

Education for Sustainability

Peter Quince

We should not be changing education to fit the modern world, but changing the modern world to reflect the values contained within an enlightened and sustainable education.

It would have been an education in itself if the wasp had been allowed to live.... But more on that later.

It is abundantly clear that virtually all forms of education are preparing our children for a world in which high-tech living is the goal. No other lifestyle is considered either feasible or desirable. And yet this very lifestyle — of consumer gadgets and conspicuous consumption — is turning the earth by degrees from a beautiful place into a wasteland in which economics is the arbitrary measure of worth.

There is another way, a gentler way, a sustainable way. There exists a strategy for informing our children about the world they inhabit and will eventually control — although “stewardship” is a wiser word — which does not involve exploitation or an arrogant attitude towards the fragile fabric of nature, a fabric that has become threadbare and unraveled throughout the past two centuries.

Today's Educational Crisis

In the West, the superficial quality of education cannot be doubted.

Everything is geared to passing tests, hitting targets and obtaining the knowledge deemed essential to run a modern economy. In the main, children have not been taught deeper values, partly because there never seems to be time for such things, partly because many educators themselves consider information, skills, and training to be the sole or dominant purpose of formal education. Leave spiritual matters to church and family, they say; such things cannot be factored into the economy, anyway.

In her superb critique, *The Resurgence of the Real*, Charlene Spretnak (1997, 122) tells us that “modern schooling ... teaches children competitiveness and regimentation to prepare them for (scarce) modern jobs...” and “the traditional Buddhist values of loving-kindness and compassion do not seem to fit into



PETER QUINCE has taught in a variety of preparatory and high schools for the past 30 years. His main interests include fiction, progressive education, spirituality and the environment, gardening, and the romance of steam trains. Readers may correspond with him at 28 Fielding Street, Faversham, Kent ME137JZ, England.

the new world which absorbs the children." Of course, she is right. One can imagine what school inspectors might make of the words "loving-kindness" and "compassion" (How do you measure them on a scale of one to ten?)

When I see, as I have seen on a number of occasions, a teacher swot a wasp in full view of the class in order to show them that it's okay to be instantly rid of a troublesome creature, then "compassion" would not appear to figure in the curriculum. Such an apparently trivial act reinforces the arrogant power relation between humans and other species in Western society. Spretnak goes on to commend "efforts to ground education in ecological awareness in a deep and broad sense" (p. 123). To that end it would seem wiser to allow every creature with a sting in its tail to live another day. There is a moral lesson in allowing the weak a means of escape.

What we are perpetrating in society is reflected in the ethos of each and every school. The ever-increasing dependence on computer technology is rendering our children more and more remote from their physical surroundings. It doesn't take a great leap of imagination to anticipate where this will end: the life of the great indoors as opposed to the great outdoors. As adults are sucked into virtual worlds by slick advertising and the dubious imperatives of "progress," so they teach the younger generation to do precisely the same. The natural world, the earth itself which is and will remain our only home, is thereby distanced, becoming the glib backdrop of television documentaries and round-the-clock news and quaint histories in which our forebears worked on the land (in grainy black and white rather than our superior modern color).

In *The Case Against the Global Economy*, Helena Norberg-Hodge (1996, 406) tells us that

a sense of place means helping ourselves and our children to see the living environment around us: reconnecting with the sources of our food supply (perhaps even growing some of our own) and learning to recognize the cycles of seasons, the characteristics of the flora and the fauna.

The high degree of abstraction in modern education, characterized by the much-vaunted "knowledge economy," clearly militates against this. Sitting at a desk with a pen or a keyboard is seen as vastly

superior to wielding a fork or spade in a garden plot. In this there is a kind of technological elitism.

Most modern schools are woeful in terms of design and aesthetics. (One leading architect recently designed a futuristic campus with "learning spaces" that in the main teachers loathe!). Old schools fare better, often avoiding the glass and concrete monstrosities of Sixties design, which are natureless, soulless, and akin to giant tiered greenhouses — fine for hothouse plants (which they conspicuously lack) but enervating to children.

And what of treating the entire world, children included, as commodities? Global capitalism increasingly sees *value* as little more than economic units, functions of the corporate megamachine of profit and loss, production and consumption.

Schools are encouraged by government to embrace corporate branding, most only too happy to grab the funding that large conglomerates can provide in exchange for advertising exposure and further inculcation of materialistic values into children. Anything and everything has its price, and that price is attached to the designer label.

Where does spirituality enter into this model of education? John Lane, in *Turning Away from Technology* (1997, 204), says,

universal education is presented as beneficent, but actually it's lethal. It's in those tragic early years that children learn to denigrate their own creativity, their poetic, imaginative, sacramental life. They are taught to value matter rather than mind.

Another Way

What are we to do?

Education for sustainability presents us with another way to look at life, a pre-scientific, immemorial way whose skills and values have largely been supplanted by the dubious imperatives of capitalism. The rich in material things are not necessarily rich in spirit or heart. The poor in material things may offer us untold wisdom and a route to happiness through chosen simplicity. We should listen to those who cannot afford an axe to grind.

The foregoing may seem unduly critical or negative. Allow me to make one or two alternative suggestions.

First, education from the very youngest age should revere and celebrate all forms of life, which

implies that killing — yes, even of cussed wasps — is anathema. Then we must convey to children that a life spent in large measure out of doors is the good life, reconnecting with the unsurpassable beauty of the natural world which is so often ignored in favor of its wide-screen electronic alternative. Infants are born rich in direct sensory experience, which we gradually “educate” out of them in favor of abstraction and machine-mediation. Instinct is thus beaten into reason.

In his book *The Search* (1980, x), wilderness educator Tom Brown says

I can have a young person in the woods with me for the weekend, and can show him/her that there is another way to look at life.... You can get high on nature, high on your own surroundings — more “up” than you’ve ever been.... Our young people have little to believe in. They look around them and everything is polluted and dirty.... I’m just doing with them what the Indians pointed out, I’m getting their feet back on the earth.

Getting high on nature is a sure way to promote a culture of peace and sensitivity in the young. Getting high on fame, money, drugs, television, power, war — all of which are easily facilitated in the egoistic cut-and-thrust modern world — is the surest route to self-destruction. Societies know this to their cost.

Smallness of scale is essential, otherwise schools become impersonal, losing a sense of community and family. Economies of scale cannot counterbalance the wonderful situation in which the head teacher and staff know all pupils by name and know a lot more that is positive about them besides. (Currently I teach in such a school and it is like a breath of fresh air.)

From nursery to sixth form, schools should provide pupils with opportunities to grow their own food, recycle everything imaginable, develop awareness of their ecological footprint and offer practical help in the larger community with humility and quietude. I can think of no greater example of this than to suggest the image of the Buddhist monk going about in peace and wonder, a yielding antidote to Western hardness.

I heard of a primary school where an enthusiastic teacher of tai chi introduced that most gentle and inspiring of martial arts to all pupils on a daily basis at the commencement of the school day. The results were general calmness, increased mindfulness, and a reduction in hyperactivity.

I know of several schools that run their own farms, thereby enabling pupils to involve themselves in day-to-day responsibility in the lives of animals and, crucially, to express feelings and opinions as to the eventual fate of animals in their care.

I know of other schools where lights are left on all day, paper is treated like manna from heaven, half the dining hall food ends up in bins, enormous amounts of money are spent on computer hardware while the bookstock falls apart, and an atmosphere of cut-throat competitiveness rather than benign co-operation is actively encouraged. This need not be the way.

Charlene Spretnak (1997, 120) declares that

beyond the physical level, education should rightfully amplify, rather than sever, the unspoken sense of connectedness a young child feels with the world, just as the ecospiritual processes of socialization in a traditional native culture do.

I don’t think we should be bending education to fit the modern world, which is what currently happens, but changing the modern world to reflect the values contained within an enlightened and sustainable education.

We should show children that by allowing the wasp out of the window instead of crushing it mindlessly, we are acting in a spirit of wisdom and compassion, and learning, at last, something profoundly valuable.

References

- Brown, T., Jr. 1980. *The search*. New York: Berkley Books.
- Lane, J. 1997. Concluding dialogue. In *Turning away from technology*, edited by S. Mills. San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- Norberg-Hodge, H. 1996. Shifting directions. In *The case against the global economy: And for a turn toward the local*, edited by J. Mandler and E. Goldsmith. San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- Spretnak, C. 1997. *The resurgence of the real*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Copyright of Encounter is the property of Psychology Press / Holistic Education Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.