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InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Review: Why Care for Nature? In Search of an Ethical Framework for Environmental Responsibility and Education by Dirk Willem Postma

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/52p0j7p5>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 5(1)

ISSN

1548-3320

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Publication Date

2009-02-20

DOI

10.5070/D451000639

Peer reviewed

Why Care for Nature? In Search of an Ethical Framework for Environmental Responsibility and Education by Dirk Willem Postma. Netherlands: Springer, 2006. 219 pp. ISBN 978-1-4020-5002-2.

On March 26, 2008 an ice chunk about seven times the size of Manhattan collapsed off the Antarctic—an event likely to be the precursor to the collapse of the Wilkins shelf, which is about the size of Connecticut. Although this claim has been contested by a few of their colleagues, the majority of scientists acknowledge that such events, which decrease our planet's overall ice mass, are caused by global warming. Carbon-based pollutants are released into our atmosphere by the burning of fossil fuels in exchange for the energy necessary for the modern world. According to Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, melting ice produces negative consequences, such as submerging most of the world's current coastal areas under a rising ocean, resulting in over a hundred million refugees, as well as disturbing nature's delicate balance in providing water in a timely fashion from mountain snowpack. On the eve of hope in a new administration, Barack Obama promises on his website to decrease the burning of fossil fuels by "ensuring 10 percent of our electricity comes from renewable sources by 2012, and 25 percent by 2025."¹ However, even the best intentions from the head of government need public "care" for this and other similar statements to become a reality.

How do we arouse concern for such events and develop a sense of responsibility for what we have done if we do not suffer immediate consequences? Negative effects might not be witnessed until our generation has passed away. Due to the perceived economic losses associated with decreasing emissions, global warming has become a political issue as much as a scientific one. When fifty thousand copies of *An Inconvenient Truth* were offered for free to the United States National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), the organization declined the offer and explained in an internal email that accepting them would be an "unnecessary risk upon the [NSTA] capital campaign, especially certain targeted supporters."² Global warming does have some immediate effects, such as increasing the frequency and intensity of devastating storms, as witnessed recently with Hurricane Katrina. Other activities have a much longer time frame for environmental consequences, such as the storage of radioactive waste, which emits rays for up to and over a million years.

Two of the most prevalent frameworks discussed in this book which negatively oppose a sense of environmental responsibility are *liberalism*, which "tends to neglect the structural nature and causes of the environmental crisis" (p. 49), and *sustainable development*, which "posits an economic-distributive and anthropocentric perspective" (p. 52). Activities that cause the extinction of entire species every day require concern that goes beyond a merely anthropocentric

perspective. Dirk Willem Postma attempts to construct an ethical framework for producing concern about nature, raising students' awareness of environmental problems that will negatively affect future generations, including those beyond the human realm. Postma's title states the overall question he attempts to answer: "Why care for nature?" The book opens with a discussion of the standard ideology held by most progressive educators, which is in direct conflict with the nature of environmental education. Most educational scholars loathe pedagogies that openly promote ideologies, favoring instead those that facilitate critical discourse to allow learners to construct their own knowledge. Environmental education, however, promotes an ideology of planetary stewardship. Environmental education is defined by Postma as "an instrument of behavioral change, in the service of a policy of sustainable development" (p. 10). This ideology needs a foundation of caring to give deep meaning to both teachers and students.

As the examples given in the previous paragraph show, environmental problems pose a need for a Kuhnian paradigm shift in human caring to extend beyond an anthropocentric framework to a planetary one that cares for both present and future generations. Citizenship within an educational framework must be reinvented to develop pedagogies that "cover our responsibility for the long-term effects of environmentally harmful behavior and the primary goods of future citizens... reach[ing] beyond the moral community of those living at present" (p. 25). Postma's overall goal is to develop education that promotes an ideology of caring for nature by constructing an ethical framework of responsibility, as he suggests in his book's subtitle. Postma argues that many ethical and cultural frameworks do not give the theoretical foundation needed for promoting such responsibility. Constructed beyond an anthropocentric framework, environmental caring and responsibility need a critically holistic view of the planet and must be intergenerational due to the longer time spans of environmental problems.

Rather than focusing on constructing a pedagogy to promote ethical framework(s) of environmental responsibility, Postma discusses at length the societal and cultural forces within contemporary environmental pedagogy that prevent such a construction. For this reason this book is not aimed toward directing educators on how to teach environmental education; rather, it re-reads (or re-codes) sociological educational theories in order to develop pedagogies which raise consciousness of the human need for caring for and protecting the environment. In other words, Postma's goal is to raise this consciousness at a macro level rather than detailing what needs to be done at the more micro level (such as in the classroom). An exception to this is the last chapter, "Because We Educate Citizens for Nature," in which Postma stresses the need for offering Rousseauian experiences within nature to develop environmental responsibility. He stresses the need for children to learn through experiencing nature and, moving

beyond Rousseau, to begin to appreciate nature through dialogue with others about their experiences. Caring for nature requires experiences within nature “to develop their own stance towards the things in life they value” (p. 199). Like Ivan Illich, Postma warns that current society is constructed based on the manipulation of nature (i.e., technology) rather than by nature, further distancing us from environmental responsibility. However, he does not view the world as *post-nature*, as does Bill McKibben in *The End of Nature* (1989). He strongly rejects this perspective, arguing that all of our necessities originate directly from nature, including natural resources and agricultural products.

Postma acknowledges that consciousness-raising of this interdependence with nature is important, but he fears that this recognition often places environmental responsibility within a neo-liberal anthropocentric framework rather than one that allows nature to have its own intrinsic value. Although one might argue that being able to experience nature might be one of class privilege—for example, inner-city youth may not have the opportunity to go for a walk in a forest—Postma gives several examples that anyone can experience, such as the sun rising over the horizon. He stresses that viewing a recurring natural event such as a sunrise, which takes place everywhere, can be an environmental lesson by raising consciousness that nature is awe-inspiring and that our planet is a balance of natural happenings that cannot be disrupted.

Educational scholars will note that a few of the names normally associated with progressive pedagogy are cited but others are left out. In a work arguing for the need for critical discussion, consciousness-raising, student-centered meaning, and determination of hidden ideologies in education, names like Freire, Dewey, Apple, and Giroux are conspicuously missing. Reinventing these pedagogies and engaging in the work of other educational theorists would have strengthened Postma’s educational arguments but probably would not have drastically altered the book’s overall message. For example, he could have reinvented Freirian pedagogy to strengthen his argument for raising consciousness by developing pedagogy based on horizontal dialogue (dialogue without authoritarianism, with students and teachers both teaching and learning from one another) on ecological and societal issues, and their interconnectivity. Postma draws strongly on educational philosophers such as Rousseau when developing the argument that a consciousness-raising educational experience leads to a sense of care for the components of that experience (i.e., the environment). However, he often fails to adequately examine the counter-environmental education that the dominant society provides and the reasons behind it. While this is a significant limitation, the extremely complex nature of ethics and environmental education means that no one publication could completely cover all issues, theories, and perspectives. For environmental educators who are searching for theoretical foundations that support critical dialogue on why humans must care for nature, Postma gives a

strong theoretical introduction to this under-explored field with extremely important consequences for the planet's survival.

Notes

¹ Retrieved November 13, 2008, from <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/newenergy>

² Retrieved November 13, 2008, from http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=364x2964710

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Reviewer

Greg Misiaszek is a Ph.D. candidate at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies studying international education within the division of Social Sciences and Comparative Education. His research interests include ecopedagogy, Freirian pedagogy, globalization and education, adult education, social justice movements and knowledge production, and distance learning. His dissertation research focuses on successful adult, non-formal ecopedagogy programs in North and South America defining ecopedagogy as environmental education within frameworks of critical social justice models. He is currently serving his second year as the Program Officer for the Paulo Freire Institute (PFI) at UCLA, where he has been a member for over 3 years.