

34th NSW Environmental Education Conference
ACTIVENATURE
LEARNING, CITIZENSHIP, ACTIVISM FOR SUSTAINABILITY

3-5 October 2019, Kirrawee High School, Hunter St, Kirrawee

Conference Framing Paper

The 2019 AAEE NSW conference is being conducted in partnership with Sutherland Shire Environment Centre. The event will have a special focus on the role of activism in education programs and initiatives. It will emphasise the importance of active citizenship in sustainability.

This document frames the relationship between education and activism. It will form a part of the Call for Papers that goes out for the environmental education conference. Speakers and presenters will be asked to make links between activism and their initiatives and programs.

This conference will focus on the role of education and educators in:

- building learning pathways towards a deeper understanding of citizenship
- improving understanding of activism in achieving a sustainable world
- strengthening and making more explicit our collective focus on longer term change.

We will ask presenters to tell stories, make links, draw out lessons, highlight achievements and indicate possibilities for strengthening the focus on building active citizenship in education initiatives.

Education and Activism

Our progress with sustainability education

Many of us have worked in education programs that have emphasized environmentally friendly lifestyle choices for 5, 10, 30 years or more. Sustainability education has spread throughout schools and communities and councils and business. Many (most?) programs focus on personal actions and change – and this is important because this is a natural place to shift practices and choices. We have had successes. But still our environments are getting worse, much worse, and the relentless impacts of our activities leave many of us with deep concern for the future of our planet. Inequity continues to grow. Communities continue to suffer. One could argue that the focus on the small has missed the big, and that the focus on the short term has missed the long term.

What world are we working in?

Right now, as you pick up this document to read, industries and corporations are preparing to or are already engaging in high-powered negotiations with governments to get their way. Working on their behalf, highly paid lobbyists seek to influence and shape government policies that enable their employers to make profits; they seek the removal of the red tape that is designed to bring calm and precision to development processes and clarification for stakeholders; they push for the removal of

green tape, the intent of which is to ensure environmental damage is not done or – at least – extremely minimized. These lobbyists are working to guarantee profit at the expense of community, environment and democracy. Is this ok?

Let's be clear. Large corporations often do not just:

- wait and hope that government policies work out in their favour
- hope that other people will do their bidding for them
- accept that nothing can be done to get the policy shifts they want.

Advocates for profit-at-all costs are active every single day. Lobbyists are in there changing and manipulating and promising and re-shaping the world and policies and governments and people and planet to suit their desires – a shape that means diminished environments for everyone and mega profits for a few. Is this ok?

And let's also be clear about this: neither lobbyists nor corporations make the decisions. Instead, governments do. It is governments that make policies and provide approvals and conditions. In this governance context, we need to consider what the role of education can and should be in bringing about change beyond behaviour shifts in the kitchens and backyards of Australia. What is the role of education in influencing government policy? What is the role of education in protecting and enhancing democratic, decision-making processes that aren't swayed by an *endless growth* ideology? Indeed, what are the responsibilities of educators in a governance environment that favours exponential development, that favours corporations over community, that favours destruction over protection, that favours jobs at any cost to the environment?

We can point to numerous examples and issues in NSW and Australia, but here's how Derrick Jensen sums up the global situation:

...the fact remains that if we judge my work, or anyone's work, by the most important standard of all, and in fact the only standard that really matters, which is the health of the planet, my work (and everyone else's) is a complete failure. Because my work hasn't stopped the murder. Nor has anyone else's. We haven't even slowed it down. It's embarrassing to have to explain why this is the only standard that really matters, but at this point embarrassment is the least of our problems. The health of the planet is the only standard that really matters because without a living planet nothing else is important, because nothing else exists. (*Loaded Words*, Orion, March/April 2012)

As sustainability educators, we must consider what learning, changes and active citizenship are required in this context. We cannot afford to accidentally let our audiences believe that it's ok to focus only on lifestyle choices and changes. Sustainability is more than keeping a good household. We live not just in a house but in a community, region, country, world...We also live in a democracy. As educators, we must be active personally – role models, in fact. But we also need to ensure our education programs build capacity to influence government decision-making and achieve sustainable practices throughout the systems that underpin society. This is where the link to activism is important.

Activism

Activism is varied and diverse, but its demands often have underlying universal themes of sustainability, social justice, equality and well-being. At a personal level, active citizenship can increase feelings of empowerment and connectedness; it can be a positive experience to challenge something that is wrong with the status quo and help set a vision for something better.

Activism is quite simply taking action to effect social change. This can occur in a myriad of ways and in a variety of forms. Often it is concerned with 'how to change the world' through social, political, economic or environmental change. This can be led by individuals, but it is often done collectively through social movements. Activism consists of efforts to enhance, promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental reform in order to make improvements in society. Activism exists on a continuum from direct action such as civil disobedience, protests, occupations, campaigning, rallies, street marches, boycotts and demonstrations through to more conventional activism such as lobbying, meeting with Ministers, writing letters to politicians and media, internet activism, petitions, holding and attending meetings, responding assertively to proposals on the table, and developing and promoting policy alternatives.

For decades, we have been hearing and reading about active citizenship. Perhaps we need to think of it now as *citizen activism* and ask where our sustainability education fits.

A dozen years ago, Paul Hawken highlighted the scale of community action that is occurring worldwide in his book *Blessed Unrest* (2007). He estimated that there were over one-million groups working towards ecological sustainability and social justice in the world. Hawken viewed this movement as a complex coalition of human organisations all working towards improving the world for the better. He observed that many of these people do not view themselves as activist or political, yet through their activism, they fight injustice and exploitation in order to heal the planet. He described these groups as an expression of humanity's immune system waking up!

Extending sustainability education

Let's recognize our role in helping to wake up and shake up humanity's immune system. If we sustainability educators want to make significant and long lasting change, we have to be a part of this movement to strengthen or rebuild the health of communities and environments. Our education must include elements of activism as well as household actions. Our education must focus not just on the single issue but on where that sits in the bigger picture of influencing policies and systems and governance models.

So...we can wait until the next hot environmental issue forces us to react. Or we can be proactive and build in strategies that help us and others learn how to protect communities and their environments by working to ensure governments are accountable to their constituents. Achieving sustainability is a process – a process with wins along the way. Wins such as renewables, reductions in resource use, increases in water quality, biodiversity protected, climate, social justice, reduced levels of inequality...

At all levels in society, education has a role in helping people identify what those wins should be, and inspiring them to participate in the process of achieving them. Individual actions have not been enough to protect our planet. We mustn't abandon those successful programs. Instead, we need to extend them to include a focus on activism in the bigger-picture, longer-term contexts.

Phil Smith & 2019 Conference Committee

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