DEBATING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TWENTY YEARS AFTER RIO: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN BOB JICKLING AND ARJEN WALS

In the same year as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development hosted in Rio de Janeiro, Bob Jickling published this paper, “Why I Don't Want My Children to be Educated for Sustainable Development” (1992). Thus, twenty years ago, a debate began on the educational and conceptual merit of sustainable development. It continues.

Bob Jickling and Arjen Wals have been close colleagues and friends during this period and have written collaboratively on this issue. Still, their approaches have diverged in some ways. Jickling has sought to seek change primarily through scholarly critique, while Wals has chosen to see what change can be encouraged and supported “from within,” by working with agencies promoting education for sustainable development. In what follows they both reflect on this period.

Why I Don't Want My Children To Be Educated For Sustainable Development: Some Reflections Twenty Years Later

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It is now about two decades since my original paper was published (Jickling, 1992), right on the heels of the Rio Conference. It has certainly been provocative over these years, often generating strong responses and bemused interest. Like most people who like to write, I frequently do so as a way to think through a problem—to figure something out, however tentatively. That was the case with this paper, and I still like it. Importantly, I think it points to questions that remain relevant, maybe even more so today. However, given the exploratory nature of the paper, much was left unsaid. In the preparation for Rio plus 20, it seems an appropriate time to reflect on the context of the original paper and the relevance of its enduring questions.

First, to contextualize the paper, it might be useful to know that “Why I Don't Want My Children To Be Educated For Sustainable Development” (Jickling, 1992) was written as part of a sequence of papers critiquing environmental education, not as a defence of this field. One of the other papers was critical of behaviourist literature (Jickling, 1991a) and yet another took a critical look at the problem-solving orientation prevalent at the time (Jickling, 1991b). The central concern in all three of these papers was education itself. That is, were approaches to environmental education extant in the literature, actually educational?

One of the criticisms of the paper at the time of publication, and since, was that it appeared to present education as a value free activity, and as a single conceptual meta-narrative. This criticism is often framed by the question: “Who’s conception of
education counts?” Such questions were once interesting provocations, but they have become clichés and, worse, conversation stoppers. The effect seems to have brushed aside questions like: “What is education?” and “Is this educational?” For me, early signs that this trend was becoming a problem were revealed in colleagues’ comments such as: “Let’s not talk about education, it doesn’t have meaning any more,” or “education means just about anything to anybody now.”

Most recently, I was shocked by yet another academic colleague’s response when asked to describe her own assumptions about education. Her first response was that she “didn’t like to talk about that kind of question” and then gave the usual disclaimers about how she felt education varied between individuals and was time and context dependent. When these concerns were acknowledged, and she was again asked to clarify her own assumptions at the present time and place, she ultimately answered that: “she was a critical postmodern scholar,” again brushing aside questions about education. Whether some scholars like it or not, “What is education?” and “Is this educational?” are legitimate questions, and answers are implicitly enacted through their own pedagogical practices.

I am well aware of concerns about meta-narratives, sensitivities to context, and individualities, and I began to address them shortly after “Why I Don’t Want My Children To Be Educated For Sustainable Development” was published (Jickling, 1997). More recently Arjen Wals and I have developed a heuristic designed to encourage scholars and practitioners to construct their own conceptions of education (Jickling & Wals, 2008). However, I am just as concerned about the other end of the spectrum, a realm of fragments and relativism—where education is eviscerated of meaning. While I acknowledge that education is not value free, this doesn’t mean anything goes.

Much contemporary scholarship has well and truly problematized meta-narratives, to the point that I find skepticism has often slipped into cynicism and fragmentation has nudged many scholars and practitioners in the direction of educational relativism. I think that we collectively need to take up this problem of relativism, and that includes developing ways to talk thoughtfully about education as an idea, again (cf, LeGrange, 2004; Jickling, 2009), however inconvenient this may be to some of our own agendas. In this task, I think “Why I Don’t Want My Children To Be Educated For Sustainable Development” is as important as it ever was. The very idea that education should be for something like sustainable development remains as questionable as ever. The concerns I raised have been interesting to many scholars and practitioners who still read what I’ve said with interest; but, more often than not, the issue remains under-engaged.

There are two fairly pragmatic reasons to take a look at questions raised in “Why I Don’t Want My Children To Be Educated For Sustainable Development.” First, there is push back. Whatever scholars and environmental educational practitioners may think, there appears to be a broad public sentiment in many parts of the world (though not necessarily all) that education excludes actions that smack of
indoctrination. Typically, when environment-related education is making political and practical advances, there can be significant push back. When this happens, environmental education and associated “educations” are damaged (eg. Butcher, 2007; Cushman, 1997; Sanera, 1998, 1996.) Some of these criticisms may not be fair or accurate, but they tend to stick.

Second, I’m doubtful that sustainable development is an idea that is adequate to the task of enabling thoughtful and effective responses to local and global issues. Recently, Andy Stables introduced me to a new metaphor for education. He said, “it was about doing the impossible” (Pers. Comm. December 2010). I like it. At worst, education can be compared with schooling and its social reproduction of existing norms. However, when infused with Stables’s more optimistic analysis, education reflects, amongst other things, an acquisition of knowledge and understanding—whether received and/or socially constructed, critical and imaginative reflection, and an impulse to act on the seemingly impossible. It also means thinking and doing things that haven’t been done before. When seen this way, why should we be satisfied with aiming for the perceived, and by now somewhat tired, “wisdom” of sustainable development when more powerful ideas are needed?

Interestingly, wherever I go, I am still approached by people who have read “Why I Don’t Want My Children To Be Educated For Sustainable Development.” Many of them still seem to find it useful. Frankly this surprises me a bit as I recognize that in 1991, when I first wrote it, I did not include careful qualifications about many things noted above, but not the least of these omissions was a discussion about the limits of generalizability. Still, around the world this paper retains a useful resonance with many folks. I agree that education changes over time, that it is context-dependent, and that it is something for folks to decide about for themselves. However, I also see that there may not be such a collective fragmentation about education’s meaning as might be expected. Sure there are differences, but not a free-for-all either—except where the question about the nature of education is ignored, dismissed, or seen as beneath critical postmodern scholars.

**Educating children in post-normal times – re-imagining education with sustainability in mind**

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What has changed since Rio in terms of the engagement of people and education systems in issues of environment, nature, development? Has the focus on sustainable development, and the more recently and more commonly used “sustainability,” strengthened this engagement around the globe? What role has the UN DESD played so far?

Needless to say, it is difficult if not impossible to provide solid and single answers to these questions. Most scientists monitoring the health of the planet will confirm that
the state of the planet today is worse today than it was in 1992, especially in terms of humanity’s footprint. Today, over seven billion people are using precious resources, some of which are not renewable or are regenerated at a pace slower than the rate at which they are used. Furthermore, the use of these resources creates by products that are harmful to the planet’s ecosystems, if not in the short run, then certainly in the long run. Issues of inequity, marginalisation, loss of diversity, poverty and so on, remain and are arguably more severe now than back in 1992. The rapid rise of “emerging markets and economies,” formerly referred to as “developing countries,” has improved the material lives of many people in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, this is also contributing to an increased gap between rich and poor, an accelerated use of natural resources, and a rapid increase of CO₂ emissions, e-waste, etc.

What we do also see is a world-wide increase of interest in ideas like: “sustainability,” “triple bottom lines of people-planet-profit,” “the greening” of virtually anything, and “corporate social responsibility” in the world of business and industry. This puts the concerns of many environmental and sustainability educators on the agenda of groups that before Rio tended to dismiss such concerns. Of course, there are those who question the underlying motives of introducing these new concepts: are we witnessing forms of “green washing” and “feel-good sustainability” that leave intact inherently unsustainable routines and planetary systems? Or, on the other hand, is this the beginning of a major shift or transition towards a more just, fair and, indeed, sustainable world that does not rely on consumerism, growth, and materialism but (re)discovers humanism, dynamic equilibriums, and spiritualism?

As far as education is concerned, consider David Orr’s observation that more education is only useful when we reflect on what kind of education is strengthened and with what purpose. Otherwise, he suggests, more education will only “equip people to become more effective vandals of the Earth” (Orr, 2004, p. 5). The UN’s “Education for all,” but also the DESD, should also be considered with this in mind. Most education around the world focuses on preparing people for playing their roles in the global economy. Only in the margins there still spaces for things like citizenship, democracy, arts, and humanities, philosophy, ethics, change and transformation, and so on. Martha Nussbaum’s book, Not-for-Profit (2010), points out what the consequences are of using business models for organizing education and privileging private and economic interests in public education.

What has EE, E/S and ESD been able to do in re-orienting education and learning since Rio? In several recent publications (Wals 2009a; 2009b; 2010)I pointed out that there have been many provisions for supporting ESD, but also for EE and, as is the case in some countries, EESD. There are great regional differences in interpreting what these educations mean and how they should be strengthened. On the ground, we do see emerging some innovative approaches that appear promising: from whole institution/school approaches to sustainability, to hybrid, cross-boundary forms of learning around local issues, to the development of educational
sustainability Apps. However, most of it is in the margins and not yet in the mainstream.

With my good friend and colleague, Bob Jickling, I have co-authored a few papers in the Post-Rio era on the role of ESD in strengthening engagement in what we both believe are the key issues of our time (Jickling & Wals, 2008). These papers have been quite critical of both Sustainable Development as a concept and of ESD as the UN preferred form of education to engage people in SD. Bob had already questioned SD and education for SD before the Earth Summit took place in his infamous “Why I Don’t Want My Children To Be Educated For Sustainable Development” (1992). The paper resonated around the globe for a number of reasons (see Bob’s contribution to this piece). Over the years he has consistently argued against ESD and SD. In the meantime, I have moved more to the inner-circle of the DESD by accepting a role of global report coordinator for the DESD commissioned by UNESCO. I continue to support and share Bob’s critique of SD being a conceptually flawed and internally inconsistent concept. I, too, question the colonializing instrumentality that characterized ESD, certainly in its early years when it was superimposed on countries and communities as the new “flavour of the day.”

I am, perhaps, a bit more pragmatic and less convinced than he that underneath ESD and SD lies a conspiracy to eliminate environmental education and to distract people from more fundamental matters (e.g. societal critique, deep democracy, questioning capitalism, (re)connecting people with each other and with the natural world). Whereas in the early years of the DESD there appeared to be a strong push for replacing EE with ESD and for arguing that EE was too narrow in its focus, we now see that people behind the DESD and the early advocates of ESD recognize that: a) EE in the spirit of Tbilisi highly resembles what many consider to be ESD, b) in some parts of the world it is more generative to work under the umbrella of a well-established EE movement and infrastructure, c) what is actually done on the ground in terms of teaching and learning is more important than the label under which these activities and actions take place. Nonetheless we need to be cautious as educators of ESD, or EE for that matter, becoming a part of the neo-liberalist project, especially now that we are entering “post-normal” times.

Post-normalism refers to the emerging tentativeness of knowing and (scientific) knowledge, the contested and value-laden nature of inquiry and its products, the inevitable uncertainty, complexity and, indeed, cynicism and scepticism, surrounding governance, decision-making, and lifestyle choices. How, for instance, do citizens need to handle “sustainability confusion”? Questions like: “Has the Deepwater Horizon oil spill led to irreversible ecological damage or will nature take care of itself and self-heal? Can organic food production feed the world or is the use of genetically modified crops inevitable?” do not have simple and single answers that can stand the test of time. Who is right or who is wrong? How bad or good are things, really? What to do? What not to do? How about the idea that what might be right in one place or situation might be wrong in another? What if scientists don’t agree and science becomes just another opinion in a fact-free debate? Clearly, living
in times of uncertainty, complexity, and contestation, but also in times of ICT-mediated hyper-connectivity and information overload, inevitably has consequences for education, learning and the role of research and science and society. This will be the post "post-Rio" challenge for educators and researchers with a planetary consciousness. In the years to come, this challenge will require a re-imagining of education and the development of new forms of learning that require the fields of EE and ESD to enter unknown terrain.

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**Bob Jickling:** Arjen, it is good to know that we agree on most things! But, I would like to take up a few things in your opening remarks. First, I think you are guilty of a little hyperbole in suggesting that I might be some kind of conspiracy theorist. It is true that am concerned about the combined consequences of the education for sustainable development phenomenon, but some of these concerns are implicit in the activities and may not even be conscious. In many cases the connections between people and events are more likely serendipitous than planned. Where they are purposeful, I suspect the links are more like Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizome’s—more random and wandering in nature, than concerted and highly orchestrated.

It is also true, that I have found some initiatives particularly troublesome. For example, the Thessaloniki conference organizers did seem to aggressively seek to displace environmental education and replace it with education for sustainable development. This struck me as damaging and divisive. More recently, I couldn’t help but notice that the UN resolution on behalf of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development didn’t reference the importance of the environment or ecology. That may or may not have been purposeful, but in the end it is not value-neutral. And then there is the network of Regional Centres of Expertise that has been “mobilised to deliver education for sustainable development (ESD) to local and regional communities” (UNU-IAS, u.d.).

I wouldn’t call this assemblage of initiatives, including others like them, a conspiracy, but still they pull a combined weight. When I think of this, I’m reminded of Hebert Marcuse (1964). According to his theorizing, the kinds of cultural products described above “indoctrinate and manipulate—promote a false consciousness” (p. 57). And, the “indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; becomes a way of life” (p. 12). Marcuse calls this the “music of salesmanship” where “[e]xchange value, and not truth value counts. On it centers the rationality of the status quo, and all alien rationality is bent to it” (p. 57). In other words, the combined weight of the activities, intentional or not, pulls attention in the direction of education for sustainable development, and, I think, the larger status quo.

As you rightly point out, it is impossible to know what impact environmental education, education for sustainable development, or other educations have had over the past two decades. I also acknowledge that some practitioners and scholars
are more concerned with what is actually done on the ground than the labels attached. I can see that many folks are trying to infuse ever more educational ideas into the inherently problematic education for sustainable development. I cannot help thinking, however, that we could be better off if we began with greater emphasis on what is more likely educational. And, this would be true in environmental education, as well as sustainability education, place-based education, and other constructions. As you and I have already argued (Jickling and Wals, 2008), education for sustainable development may be infused with good educational ideas, but in the end it is a kind of “feel good” education; because, it is ultimately constrained by the idea of sustainable development.

On the last point, Anthony Weston (1992) claims that environmental ethics is a new field and that it would be a mistake to constrain our discussions about where we might go, or to converge on particular assumptions. He argues that our challenge is not to systematize values, but to create opportunities for new values to evolve. We need, then, to create conceptual, experiential and physical space to move and think. If, following Andy Stables, we need future generations to do the seemingly impossible, we will need to create conditions where they are able to generate ever more powerful ideas.

In light of the concerns that I’ve been discussing, I do note that in your comments above, and in your reporting (Wals, 2009), that those who back the Decade are beginning to soften their stance. You point out that they recognize there is an important place for environmental education, and other educations, in global discourse and practice. This is the best news in two decades! But, can we now go further a bit further. For example, can these same folks take some concrete action? I’d love to see, for example, UNESCO and UNU modify the conception of regional centres. Instead of having Regional Centres of Expertise in “Education for Sustainable Development,” why not allow individual centres to decide how to frame their expertise, and then encourage them all to flourish. This movement could then include centres of expertise in environmental education, sustainability education, ecological education, place-based education, and others. This is a strategy that would speak much louder than words, and would help enable the kind of intellectual and practical diversity that is the cauldron for creating powerful new ideas. That is something that I could really get behind.

Arjen Wals: I do support your concern about education and for the way educational possibilities are limited when education is framed in terms of sustainable development, particularly when SD is narrowly interpreted and forcefully prescribed. Still, I do believe that the people within the UN system involved in the DESD and ESD, as well as the people who put their energy in things like RCE’s, are not consciously limiting choices. Many of them are willing to engage with ideas and perspectives other than their own, particularly those who are inspired by a genuine concern about the well-being of the planet, and not by self-interest and strategic motives.
The people behind the Thessaloniki declaration may have gotten carried away in their enthusiasm for what they saw as a breakthrough innovation: ESD. But, they didn’t mean to be damaging and divisive, even though that may have been the unintended result of their efforts. The fact that the UN resolution, on behalf of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, does not have a reference for the importance of the environment or ecology is unfortunate, but there are many UN documents and, indeed DESD-related documents, that do have such references, and also references to environmental ethics (see for instance http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/science-and-technology/environmental-ethics/). In particular, the Mid-DESD Bonn Declaration has many references of this kind:

Through education and lifelong learning we can achieve lifestyles based on economic and social justice, food security, ecological integrity, sustainable livelihoods, respect for all life forms and strong values that foster social cohesion, democracy and collective action (www.esd-world-conference-2009.org/fileadmin/download/ESD2009_BonnDeclaration080409.pdf).

So it’s there.

However, there is a need to remain alert and critical in order to make people aware of the values and assumptions of their expressions and positions—including our own. And, there is a need to make clear that choices strengthen particular vantage points at the expense of others that might hold (more?) promise in co-creating a world that is more sustainable than current prospects. Finally, there is a need to point out the contradictions between what we state and what we do. I think this is indeed a responsibility of education, and I think this is what you have been doing so well over the years.

**Bob Jickling:** Thanks for that Arjen. As we move to close this conversation, for now at least, it seems that we are again in agreement on many things. Importantly, we share the views that educational potential is limited when framed by education for sustainable development; we seem to agree that forceful promotion of education for sustainable has, at times, been damaging and divisive, whether this was intended or not; and, that it is unfortunate that the United Nations’ resolution for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development fails to mention ecology and the environment. This last point does, however, illustrate how plastic the sustainable development rhetoric can be, and how it can be easily manipulated, or inadvertently bent, in ways that favour the global status quo.

I acknowledge, too, that we have both agreed, here and elsewhere, that there are folks doing good work “on the ground,” trying to infuse good educational qualities into what we both feel is an educationally limiting conception. I like the idea that the discourse is softening and that there is, again, a greater interest in increasing
diversity in the languages of education to better reflect a breadth of interest. But, is this real? I’d love my university to be invited to become a Regional Centre of Expertise in **Environmental Education**. That could be an important practical and symbolic step towards bridging some of the divisions that have occurred.

However, to finish, I will return to Martha Nussbaum’s (2010) book that you cited earlier. She argues that we do not need, “reliable servants of any ideology, even a basically good one,” and that we should, as artists do, “ask the imagination to move beyond its usual confines, to see the world in new ways” (p.24). This resonates with our ideas about education, and seems a good way to tackle the “impossible.”

**References**


Jickling, Bob. (1997). If environmental education is to make sense for teachers, we had better rethink how we define it! *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education. 2*, 86-103


