains the arrogant human assumption that intimate local knowledge of landscapes can just be transferred anywhere. However, if it seems too far-fetched for the class to humour an environmentalist reading of the text, they need only be reminded that the very title of the book itself, *The Master of Ballantrae*, juxtaposes the themes of mastery and one's local environment so prominently that it cannot be ignored.¹⁶

This environmental ethically informed reading of *The Master of Ballantrae* was attempted with a high-performing final-year high school class. On reflection, I believe that it was a successful way of encouraging students to engage with complex themes that are deeply relevant to contemporary environmental philosophy, because it was presented in an accessible, familiar format. Examining engaging texts, and exploring environmental themes in this way, is certainly more profound, and unifying, than straightforward expositional education about the environment. Rather than teaching that the domination of nature is wrong (hence indoctrinating), this approach suggests allowing students to question the mentality of “mastery” itself, in a way that broadly unifies concepts of human relationships and wider environmental relationships.

Perhaps then a powerful narrative of mastery in literature can be used as a medium to introduce this to the classroom while fulfilling official curriculum requirements, and as a point of reflection for young individuals' own attitudes, both to other students and to nature. *The Master of Ballantrae* provides what I feel is an excellent example of literature that allows learners to access this aspect of “mastery” which is surely crucial to a consideration of environmental ethics. It will be the challenge of other subject-specialists in other curriculums to identify similar cultural opportunities for learners to access similar areas of academic debate. This outlined Thematic approach complies with the independence of thought desired by the curriculum, and avoids

indoctrination. To avoid indoctrination, a secondary education approach to environmental ethics will seek ways not to preach its ethics in an expository way, but to expose minds to its possibility.

A Thought Skills Approach - Breaking Barriers

Let us not fool ourselves, a mainstream educational re-cognition of the environment as an appropriate recipient of ethical consideration would require a huge cognitive shift. Faced with such a huge task, it is not unreasonable to ask whether the mainstream school curricula can really provide the framework for beginning such a transition. Yet, in mainstream education, “critical literacy” is perhaps a pedagogy with the potential to provide the conceptual framework for environmental, and indeed plant, ethics.

“Literacy” itself is a far-reaching term. Traditionally associated with English, “literacy” defines the analytical skills required to engage with a text and analyse its workings competently enough so that the skills of a writer are not just recognised but also used by the reader themselves. “Text” today, of course, is also a far-reaching term, and not since the post-structuralists has it applied to words on paper alone. A “social text”, for example, can be read, analysed and interacted with in order to be improved¹⁷. Therefore, “eco-literacy”¹⁸ may teach how an environmental text, or eco-system, may be read, analysed for problems, and engaged with.

Very simply, critical literacy is a pedagogical framework in which learners are not simply trained to elicit meaning from texts, but are empowered to understand how texts may attempt to influence and mould them as members of a society. Students are taught deconstructive analytical skills, are taught to spot implicit evidence of oppression and exclusion in a “text”, and are then encouraged to create new “texts” with more balanced and informed perspectives. Its origins are most widely associated with the educator and social activist Paulo Freire. Freire describes the practitioner of critical literacy as the *conscientização*¹⁹ – a term which he uses to describe those who learn first to perceive and analyse the presence of oppressive social, political and economic structures within their living situations, and who then move to take political action against these structures. Refuting criticism that critical literacy challenges the very rules of society that maintain order,²⁰ Freire’s conception of the skills of critical literacy are those vital for becoming an effective participant in the world in which we live. The *conscientização* sees him or herself in a dialogical relationship with the structures of oppression, and sees it as his or her responsibility to interact with these structures in order to effect social change.

Most importantly for a discussion of environmental ethics, Freire moved in later writings to recognise the contradictions of excluding other-than-human persons from this pedagogy, in a movement which became defined as “Ecopedagogy”: “the notion seems deplorable to me”, he says, “of engaging in progressive, revolutionary discourse while embracing a practice that negates life – that pollutes the air, the waters, the fields, and devastates forests, destroys the trees and threatens the animals”.²¹

Finally, the aim of education, according to Orr, “is often described as teaching people how to think. But think about what?”²² Perhaps the question should rather be: but how should they think? In Scottish education, *The Purposes and Principles of the Curriculum 3-18* defines as a “prime purpose” of the curriculum to “help [young people] to establish their own stance on matters of social justice and personal and collective responsibility. Young people therefore need to learn about and develop these values.”²³ The Scottish Curriculum’s new curriculum *Principles and Practice* of literacy also states explicitly that “[i]n particular, the experiences and outcomes address the important skills of critical literacy”.²⁴ From this we can see that “critical literacy” is a pedagogy of liberatory thinking skills which has not only very recently been recognised but explicitly

promoted by secondary educational institutions. Scottish education officially endorses critical literacy, and other nations, including Australia (the world's leading practitioner)²⁵ employ critical literacy in the classroom.

Freire's logical conclusion was that equality must necessarily include other-than-humans. This development of critical literacy in secondary education therefore may be opening up the conceptual and curricular space which enables students to think more deeply about environmental ethics (including plant ethics), and *possibly* arrive at similarly inclusive conclusions independently, without the need for expository preaching. This is one approach to moving important environmental debates outside of the Universities and journals, connecting them with the social and ecological environments in which we live.²⁶ Indeed, the liberatory thinking skills of critical literacy may help effect the cognitive shift in secondary education which will be required for society as a whole to re-cognise plants and animals within its spheres of empathy and moral consideration.

Notes

1. Alasdair is a secondary school teacher based in Edinburgh, UK.
2. B. Jickling (1994), "Why I don't want my children educated for sustainable development," *Trumpeter* 11, (3), p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4. "Expository teaching" here should be defined as dictatorial and lecturing, where learners are exposed to the "facts" of environmental crisis.
5. There is not the space in this article to discuss the benefits of outdoor education, for example. See A. Lugg (2007), "Developing sustainability-literate citizens through outdoor learning: possibilities for outdoor education in Higher Education," *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning* 7 (2) pp. 97 – 112.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
7. D. Orr (1992), *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*, SUNY Press, New York, p. 142.
Scottish Government (2004), *The Purposes and Principles of the Curriculum 3-18*, Scottish Government, Edinburgh.
8. D. Orr (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 142
9. The "Reflective Essay" in this case is offered only as an example of how values might lie at a banal level within an existing instrument of assessment; i.e., this is not to suggest that a "Reflective Essay" may be used as a direct way of promoting plant ethics.
10. Scottish Qualifications Authority (1989), *Standard Grade Revised Arrangements in English*, retrieved 5 September 2011, http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/English_SG_arrangements.pdf, p. 39.
11. Scottish Qualification Authority (2011), *2011 English: Higher Writing Folio: Finalised Marking Instructions*, retrieved 5 September 2011, http://www.sqa.org.uk/pastpapers/papers/instructions/2011/mi_H_English_Writing-Folio_2011.pdf, p. 6.
12. D. Orr (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 142.
13. B. Jickling, (1994), *op. cit.*, p. 6.
14. D. Orr (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 142.
15. See V. Plumwood (2002), *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason*, Routledge London, New York.
16. The inspiration for this lesson came from the following book: L. Gairn (2008), *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
17. See J. Moss (2007), "Which English?" in J. Davison & J. Dowson (eds), *Learning to Teach English in the Secondary School*, Routledge-Falmer, London, New York, pp. 1-17.
18. See: R. Kahn (2010), *Critical Pedagogy, Ecocriticism, & Planetary Crisis: The Ecopedagogy Movement*, Peter Lang, Oxford; and A. Peacock (2004) *Ecocriticism For Primary Schools*, Trentham Books, Stoke on Trent.
19. P. Freire (1996), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Books, London, p. 17.
20. *Ibid.*

21. P. Freire (2004), *Pedagogy of Indignation*, Paradigm Publishers, London, p. 120. For a subsequent, more explicit definition of Ecopedagogy: "The "international ecopedagogy movement represents a profound transformation in the radical educational and political project derived from the works of Paulo Freire known as critical pedagogy. Ecopedagogy seeks to interpolate quintessentially Freirian aims of the humanization of experience and the achievement of a just and free world with a future-oriented ecological politics that militantly opposes the globalization of neoliberalism and imperialism, on the one hand, and attempts to foment collective ecoliteracy and realize culturally relevant forms of knowledge grounded in normal concepts such as sustainability, planetarity, and biophilia, on the other." R. Kahn (2010), op. cit., p. 18.
22. D. Orr (1992), op. cit., p. 142.
23. Scottish Government (2004), *The Purposes and Principles of the Curriculum 3-18*, Scottish Government, Edinburgh, p. 11.
24. Scottish Government (2009), *A Curriculum for Excellence Responsibility for All Practitioners: Literacy Across Learning: Principles and Practice*, Scottish Government, Edinburgh, p. 2.
25. See W. Morgan (1997), *Critical Literacy in the Classroom: The art of the possible*, Routledge, London.
26. For an argument on the importance of such an approach, see, for example: R. Grimes (2002) "Performance Is Currency in the Deep World's Gift Economy: An Incantatory Riff for a Global Medicine Show." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 9.1 (Winter), p. 149 – 164.