

Learning, Citizenship and Activism for Sustainability: A follow-up article by participants at the 2019 Conference

February 2020

Editors: Phil Smith, Dr Peta White

Contributors: Peter Andersen, Elliot Connor, Kerryn Coombs-Valeontis, David Giblin, Jenny Hill, Jasmine Payget, Victoria Walker, Sandy Wilder

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



100 Seconds to Midnight

The timing was right for the NSW AAEE and SSEC November 2019 conference on activism: global climate strikes by students, protest actions by Extinction Rebellion, and, in the months since our conference, there has been a lot in the media about activism – much of it focused on actions and ideas from the PM and Premiers in Tasmania and Queensland about limiting or preventing environmental activism, whilst planning to remove ‘green tape’ and give permission to huge, environmentally destructive developments. At the launch of the conference back in October 2018, Costa urged us to ‘stand up, turn up, speak up’. The clock is ticking: we are 100 seconds to midnight. 100 seconds. Urgent. People are ready to take action. Our work in education must keep up with the urgency and with the learning and activism needs in our communities. We have important roles to play in this rapidly changing situation. Let’s play!

This piece is long. It gathers ideas from a number of contributors about the role and place of activism in environmental education. The invitation for contributions was to write about the implications of activism for the programs we run and the organisations we work in/for. This was the same topic the panellists discussed on the Friday afternoon of the conference. It encourages writers to identify challenges and offer ideas that could open minds and doors to incorporating an activism focus in programs... remembering of course that you don’t have to glue yourself to a road or climb on the Harbour Bridge to be doing ‘activism’. One of our panellists, Annette Sartor, reminded us that the *partners* we choose to work with in our programs can help introduce an activism approach. Another panellist, Niki Carey, said that councils can be supportive of community organisations and promote their work – work which might have an activist feel about it. Letters, conversations, partnering on programs, art works, working to get areas listed on World Heritage... all different forms of activism. ‘You don’t have to get arrested’, as Sue Martin said.

This article is not intended to be the end of the discussion about activism. Instead, it’s a part of a process of thinking we all have to do. Perhaps the best way to do that is through your Regional Sustainability Education Network. Activism might even be a topic for discussion at your next local RSEN event. Find your RSEN here: <https://www.aaeensw.org.au/networks/regional-sustainability-education-networks>



To go back to the start. First, there was the [Framing Paper](#) on education and activism. It included an invitation to all conference presenters to consider where activism fits or could fit in their initiatives. Then there was the conference. Some of the keynote speakers and panellists, young and more experienced, told stories and shared insights. Now, we have below some post-conference reflections on learning, citizenship, and activism. Many thanks to those who have contributed to this piece.

The ideas below are offered from a place of doing what one can, with what one has.

If they inspire you – great.

If they call you to action – brilliant.

If they help to evolve our collective activism as a rapid response to the challenges we face in times such as these, our voices will become stronger and louder for love of this beautiful home we share, and for the flourishing of all.



Environmental education has always been about change: of minds, hearts, and actions. Steve van Matre, ‘father’ of Earth Education, put it this way: “*Environmental education is about change. If there’s no change, there’s no point*”. And environmental/sustainability educators around this

country have helped shift community actions, attitudes values and beliefs linked to the environment and sustainability. We have reached a point, however, where those actions – typically individual and behaviour-related – are insufficient to deal with the local, national and global environmental and sustainability issues that confront us. Us being everyone.

The time has come to step up the actions to influence policies and systems. If you have any doubts about what we are faced with, [see the PowerPoint presentation here](#). This was a part of a presentation at the recent World Environmental Education Congress in Bangkok (November 2019). The presentation was on GEO-6, a review of the environment by the UN Environment Programme. Sad. Scary. Frustrating. But you will also find hope in it. The author, Ana Vukoje, makes it clear that policy change, systemic change, transformative change, integration of environment into other sectors and the diffusion of good ideas are all vital if we are to hold off human and environmental catastrophe. She also points to the imperatives of participation and education.

Nine submissions were received. Minimum editing has been done; each is presented almost as it was submitted.



From Jenny Hill, Blue Mountains. Jenny is the 2019 NSW Environmental Educator of the Year

In an article by Jennifer Sumison (1) in which she explores political activism in the child care and education sector, the assertion is that if we are to successfully challenge the current political and policy orthodoxies, we will need powerful and strategic alternatives to our current advocacy efforts. By advocacy she means speaking on behalf of others often from within existing political, social and economic frames of reference. Sumison distinguishes advocacy from activism. The latter involves resisting and challenging those frames of reference, underlying assumptions and the power bases that support them.

I think her assertions can be applied to environmental education through a series of questions:

- What are the frames of reference that we use for environmental education currently?
- Whose frames are they? For example do we use a Traditional cultural and Traditional learning frame?
- Do we pull up and examine the assumptions that drive what we do?
- Who has power in our environmental programs? Whose voices are included or excluded? Who is trying to silence us?
- Are we still so anchored in industrial education that we wouldn't even know what it could look like if we were to reimagine and critically reframe what we do?

(1) Sumison, J. (2006). From Whitlam to Economic Rationalism and Beyond: A conceptual framework for political activism in children's services, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 31(1). 1- 9.

Reflections on this contribution...

These reflections and questions above pick up on something Tim Soutphommasane, a political theorist, professor at the University of Sydney, and a former Race Discrimination Commissioner, recently wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald:

In the past, I've warned about race politics seeping back into our politics. But there are signs of other manifestations. Since the federal election, Prime Minister Scott Morrison has frequently highlighted the virtues of "quiet

Australians". At first, we may have dismissed this as banal paternalism, as a rhetorical celebration of political apathy.

However, the valorisation of quiet Australians can have more menacing implications. Consider the federal government's proposal of laws targeting social and political protests. This is what it really means when governments applaud their citizens for being quiet. It's about paving the way for governments to coerce citizens to be compliant, to shut down dissent and expression.

And when such ideas are tied to notions of national character and virtue, we're entitled to be suspicious. Patriotism is, in my view, a laudable thing. Sometimes, though, politicians can abuse patriotism. Loving your country can come to imply you shouldn't ever criticise your government or society.

The last thing we need right now, of course, is a meek, uninterested and passive citizenry. We need the very opposite. We should be encouraging vocal, committed, and energetic citizens – patriotic citizens, in the truest sense. The kind of citizens who wouldn't hesitate for a moment to criticise their government because they see it as their responsibility to do what's right.

If anything resembling what has been happening in America were to happen here, we can only hope that there would be people prepared to stand up. That people are prepared to put country above party or tribe.

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/a-quiet-and-passive-citizenry-is-not-patriotic-20191121-p53crl.html>

Tim addresses questions Jenny raises about who's trying to silence and exclude criticism, and whose frames of reference matter. "Quiet Australians" isn't so much Morrison's description but his prescription about how Australians should be.



From Kerryn Coombs-Valeontis, a Sydney-based eco/art therapist, co-writer of *Nature Heals: An introduction to Nature Based Therapies in Australia and New Zealand*, and founder of the Diploma of Ecotherapy. www.earthcreateheal.com

Activism is inevitable once we start to love this earth, and educators must take a bigger role. When we educate, we are forging connections and relationships, and love is part of that. Activism is just where that goes.

I foster kids; a house parent, with teens that are vulnerable, and struggle with everything. It is astounding the damage that not making secure attachments does. Lots of them hate nature and tell me so; life gave them families that were harmful, neglectful, and abusive. Some of them are very addicted to their screens, because screens have replaced parenting in many families. As an ecotherapist, I take a holistic approach to their environmental experiences; softly, slowly, healing and trust building can open them to learning and then, wow! Caring. Once they care (and start talking to ladybirds eating the aphids on the broad beans) then they get hungry for knowledge about the web of life, and their place in it. House pets become therapists and allies in their healing. Venus fly traps, become expressions of their rage/defences, that they can laugh about. Mosquito bites and splinters slowly become more tolerable, as they relax outdoors.



Taking them to the September student strike for climate change was important for all of us. They were keen, but cautious. They had never marched before, and the usual wariness was present, before doing anything new: Are we in trouble for not being at school? Are we going to get arrested? Can we take the dog?

Making signs became a cathartic voice-finding exercise. You tubes of previous marches and their cryptic signage were inspiring, and their own expressions flared. Connections were made immediately we entered the domain, with the house Labrador, Belle in tow, sporting a sign “Pet therapy dog; pat me for your eco-anxiety!”



As soon as we entered the domain, in Sydney, connection to something bigger than ourselves, was immediate. The temporary communitas of belonging, electric. Get-Up wanted a pic, and the swell of teenagers’ voices, leading the march and speaking their love of this earth, into loud halers, and their rage at its treatment, damn good for the plethora of anxieties these young people suffer. We now have ongoing conversations at dinner, about Greta being their age, and having Asperger’s, and being amazing. Activism soothes the uncertainty, and the eco-anxiety, by acknowledging it. This is catalytically empowering. Seeding activism, with an upcoming generation, amplifies all this, and settles (for a while) their future question they haven’t asked yet: (which can nag at me so) “What did you do to prevent it?”

Reflections on this contribution...

Perhaps activism must be inevitable when we are faced with this situation. Richard Flanagan explains:

In Australia we are all now being treated as children, quietened Australians, most especially on the climate crisis. While the climate crisis has become Australians’ number one concern, both major parties play determinedly deaf and dumb on the issue while action and protest about the climate crisis is increasingly subject to prosecution and heavy sentencing.

In Tasmania, the Liberal government intends to legislate sentences of up to 21 years – more than many get for murder – for environmental protest, legislation typical of the new climate of authoritarianism that has flourished under Morrison. As Australia burns, what we are witnessing nationally is no more or less than the criminalisation of democracy in defence of the coal and gas industries.

In this regard, the climate crisis is a war between the voice of coal and the voice of the people. And that war is in Australia being won hands down by the fossil fuel industry.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/25/scott-morrison-and-the-big-lie-about-climate-change-does-he-think-were-that-stupid>

The narrative Jenny shares exemplifies this quote from Cornel West... “Justice is what love looks like in public”. It’s time for our voice to be heard and for our love to be acknowledged. Aussies may carry a tough exterior or indifference, but managing the feelings of being under threat, of having our land devastated, and of feeling like those in power do not have our collective best interests in mind, is unsettling and anxiety-causing. How many of us felt relief and pleasure by joining the collective action and seeing our thoughts reflected in others signs?



From Jasmine Payget, Mid Mountains Co-Housing, Blue Mountains NSW

I arrived at the AAEE conference from a week along the Darling River as part of the Ngunna Yaama Barka Corroboree – Water for the Rivers. As a non-Aboriginal person, my place was to bear witness to the disaster of the river not running, and to witness a resurgence of culture as Aboriginal peoples continue their many ways of caring for country and the people living in the country. It was a sobering and stark example of the environmental crises afflicting our country.

Is witnessing a form of activism? This experience certainly focussed my mind on the topic of the conference.

For more than 20 years I have been an environmental educator in local government. Our job involves two-way communication between council and community. In this role I did **not** see myself as an activist; I was a messenger, an observer, a researcher. I ran community engagement programs to understand more deeply. I registered all my significant memberships and did not take leadership role in local community environment groups.

When decisions were made (often as a result of activists working with elected council members or with senior management) for projects to protect the environment, I acted to make it work, based on the community input and expert knowledges.

My current role at the Mid Mountains Co-Housing demands of me to be activist. I am a property developer for what will be a group project: building sustainable, accessible, affordable houses in a community and permaculture setting. We can walk the talk. In order to enable co-housing to be put into practice, many elements in our society need to change. For example, most of the financial industry impedes people from buying into low cost housing. Economic systems stand in the way of sharing.

As a council worker, I was paid by rates and taxes by people who don’t necessarily share the same goals. I accepted the constraint because I thought my skills could be best used in implementation. The Mid Mountains Co-Housing is privately funded by people who sign up to goals and principles. I have more freedom to use activism to help make this project happen.

I understand ‘*activist*’ to mean ‘efforts to promote, impede, direct or intervene in social, political, economic or environmental reform with the desire to make changes in society’. In my council role, I was an ‘*eco-crat*’, working within my contract, instructions, agreed principles and plans to enable

protection of the environment. As a co-housing developer and activist; I lobby, protest and act collectively to get the changes necessary to allow co-housing in general (and our co-housing project in particular) to flourish. I just need more energy!

Reflections on this contribution...

The Framing Paper uses the term 'activism' rather than 'activist'. This was deliberate. Activist implies a person is or isn't something. It sets up a false dichotomy. A false either/or. You are an activist or you are not. People may not like to think of themselves as activists; they may not like labels. If you kick a soccer ball with your child on a Sunday afternoon in the local park, does that make you a soccer player?

The term 'activism' encourages us to understand that people can undertake actions that seek to change (or protect) policies and systems and values... we can *do* activism around the edges of everything else (if we want to) and not feel like we have changed our identity to become and 'activist'. But is this a good thing?

Jasmine has found a way to be employed in ways that matter so that she is taking the action she wants to see and also has a voice/role in directing. Being pro-active in choosing what we do for employment shows great integrity and ability. Maybe we can all find ways to do bits of this, even in our regular jobs.

In the same way, we need to distinguish political from partisan. Taking up the fight for the important things... it's sometimes hard to discern what matters as life crowds around us. Jasmine made the decision to work for a group that is ethically aligned with her ideals. This ethical alignment may be imperative to feel fulfilled in employment and as a community member. Imagine if we all could include some form of activism in all aspects of our lives.



From Elliot Connor, Founder and CEO, Human Nature Projects. Elliot, a recent school-leaver, reflects on what school might have taught him.

I wish I'd been taught life skills as opposed to learning complex algebra. There's a growing realisation that rote learning in the age of the internet is effectively obsolete, but of course change in the system is slow to compensate – and really there's no precedent to a system other than the current one.

I'd like to see community service integrated into the curriculum, and content centred around the here and now: today's issues and their solutions, as opposed to hypotheticals invented 20 years back by some bored academic writing hundreds of textbook pages. Much of it is experiential, but there's certainly a big plus in having the theory down pat before going out into the world and making a difference.

From my perspective, activism is simply the opposite of apathy, and as such the only solution to the world's most pressing environmental issues. It defines the mindset of the changemaker-conservationist, the likes of myself who strives to redefine the edifice of Human Nature in the present day. And, as with all things worth fighting for, it's not at all an easy change to make: shifting public dialogues away from egocentrism towards ecocentrism, and turning dim awareness into appreciation and respect for other lifeforms.....It's a fine line that we walk between utter failure and far-reaching success, but at 17 my experiences have granted me insight into where the true path lies. I look forward to continuing discussions from the AAEE conference long into the future and seeing where our active lives might lead...

<https://humannatureprojects.org/>

Reflections on this contribution...

David Orr says everything is environmental education. Steve van Matre says environmental education is about change. Education is change-making. Karsten Schnack said never teach like there's nothing happening outside. As educators, we need to adapt to the (rapidly) changing world outside the classroom, but within a system that somehow seems to ignore that world. We are challenged to teach/work in systems that are slow moving. Young and old, we are all changing and the needs of learning are changing faster than education systems can keep up.

Our work must include a focus on shifting the focus, values and approaches of the institutions we work in. Perhaps we need to be bold and move our educational systems and practices forward so that we address the needs that Elliot identified for his own learning.

A futures frame scaffolds the movement needed. We are challenged to make changes that enable futures.



From Victoria Walker. Victoria is an environmental educator who left a conventional career with government, and now aims for deeper behavioural change via cultural transformation. Works with Blue Mountains CC and Inner Landscape.

Working in environmental education and engagement, there can be a feeling of being stuck between sharing the messages that are required, and the constraints of the organisation that is paying our wages. As many institutions that offer environmental programs are associated with government, there is little scope for discussing large scale radical change. What often happens is that people are forced to focus their engagement around issues that have little consequence in the big picture. This has driven a focus on individual action in environmental programs, which will not deliver the changes we need to address the issues.

Environment and climate change have become so politicised in Australia that, in some cases, even mentioning climate change is considered a critique of the established powers. At the time of writing, some local governments have still not acknowledged the reality of climate change. Encouraging people towards bold action is almost certainly going to involve acknowledging the poor policy response in our country.

Working in this cultural climate, educators must ignore the voices in their hearts to stimulate courageous action in organisations, as well as individuals. This can create a feeling of emptiness, futility, and even self-betrayal. When messaging of environmental educators becomes politicised, truth is compromised and we miss opportunities to stimulate energy in our communities. In this new era of 'speaking truth to power', it would be wonderful to see a liberation of environmental education to become holistic, bold and deeply honest.

Reflections on this contribution...

In an era that is also being called 'post-truth', our frustration grows. So too must our boldness to challenge mistruths and constraints.

Perhaps timing is everything... but how does change begin? Are we in a ground-swell right now... can you feel it?

Sometimes I feel small, insignificant, like; it feels as if my efforts amount to very little. And then I remember Margaret Meade's quote about the mosquito and how one small fragile insect can generate a lot of change in the middle of the night when enclosed in a tent. Small things CAN generate big change.

My small changes enable me to make other changes as I feel compelled. These small changes, when communicated also allow (as in give permission) for others to make their own changes, too. Modelling is a powerful tool. We need great role models (perhaps not looking to our political leaders for this modelling is the best thing to do right now).

Change happens for one of three reasons: mandate, disaster, education. I know which I prefer!



From David Giblin. Science and Agriculture and Marine Studies teacher at Chifley College, Bidwill Campus. This is a comprehensive government high school (Yrs 7-12). Chifley College, services the Mt Druitt Area in Western Sydney. Our campus has around 590 students. I am in charge of the school farm (2 hectares) where students of Agriculture undertake studies in production of fruit and vegetables, poultry, sheep, cattle, apiary, aquaponics, and horticulture.

From the perspective of an educator working in schools, I feel that part of my (our) job is to, in the first instance, expose students to natural environments. There is a need to develop and build a sense of value for these environments either as places of wonder or as places of future economic worth for our society. This process can be as little as building up a knowledge base of a single species in younger students and then progressing to ecosystems as a student level of understanding grows.

It is only when an individual develops an emotional connection to something that it becomes something of value, something worth saving. Once you have that emotional connection, we can then move onto the issues that threaten these ecosystems and, indeed, the planet. It would appear common sense that there is a correlation between the depth of passion felt by an individual and the level of activism that that individual is prepared to engage in.

We are quite fortunate in this country to have major environmental issues built into our school curriculum and with a level of freedom for teachers to pursue these issues in whatever depth they desire (short of organising excursions that involve marching in the streets). Much of this freedom is built around a focus on the scientific data. While we have individuals that would restrict the sorts of things taught in schools, the data is so strong now that it is the opponents to this data that are looking like the radical, ill-informed, heretics.

I think that teachers and schools in particular can be highly effective in moving environmental activism forward without participating in direct and controversial action. In many ways teachers and educators set the ball in motion. Not every student is going to become an activist but for some with the passion to follow through there are opportunities outside the structured world of government-funded institutions that allow these individuals to act on their passions. For individuals involved in the recent school climate strikes, the genesis of their activism can often be traced back to school – the “did you know?” conversations.

Reflections on this contribution...

Teachers who are parents don't arrive home and say, *I've worked with kids all day, I'm not going to look after my own children*. Parents have responsibilities outside their work – even if it is with children.

In the same way, each of us as citizens and members of a democracy has a responsibility to participate regardless of the work we do during the day. One of the sad realities in Australia is that people will fight to the death for rights but run a million miles from responsibilities. We are employees, but we are also citizens. We have responsibilities at many levels. It is our view that we must fulfil the responsibilities we have as community members in order to protect the rights we have at that level.



From Sandy Wilder

This morning I went to a local event of *Parents for Climate Action* in Moruya where I live. I took a sign -"Write a Message to the Earth" and asked people to draw or write their thoughts.

It enabled some people to access their deep caring and concern. The parents wrote. The children made pictures; some wrote things.

Parents of young ones who are able to take in the message about the crisis heading our way are grief stricken. One mum wrote *"My darling children - M and E - I want you to know I did everything I could think of, with the tools I had at the time, to secure a safe future for you, your friends, strangers' children, and other animals. I love you and hope you will love this earth that sustains us."*

My take on our work ...

Dangerous climate changes are largely due to a small number of the human population making huge profits out of fossil fuel extraction. These grossly rich people and corporations have bought off governments.

Our society uses oppression - sexism, racism, class differences, age differences etc to keep us divided. Otherwise as in when the union movement was strong - sticking together and demanding change - we would be able to influence governments or replace them.

So, work on building strong connections across the boundaries of oppression needs to be part of climate action. A couple of projects I know of who seem to understand and operate seriously on this are:

- Democracy in Colour <https://democracyincolour.org/about/team/>
- Sustaining All life (I am connected to this one) <https://www.sustainingalllife.org/>

Sustaining All Life (SAL) bring tools to organisations that allow people to see the structures that divide us and enable/assisting people to work together across difference.

SAL have many tools and formats to enable all voices to be heard. They participate at the UN COPs and are represented by numbers of young adults and people of the global majority (people targeted by racism) plus very experienced leaders in social justice and community development.

I haven't been to any of the COPs but am very familiar with the processes they use to empower people and help us all work more inclusively and more powerfully.

It was fabulous to meet Nosrat Fareha and have her come to the workshop I led and also to hear Ruby speak!...and others of course... I've been arrested with Col Ryan and his amazing dad and worked on campaigns for Lee Rhiannon and met her at Parliament House when she was there.

We need to get people thinking big picture not just what is good for one family or household. We are in this together sink or swim.

Reflections on this contribution...

Perhaps one could argue that if we are not operating with the big picture in mind, we have swallowed the lie.



From a Principal of an EEC centre writing as a long-term member of AAEE

Inactivist: one who does not take action or engage in activism.

If you are confused about whether you should do something, or do nothing, in your professional life, consider these two quotes from Martin Luther King:

"The time is always right to do the right thing"

"For evil to succeed, all it needs is for good men to do nothing."

As educators, we must be role models in pursuing change personally, professionally and collectively. If you are not prepared to be an activist, you must prepare yourself for the consequences of accepting the activism of others, which may not be in best interests of those you educate or our wider society.

A recent article in ABC News Online (2) outlines the societal context of opposing views on the purposes of education, including those held by a One Nation candidate in the Queensland seat of Flynn at the May Federal election.

"Ms Lohse said when she first started teaching her eldest daughter by distance education in 1998 there was still a strong focus on basic textbook material and the "three Rs" — writing, reading and arithmetic. Yet she says she watched in dismay as the curriculum shifted, and by the time her youngest child reached high school, Ms Lohse was convinced a creeping bias had become entrenched.

She cites climate change as one example, saying her family "doesn't believe it" but her son was asked to do assignments on the issue based on it being established fact. The science of climate change is based on "well-understood principles showing a link between greenhouse gas emissions and rising temperatures, backed up by evidence showing the world has warmed almost 1 degree Celsius in the past century."

"Now that's conditioning. That's complying. That's not education," she said.

"Teach them the basic education to read, write and do arithmetic.

"Not all this LGB-whatever, getting kids to confront or open their enquiring minds to all this other stuff. Let kids be kids. Keep all that out of the schools."

Open enquiring minds? Why on earth would an educator want to do that? LOL!

While Ms. Lohse is entitled to her opinion on education, there are many processes that determine what our students are taught and current NSW syllabus documents require that students should understand important scientific principles and consider the implications for their future through **active citizenship in sustainability** (3).

So, educators must be active in the processes of curriculum development. Educators can, and must be, professionally active and participate productively in the processes that shape our educational systems. With that in mind, I recently wrote to the Chair of the NSW Primary Principals Association Curriculum Reference group with my comments on these bolded extracts from the NSW Curriculum Review Interim Report (4):

*"If the review is to **'ensure that the NSW education system is properly preparing students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century'** then it is a failure because it doesn't identify global warming and climate change as **THE** critical challenge.*

*There is a tiny mention that **"Many [students] are concerned about environmental sustainability...."** (p4), while neglecting to mention that the overwhelming majority of the world's climate scientists are very concerned, and also that **"At the same time, it is becoming***

increasingly urgent to find solutions to an array of complex social and environmental problems.” (p13) without highlighting the most urgent problem.

While the report is prepared to ponder the “profound implications” (p4) of automation, it fails to explore the profound implications of the unfolding climatological and ecological disaster ahead of us– don’t mention the war!”

Why is the review focused on declining student attainment in science when governments are ignoring the science that tells us that urgent action is needed now?”

The title of the report is, “Nurturing wonder and igniting passion” and I question, given institutional responses to the student climate strike, whether we are really interested in “igniting passion”, with the real intent that students would do something meaningful and profound with their learning. I note that we are already “nurturing wonder”, as tens of thousands of students who expressed their concern at the climate strike do wonder why the most powerful political and institutional voices in the land are paying scant attention to what really matters – the scientific evidence for global warming and catastrophic climate change.

I’ll close by saying that my teaching has to demonstrate the core “Values in NSW Public Schools” (5):

INTEGRITY; EXCELLENCE in.....individual and community action; **RESPECT; RESPONSIBILITY** Being accountable for your individual and community's actions towards yourself, others and the environment; **COOPERATION** Working together to achieve common goals, providing support to others and engaging in peaceful resolution of conflict; **PARTICIPATION** Being a proactive and productive individual and group member, having pride in and contributing to the social and economic wealth of the community and the nation; **CARE** Concern for the wellbeing of yourself and others, demonstrating empathy and acting with compassion; **FAIRNESS** Being committed to the principles of social justice and opposing prejudice, dishonesty and injustice; **DEMOCRACY**: Accepting and promoting the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of being an Australian citizen.

The policy also states, “Schooling is also about the future. Our community looks to today’s students to determine the world of tomorrow...”

It is my professional responsibility to teach these values and I cannot do that by being inactive or by modelling inactivism. I support youth who model these values by refusing to be inactive in the face of leadership that condones environmental destruction.

References:

(2) Wood, P 2019, [“Teachers, schools in firing line as conservatives rail against 'leftist agenda'”, ABC News Breakfast, 22 November, accessed 22 November 2019](#)

(3) NSW Department of Education 2014 *Values in NSW Public Schools*, viewed 22 November 2019, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/values-in-nsw-public-schools>

(4) Masters, G 2019 *Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion, designs for a future school curriculum: NSW Curriculum Review Interim Report*, NSW Education Standards Authority, Sydney, NSW, accessed 22 November 2019, <https://nswcurriculumreview.nesa.nsw.edu.au/pdfs/interimreport/chapters/NSW-Curriculum-Review-Interim-Report.pdf>

(5) NSW Department of Education 2014 *Values in NSW Public Schools*, viewed 22 November 2019, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/values-in-nsw-public-schools>

Reflections on this contribution...

Some of you may have seen this quote on FB. Howard Zinn, a controversial American historian and political science professor at Boston University, believed:

Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of leaders...and millions have been killed because of this obedience...Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves... (and) the grand thieves are running the country. That's our problem. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/163932-civil-disobedience-is-not-our-problem-our-problem-is-civil>

It is encouraging that this principal will not go quietly, that he rejects the invitation and inherent direction/threat to be a “quiet Australian”, and that he will find ways to build student capacity to participate in active ways as citizens in a democracy that must work towards sustainability.



From Peter Andersen, University of Wollongong. Dr Peter Andersen lectures and researches in the field of environmental education. His passion lies in how to empower children to become intergenerational environmental change agents.

Universities are preparing pre-service teachers for a complex, ever-changing work environment in which they will be expected to create successful, confident, creative, active and informed citizens (MCEETYA, 2013). In order to be ‘active’, as defined by the Melbourne Declaration, school students should be able to work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments (MCEETYA, 2013). The notion that education should support children to become environmental activists and change agents has existed since the 1960s, when it was recognised that there was a global environmental crisis (Gough, 2006). Subsequently, at international and national levels, authorities have called for children to be positioned as co-decision makers, with adults, around important social issues. Article 12 from The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - 1990 - states that “*Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account*” (UNICEF, n.d). Furthermore, the Australian Curriculum, under the umbrella of the Melbourne Declaration expect that students, as young as twelve years of age, should be able to ‘identify situations where current approaches do not work, challenge existing ideas and generate alternative solutions (ACARA, 2013).

However, these very students are at the same time being bombarded and manipulated by powerful educational hegemonic forces (McLaren, 2003) that are undermining their efficacy as activists and change agents. In Australia, adult-centric educational systems continue to position children as passive recipients and ‘regurgitators’ of knowledge. Of the seven general capabilities, borne from the Australian Curriculum – and in accordance with the Melbourne Declaration - Literacy and Numeracy are key capabilities of successful learners. In their truest forms, Literacy and Numeracy should be key foci for all Australian schools. However, public examinations, such as NAPLAN, originally designed to support teachers to better understand the impact of their teaching and learning programs, have instead become tools with which to judge schools and their families. Meanwhile, general capabilities such as Critical and Creative Thinking have not received nearly the same level of attention by accrediting agencies. Instead they have become the forgotten capabilities in Australian classrooms. A further indication of the types of hegemonic headwinds facing students in Australia is the response that those adults in power gave to the recent student-led climate change strikes. Leaders had the opportunity to listen to and celebrate the voices of young people who were demonstrating, through their ‘actions’, the ‘spirit’ of the United Nations, Melbourne Declaration and Australian Curriculum. Instead the Prime Minister of Australia stated, “*We don’t support our schools*

being turned into parliaments. What we want is more learning in schools and less activism in schools” (ABC, 2019).

Universities face the challenge of preparing future teachers to not only be environmental change agents and activists in their own rights but also capable of empowering their students to be environmental change agents and activists. Quite simply, Environmental Education needs to become a mandatory component of all teacher training degrees. Likewise, pre-service teachers need to be shown how to genuinely embed the cross-curriculum priority of Sustainability and general capabilities into their programming frameworks.

References:

- Australian Broadcasting Commission. (2019). Climate change strikes across Australia see students defy calls to stay in schools. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-15/students-walk-out-of-class-to-protest-climate-change/10901978>
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2013). General capabilities in the Australian Curriculum. Retrieved from <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/media/1072/general-capabilities-creative-and-critical-thinking-learning-continuum.pdf>
- Gough, A. (2006). A long, winding (and rocky) road to environmental education for sustainability in 2006. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 22(1), 71–76.
- McLaren, P. L. (2003). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs. (2008). Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. Retrieved from http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf
- United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund. (n.d). *A simplified version of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org.au/Upload/UNICEF/Media/Our%20work/childfriendlycrc.pdf>

Reflections on this contribution...

The high and increasing levels of administration and policy and curriculum changes and accountabilities and training requirements seem to swamp and drown out enthusiasm and time to achieve the good stuff from such documents as the Melbourne Declaration. Building community, achieving sustainable ways of living, and interacting with other people and species are given token effort compared to the emphasis, time and resources given to literacy and numeracy. At least our students will be able to read the menu at the restaurant at the end of the universe. Students will be literate and numerate on a dead planet. Is this really what we want from our education systems?



Closing comments

I (Phil) teach teachers at Western Sydney University. I make these points to my students:

- If we are not teaching our students to be subversive, we are teaching them to be passive.
- If we are not modelling a preparedness to correct what’s wrong, we are modelling blind acceptance.

I want my students to challenge ideas and processes and systems and my teaching. I invite them to be critical of my pedagogy and encourage them to wonder how they could do the lessons better. We have to take a similarly mindful and critically engaged approach to how things are done in our society. We have to challenge, not just learn to tinker environmentally and survive. We have to effect change at the biggest levels possible, and – through our education work – inspire others to do the same.

Recently, I (Peta) took up a request from one of our marketing/media publications to produce a quiz about climate change and to do an interview about it.... The end result is here <https://this.deakin.edu.au/self-improvement/quiz-how-much-do-you-know-about-climate-change>.

The process was really enjoyable: thinking carefully about what people really could/should know about climate change and how to encourage them to develop their own responsibilities – being active and informed in our democracy. Maybe have a go at the quiz and see how well you do... would you have asked questions differently? What is important for people to *KNOW*!!

And maybe it's not about what we know, but what we do... As educators we *DO* a lot of encouraging/facilitating others to think and do – perhaps differently. Phil and I were contracted by AAEE in 2019 to develop this teaching and learning sequence on climate change. Check it out here <https://sustainable88future.wixsite.com/climatefuture>. We generated 8 modules that support anyone to take a group of people through some thinking about change and how/why we need it. The aim was to pull together some useful resources and to provide a narrative or how they could be put together, so that you could work with a group of interested people and generate action.... Change. We are all part of systems and it is our responsibility to ensure that the system is working in the way we want it to... in the way it needs to be working for these increasingly desperate times.