

Global learning for sustainability

- with peoples' wisdom

John Peet and Katherine Peet

87 Soleares Avenue, Christchurch/Otautahi 8
New Zealand/Aotearoa

"Unless we change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed."
(Chinese proverb¹)

Introduction

In this paper we consider some strategies for mass education about the environment - a topic which is very much to the fore nowadays. We emphasise that our interest is in **adult education**, not the education of young people. One reason is that children spend more time in families and in communities than in schools; school education often cannot easily address issues that are located in homes and community environments. The other reason is that, if we wish to change the direction in which society is going, we need to start with the principal decision-makers - adults - in the expectation that schools will then be able to respond.

Even with this reduction in scope, it is still a large issue. For example, which "masses" are we trying to "educate" about the environment? Is it the masses in the industrialised North, who consume a disproportionately large quantity of the world's resources, or those of the South, where rainforests are being cut and deserts created? Is it the elite of both, or the masses over whom the elite hold financial, political or military power? Is it the ideological high priests of both North and South, in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, who promote and support economic systems which reward the rich for consuming more, while condemning the poor to be forever the victims of both social and environmental degradation? Is it all of these?

Whatever the answer to our questions, different approaches must be used for different groups. There is a context for each, to which the adult education strategy must respond.

Here we take a somewhat simplified approach, in that we describe the topic in terms of two models. While it is tempting to do so, we do not suggest that they simply reflect North and South, Right or Left. As a generalisation, however, we believe there is evidence that the poor and vulnerable are already living more sustainable lifestyles than the rich and powerfulⁱⁱ. Given the opportunity, they would live even more sustainably. The opportunity to do so is closely involved with the need to give them the confidence to see themselves as in fact the leaders, as we move towards the 21st century.

Adult Education Models

Linda Sissons and Michael Law illustrate the two main models, and their mutual contrasts, in the following examples (emphasis added)ⁱⁱⁱ:

"Continuing educators have two choices:

'... I wholeheartedly support the principle that educational opportunities should be equal ... but I must first go back to an even more basic issue, that of the whole purpose of education in its relation to society. The role of an education service, as I see it, is to reflect rather than to lead society in that its major task is to prepare its citizens to take their place in it. Thus an education service, if it is to avoid being disruptive, can only be innovatory in so far as it sensibly anticipates obvious and uncontroversial trends in social attitudes'. (Margaret Thatcher)

"or as Gelpi puts it:

'Education for all, and at all ages; but with what objectives and with what means? "Lifelong education" could result in the reinforcement of the established order, increased productivity and subordination; but a different option could enable us to become more and more committed to the struggle against those who oppress [hu]mankind in work and in leisure, in social and emotional life.'

According to sociologists^{iv}, these two approaches may be described as the "consensus" paradigm and the "conflict" paradigm, respectively. They differ fundamentally in their views of the structure of society, and in their notions of inequality.

To those within the consensus paradigm, social inequality is an unconsciously evolved device by which societies ensure that the most important positions are filled by the most qualified persons. Thus, inequality in society does not arise out of vested interests but out of the needs of society as a whole. According to its adherents, inequality is not only inevitable but also necessary and beneficial to us all. This paradigm reflects an individual-based view of human behaviour, exemplified in Margaret Thatcher's comment.

A different approach is taken by those working within the conflict paradigm, who approach questions of social change and inequality (and hence adult education) from the standpoint of the various interest groups within society. Inequality is seen as a direct result of the struggle for power, privileges and goods and services that are in short supply. Conflict theorists such as Gelpi emphasize competing interests, elements of domination, exploitation, and coercion. The dominant ideas in any society are those of the ruling class.

The two paradigms present different views on the social functions of education. Going somewhat further, Antonio Gramsci^v suggests that the relationship between education and social change - especially in relation to adult education - requires an understanding of **hegemony**.

Hegemony

According to Kjell Rubenson^{vi}:

"The notion of hegemony refers to the way one social class exercises political, cultural, or economic influence over other classes. ... it is the establishment of a moral or cultural influence, rather than physical coercion or political power, that is the basis of Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Social control occurs through wide-ranging consent to and acquiescence in the culture and ideas of the dominant hegemony. Debate in the sociology of education around the notion of counter-hegemony is mainly concerned with how teachers within the formal educational system can create similar liberatory strategies."

This understanding raises a number of important issues for those engaged in adult education. In our opinion, adult educators have to make a choice right at the start of our work. Are we to be a force for maintaining present structures, or for changing them? In our opinion there is no such thing as neutral provision of education - **all** education is value-laden, even scientific information about the environment!

Our belief is that, whether in societies of the North or the South, of the Right or the Left, a climate for sustainable development is more likely to be successful via appropriate **counter-hegemonic** adult education. If we resource those processes already in place that are dedicated to maintaining the social, political and economic status quo (as with Margaret Thatcher, above), we see a virtual guarantee of unsustainability for the foreseeable future.

George Bernard Shaw put the dilemma that faces us in these terms^{vii}:

"The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

In the context of adult education, this suggests that progress in adult education depends upon "unreasonable" people - those who persist in challenging the world to change for the better. This is especially so for women, who provide seventy percent of the leadership being taken around the world, to protect the environment^{viii}. In this context it has been pointed out by Ivan Illich^{ix} that *"True adult education is more dangerous than training guerillas"*.

According to Francisco Vio Grossi^x, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or as Grossi describes them, "promotion organizations", are a response to political-economic hegemony, especially in developing countries:

"... the imposition of economic liberalism as defined by the economists of the Chicago School has meant that the State has abandoned its responsibility for and role in social development. It has maintained its function as guarantor of the social order through oppression thus creating a climate in which hegemonic economic groups can maximize their profits. This policy has created a vacuum and hence a space in which promotion organizations have been created to support oppressed groups in their search for the fulfilment of their basic human needs."

A central tenet or value guiding the work of the NGO/promotion organizations described by Grossi^{xi} is participation and popular organization^{xii}.

"... the benefactor of a project should be at once the subject of the action and the conductor of its development. The relationship between the external agent, member of the promotion agency, and the local community should be based on dialogue and sharing. The imposition of ideas and paternalistic attitudes must be set aside. Decision making within the project and, ultimately, its evaluation, must involve the active participation of all concerned."

Approaches to Learning

There are at least two views of what learning or knowledge means, that go back at least two thousand years. One is of **learning as experience**, rather than **from** experience. The other is **structured knowledge**, in the form of a classification of information. The first is termed **personal knowledge**, the second **official knowledge**, by Illich^{xiii}.

The Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire^{xiv} distinguishes between the two by using the image of the traditional "banking" approach to education as one where participants are treated as empty vessels that must be filled with information. The underlying implication of the traditional approach is that students are "uneducated" and in need of knowledge that can come only from teachers or experts. Also described as the "hole-in-the-head" method, this approach often results in creation of dependency and powerlessness on the part of participants. As the earlier quotation from Margaret Thatcher indicates, it is also the method generally encouraged by those in positions of power.

Freire's method encourages participants to see themselves as founts of information and knowledge about the real world. When encouraged to work with the knowledge they have from their own experience, they can develop strategies together to change their immediate situations. In other words, this form of education can be seen as **education for change**, whereas the "banking" approach is seen as **education for adaptation**. The point made above, that adult educators have to decide whether they will support the status quo or support counter-hegemonic education, will no doubt be clear to the reader.

From a sociological viewpoint, the context and structure of the process of learning are critical. Unless seen in its total social context, **Education as a social phenomenon** is reduced to **learning, a psychological phenomenon**, when reduced to the individualised level. Rubenson points out^{xv}:

"From the perspective of the conflict paradigm, formal adult education is subject to the same hegemony that governs the preadult education system, although the paradigm does not deny that adults differ in many respects from their counterparts in preadult education.

"... educational activities organized through a social movement are the most distinct examples of counterhegemonic activities that can be found.

"Discussing the concept of self-directed learners, Freire denies the possibility of individual self-empowerment. If the sense of freedom is not social, then the only thing being exercised is an individualist attitude toward empowerment or freedom. Shor sees the emphasis on self-education in the American educational context as a reflection of the deep roots of individualism, the utopian devotion to 'making it on your own'.

"In summary, when analyzing adult education and social change, it is important (1) to focus on the extent to which adult education is directed toward either the collective or the individual, (2) to realize that organized adult education, as well as self-education, can be of a collective or individual nature, and (3) to question the extent to which the educational activities are connected to a broader social and political struggle."

Clearly, the answers to the question "What is adult education for?" are different, depending upon what kind of adult education one is looking at. If directed at **maintaining** present power structures, the form adult education takes, and its outcomes, are obviously going to be different from adult education directed towards **changing** present structures.

Because of the centrality of its social context, any adult education programme has to be specific to a time and place. There is no single model that is demonstrably valid outside a hegemonic context. Regrettably (with often the best of intentions) models coming from the industrialised North tend to be implicitly hegemonic, even if not explicitly so.

Thus, we would like to raise our concern about the term "mass education about the environment". It has connotations of a "top-down" process, not a participatory one. In the context of sustainable development, we see the most valid form of mass education about the environment to be that which comes from and is directed towards the grass-roots. We therefore question the "expert-based" model, widely used in developed countries and often encouraged in developing countries, involving what Sissons and Law^{xvi} refer to as the:

"... parachuted expert, dropping silently down upon an unsuspecting community."

This is not in any way to suggest we do not value experts; we are experts ourselves! But we appeal to experts to see themselves as part of a process in which their expertise contributes to the strengthening of people's wisdom.

Adult Education and Sustainable Development

The socio-political-economic structure of a country or region determines the hegemony, and the hegemony decides what is the underlying curriculum for education for adaptation. It has a similarly large effect on the methods of allocating resources, whether these be money or raw materials, land, water and so on.

Methods used to allocate resources often pre-empt, or at the very least constrain, the ability of individuals, family groups and communities to act in ways that are consistent with their values and wisdom. In many situations, the socio-political-economic context **prescribes** many aspects of the value system, thereby effectively denying people the power to act sustainably.

The adult educator Rajesh Tandon, in an examination of challenges for adult education in Asia and the South Pacific, comments that^{xvii}:

"The global capitalist economic order and a welfarist and charitable response to the problems of poverty and the poor are resulting in individual and privatised perspectives of well-being, quality of life, standard of living, etc. The philosophical and political concept of ensuring 'common good' has disappeared both from the debates on social transformation and from the planning of strategies in national and multi-lateral decision making structures.

"What then is the role of adult education in the face of such challenges? In my view, the most important contribution of adult education in the coming period in the region is to continue to address the concerns and problems, and the hopes and aspirations of the poor themselves." "Adult educators like us from this region must ensure that our vision, our aspirations, our capacities, our institutions continue to remain responsive to and linked to the struggles of the poor and not get co-opted into a technical profession preparing white and blue collar workers of the future economic order.

"The second role for adult education in the region is to create a climate of tolerance and mutual appreciation. Respecting the differences in religion, caste, culture, language, perspectives, gender is perhaps a major requirement of individual and collective human functioning at this juncture in many countries of the region.

"A third contribution of adult education ... is to strengthen the possibility of a sustainable life style. The problems of environment, degradation of natural resources, pollution, destruction of a natural balanced regenerative habitat are essentially problems of life-style. Unless we - as individuals, families, communities and nations - come to terms with the question of a sustainable life style consistent with our natural ecology, the problems of environment and pollution will not go away. Adult education, therefore, has a significant role to play in elaborating and promoting the elements of such a sustainable life style consistent with the different ecological environments.

"And finally adult education can help in regaining a sense of indigenous cultural identity among communities of our region. The most devastating consequence of a uni-polar world is the homogenization of cultures. The socio-diversity inherent in the diverse and varied cultural mix of our region is being slowly but surely eroded and destroyed." "... our own people, children and youth, poor and rich, rural and urban, are beginning to discard our cultural heritage in the race to become 'modern'. Our region has the potential to provide cultural and moral leadership to the world at this critical juncture.

"The challenge for us adult educators of the region, and our colleagues and institutions, is to shape our practice to become relevant to our people."

The socio-political-economic context of a society must be taken into account in any analysis of education, before one can create an adult education programme to support a change to sustainable development. Sociological understanding is an integral part of education for sustainable development.

Ethics and People's Wisdom

Many peoples already know the essential needs of sustainability^{xviii}. Here is an example of what the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa-New Zealand produced as a contribution to the New Zealand government's UNCED process in 1992:

As the collective voice of the Maori tribes of New Zealand and respecting the separate sovereignty of each, we in Congress and in the international community of indigenous people affirm:

- 1 That environmental management shall be based on respect for the **spiritual integrity** of the environment as the literal embodiment of our ancestral beginnings and our eventual rest.*
- 2 That we treat the environment as a living system of which we are part and which we must respect as we would the personality of another.*

- 3 *That we have an **inter-generational responsibility** for the environment which we hold in trust. It came to us from our ancestors and we must pass it on to our children at least in no worse condition from that in which we received it and we must do everything that we can to improve the quality of their heritage.*
- 4 *Under the principle of **personal sufficiency** that each of us is entitled to take what we need of the resources that our world provides but to care for their sustainability and for the needs of others.*
- 5 *The principle of **collective ownership** which also allocates resource use but controls it through central leadership responsible to the people.*
- 6 *The principle of **collective management** which also allocates resource use but controls it through central leadership responsible to the people.*
- 7 *The principle of **equitable use** under which there may well be inequalities of resource allocation just as the individual pursuit of personal excellence recognises inequality within a framework of social equity.*
- 8 *That the intrinsic **value of traditional knowledge** derives from the scientific tradition of our ancestors who through observation and use over centuries developed our tribal wisdom, which in the broadest sense is the most pragmatic and practical.*
- 9 *That our future will depend upon the **quality of partnership** which we will be able to achieve as we draw into our traditional cultural framework all the wealth of knowledge from every source that we can tap.*
- 10 *That we are patient people but we become impatient when problems which confront us cannot be dealt with immediately. Our ancestors taught us not to tolerate the intolerable. Therefore, our **style of conflict resolution** is cultural and combines confrontation, negotiation and reconciliation as elements of action. These same principles apply to remedies for current environmental ills. We want **direct action**.*
- 11 *That in being good survivors, we have learned to apply **anti-waste ethics** to all things - to our own energies, to energy itself, to the talents of our people, to the resources of the world around us. Even that which others call waste cannot be wasted.*
- 12 *The **ecological principle of wholism** which was not invented by human thought or discovered by science. It was there from the beginning in our legends of the origins of all things including the ethics of relationship between people, their gods, and their world.*

That statement (and related ones from other countries) shows that indigenous peoples have ideals that are entirely consistent with modern scientific understanding. The example also raises important questions about how we respond to the key issues, when most of the socio-political-economic structures in New Zealand/Aotearoa explicitly clash with those statements of value. At present, Maori have no political power to put their ideals into action. To us, then, the big question must be; How do we remove the roadblocks which the developed nations have put in place to ensure they remain in control the world's resources?

Conclusions - and Challenge!

We believe we have made the point in this paper that education about the environment, about sustainable development or anything else, cannot be separated from consideration of certain basic issues. These relate to questions of power and control, of wealth and influence, and of that social participation in setting national goals and policies that some of us refer to as "democracy".

Sissons and Law^{xix} point out that adult education:

"... emerges as an integrated element of a wider transitional process designed to transform a society which denies social justice to an increasing proportion of its own citizens while collaborating with the richer nations of the world in exacerbating international inequalities.

"... even though the regressive, economic, social and political environment ... highlights the need for urgent social change education, it also induces an intimidatory climate of reaction which silences most social service practitioners, especially those dependent on ... state funding.

"In the prevailing social atmosphere, even debating a meaningful social change strategy must involve risk. Rejecting the adaptive framework and applying these principles is even more dangerous. It means changing sides."

Many of us at this conference are already swimming against a powerful tide of hegemony. We are part of the worldwide counter-hegemonic struggle. Perhaps we need to be clearer about some of the key tasks we are involved in, so we do not dilute our efforts by addressing issues of lesser importance. So again we raise the question: ***Is the issue really one of "mass education about the environment", or is it perhaps something a little different?***

Are there some clues for us all about the hegemonic processes at work in the world, in the Maori list of affirmations and what they mean for a programme of action? What does it say about the key elements of an adult education programme which could achieve them for us as well as for Maori?

References

i. quoted in Pachamama, the Newsletter of Learning for Environmental Action Programme of ICAE (International Council for Adult Education, Toronto, Canada), June 1992 no 2 p 3.

ii. Patricia M Mische, "Toward a Pedagogy of Ecological Responsibility: Learning to Reinhabit the Earth", *Convergence*, ICAE, v XXV n 2, 1992 p 9.

iii. Linda Sissons and Michael Law, "Adaptation or Change? The social purposes of continuing education", *Continuing Education in New Zealand* v 14 n 1 May 1982 pp 47-66.

iv. Rubenson, Kjell, "The Sociology of Adult Education", in (eds) Sharan B Merriam and Phyllis M Cunningham, "Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education", Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1989 pp 51-69.

v. see, for example, the discussion on Gramsci's ideas in Rubenson, 1989.

vi. Rubenson, op cit pp 56-57.

vii. Shaw, George Bernard, "Maxims for Revolutionists", 238, quoted in Browning (ed) "Dictionary of Quotations and Proverbs; the Everyman Edition, Cathay Books, 1989 p 275. (N.B. While applauding the general tenor of his comment, we deplore Shaw's use of male-specific, exclusive language. Women dominate provision of leadership and inspiration for adult education for sustainable development)

viii. Moema Viezzer, "Learning for Environmental Action", *Convergence*, ICAE, v XXV n 2, 1992 p 8; Kamla Bhasin, "Alternative and Sustainable Development", *Convergence*, ICAE, v XXV n 2, 1992, pp 26-35.

ix. quoted by Ohliger, op cit p 55.

x. Francisco Vio Grossi, "From Project Bureaucracy to the Flourishing of Life: Elements for a New Relationship in Financing Adult Education", *Convergence*, ICAE, Working papers from the Kungaly

Seminar, v XIX n 4, 1986 pp 1-29 (p 13).

xi. Grossi, op cit p 15.

xii. also see material in Gunnar Rydstrom, "Adult Education Development and International Aid: Some Issues and Trends", Final report of the Kungälv Seminar, International Council for Adult Education, 1987.

xiii. Illich, Ivan, "Tools for Conviviality", New York, Harper and Row, 1973.

xiv. GATT-Fly, "Ah-Hah! A New Approach to Popular Education", Between the Lines, 1983 p 13 (229 College St Toronto, Ontario M5T 1R4, Canada).

xv. Rubenson, op cit pp 59-61.

xvi. Sissons and Law, op cit p 56.

xvii. Rajesh Tandon, "Unity in Diversity: The Future of Adult Education in Asia and the South-Pacific Region), ASPBAE Courier no 53, December 1991 pp 1-3, Asian and South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

xviii. see, for example, Mary E Clark, "Ariadne's Thread: The Search for New Modes of Thinking", St Martin's Press, New York, 1989 Chapters 6 and 7; also "Sustainable Development, Appropriate Technology and Environmental Protection", Concept paper in "Adult Education in the 90s; Unity in Diversity", Proceedings of the First General Assembly on Adult Education, december 8-14, 1991, Tagaytay City, Philippines, Asian-South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education, 30/63A Longden Place, Colombo 7, Sri Lanka; also Mische, op cit p 17; also ICAE News no 2, 1992.

xix. Sissons and Law, op cit pp 63-64.