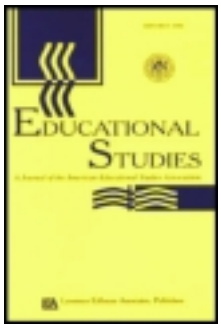

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What If? The Educational Possibilities of the Earth Charter

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Evoking a concern for intergenerational equity and claiming that the bounty and beauty of Earth have become diminishing prospects, I introduce the Earth Charter as an expression of the hopes of diverse communities around the globe. I argue that the Charter deserves educators' attention as an integrated vision of social justice, peace, and ecological sustainability. I believe the Earth Charter can help transform our conception of what is foundational to include solutions to the deepening anthropogenic ecological crisis. Attention is given to the rationale and methodology for teaching with the Earth Charter. I argue that those in educational studies must deeply engage the problems of our time and that the Earth Charter offers hopeful possibilities for examining and addressing our mutual interconnections.

Why?

> 4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.
>
> a. Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.
>
> b. Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.
>
> Principle 4, Subprinciples 4a, 4b
> The Earth Charter

What is foundational in the foundations of education? What aims of education are both timeless and timely at this moment of anthropogenic ecological crisis? John Dewey, in *A Common Faith* (1934), wrote,

> We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received. (57–58)

Many of us have chosen educational studies and teaching because we cherish this heritage and this responsibility. Many of us also believe, as did Dewey, in education as an agency of social change for the better, for the common good. Tragically, but surely, the common human heritage of a bountiful and beautiful Earth is at risk. We are causing unprecedented and irreversible diminishment of this long, rich tradition. This cultural and, if you will, natural order of things is now lost. Such once unimaginable bounty and such vast beauty have become, in the hands of modernity, diminishing prospects.

Even more foundational than our classical question of what it means to be educated is the question of what it means to live. As many in our field have said, education must be for life. If not, then what is it for?

Concerned for the unsustainable path of Western economic development and for the losses for future generations, the World Commission for Environment and Development (WCED 1987) called for "a new charter" to consolidate and extend relevant legal principles creating "new norms … needed to maintain livelihoods and life on our shared planet" and to "guide state behaviour in the transition to sustainable development" (332). Thus, the challenge of sustainable development was thrust upon the community of nations.

Brundtland (WCED 1987) defined sustainable development as development that "ensure[s] that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (8) and addressed in no uncertain terms the question of intergenerational responsibility, "'we' borrow environmental capital from future generations with no intention or prospect of repaying … the results of the present profligacy are rapidly closing the options for future generations" (8).

The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 began to respond to calls from the WCED, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and governments, and the religious and spiritual community to draft an Earth Charter. However, although consensus had gradually begun to emerge as to the content and structure of an Earth Charter as a statement of fundamental ethical principles widely "shared by people of all races, cultures, religions, and ideological traditions" (Rockefeller 2002, 23), many governments disagreed with the idea of an ethical commitment and efforts within the United Nations' structure were ended. But, in 1994, a civil society initiative was launched to advance the development of a people's charter of ethical principles for sustainability. This process culminated in the current Earth Charter in 2000.

To the best of our knowledge, the Earth Charter Initiative has involved the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in connection with the drafting of an international document. Tens of thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations from all regions of the world, different cultures, and diverse sectors of society have participated. The charter has been shaped by experts, government and civil society leaders, students, and representatives from indigenous groups and grassroots communities.[1]

The Preamble of the Earth Charter briefly describes the cosmological and ecological situation and the major challenges and choices facing humanity. There follow sixteen main principles, which are divided into four parts. Each part contains four main principles with a number of supporting principles that elaborate the meaning of the main principles. The principles in the charter are formulations of fundamental ethical guidelines and major strategies. (The Preamble and sixteen main principles follow this article.)

I believe the Earth Charter is an important expression of the hopes and aspirations of the emerging global society. It is part of a growing worldwide people's movement pursuing major challenges in our values and institutions. For this reason, it is important for teachers to consider.

What If?

What if you had entered teaching because you believed deeply in the efficacy of education to make the world a better place?

What if you were committed to social and environmental justice and were looking for effective ways to teach it?

What if you discovered an integrated statement of ethical principles with demonstrated educational value?

What if you learned that you were among thousands of teachers worldwide teaching the ethics of sustainability?

We live by hope and we teach by hope in dark times. Contemporary challenges like globalization, the threat of terrorism, and the worsening environmental crisis present us with daunting challenges as teachers of hope.

If globalization is to mean more than transnational corporate commodification of resources and cultural concepts, it needs an ethical framework. If the problems the world faces are, in the end, ethical problems, then, indeed, the solutions must be solutions to which ethics point. We need an ethical framework for sustainability in the context of globalization and environmental degradation. The Earth Charter, by virtue of its remarkable birthright and content, can provide environmental and sustainability educators with such a foundation for humane and just globalization.

Education, with its powerful concentration of intellectual resources and privileged position in society, has a leadership role, indeed a moral responsibility, to seek ethical and practical answers to the economic, social, and environmental problems. Education, then, can take the lead in pointing the way toward an integrated vision of the challenges and the solutions. I believe that the Earth Charter, recognizing as it does the indivisibility of environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace, is a wholesome conception of sustainability that can assist education in its response to the question of what education is for in such a time as ours.

Surely it is not the last word on a global ethical framework, but the Earth Charter provides an opportunity to reflect on the significance of globalization for life on

earth and to consider the responsibility of education to raise issues related to the direction in which economic development is going. If our way of life is to be a sustainable one, if globalization is to be humane, we in educational studies need to engage deeply in such challenges.

Ruud Lubbers, United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees and an Earth Charter Commissioner, has said,

> Governments across the world have recently committed themselves to ridding this world of the scourge of terrorism. But we also have a collective responsibility to address the conditions that breed such hatred and violence in the first place. Injustice, poverty, conflict, ignorance and disease—all these contribute to general instability in the world. In a globalized world, we cannot afford to turn our backs on people and places severely affected by any of these maladies. And without a common ethical framework, efforts to address these issues will be in vain.
>
> The Earth Charter offers a way forward by adopting this integrated approach. It links the various stakeholders who have an impact on our future. It is fundamentally about universal responsibility and interdependence. (Earth Charter Commission 2000, 2)

It is an enormous challenge to teach about such broad and interrelated topics. The ecojustice crisis is particularly challenging to teach, in my opinion, because for so many teachers, and students, it induces despair and helplessness. One of my students has said, "hope is finding the possible in the impossible." For me, the Earth Charter is a source of hope and inspiration because of its educational value in teaching these difficult topics.

How?

From the beginning, the themes and perspectives of the Earth Charter have been viewed as efficacious for education of all kinds and at all levels. *The Earth Charter Briefing Book* states,

> The Earth Charter is a valuable resource … Discussion of the Earth Charter in classrooms, conferences, and workshops can heighten awareness of the basic challenges and choices that face humanity. It can help people learn to think globally and holistically. It can focus attention on fundamental ethical issues and that interconnectedness. It can serve as a catalyst for cross cultural and interfaith dialogue on shared values and global ethics. It can be used to generate in individuals and communities the kind of internal reflection that leads to a change in attitudes, values, and behavior. (Earth Charter International Secretariat 2000, 18)

The Earth Charter allows for an integrated approach to the teaching of human rights and peacemaking on the one hand, and environmental challenges on the other, because of the proximate nature of the related principles within the document itself. Social peace is defined by a series of right relationships with oneself, with one's community, both past and future, and one's biosphere. Ecological integrity, the principles acknowledge, cannot be achieved if the social context is not just and participatory, nonviolent and peaceful.

Specific principles and subprinciples of the Earth Charter also offer many possibilities. Principle 11, for example, states,

> 11. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.
>
> a. Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them.
>
> b. Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.
>
> c. Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.

In a recent speech, Steven C. Rockefeller (2003) has said,

> Among the illiterate, there are almost twice as many women as men. The major message of the UN summit conferences held in Cairo on population (1994) and in Beijing on women (1995) is that the empowerment of women through access to education, health care, and economic opportunity is essential to the achievement of population stabilization and sustainable development. Access to early childhood and primary education for all, girls as well as boys, is, then, a major challenge, especially in the global South. Colleges and universities throughout the world can help to meet this challenge through teacher training programs. The training of new teachers becomes doubly critical in regions hard hit by AIDS. In parts of Africa, for example, thousands of teachers are being lost to the disease annually. (9)

Individual principles can serve as an entry point to exploring special issues and for further discussion of actions that are ethical and sustainable. Use of individual principles can clarify and justify concrete issues, then, as well as contextual and related ones.

Dimensions of the content can indicate many areas for further study—international law, contemporary science, philosophical traditions of secular and reli-

gious belief, and the wisdom of indigenous peoples, for example. The content can serve as a conspectus of the "debate" on the pluralism of thought that ought to be included in sustainable development. Indeed, through the content of its principles and through its conceptual framework, it can serve as a kind of definition of sustainability and a framework for sustainability education in educational studies.

Conclusion

In this brief review of the Earth Charter, I have tried to answer three questions of interest to those in educational studies:

Why should educators know about and teach the Earth Charter?

What if the Earth Charter came into the life of a teacher?

How might the Earth Charter be used to reframe and improve current teaching, especially in ecojustice education?

In such a brief essay, it is impossible to do justice to the rich history and provenance of the Earth Charter. The prodigious array of the sources of its ideas is a story in itself. So, too, is the inspiring thirteen-year saga of its development as a people's charter. The Earth Charter Initiative believes it to be the most open participatory process ever engaged in any international agreement.

Also beyond the scope of this piece is the explanation of the elaborate intellectual architecture of its concepts and their integrated synergy. For more on the Earth Charter story and on its educational uses, please visit www.earthcharter.org. The full text of the Charter is also available there.

The call for papers for this special issue on eco-justice and education emphasizes the responsibility to understand ecological and cultural systems as human and non-human interactions and to re-conceive and adapt our lifestyles in ways that will not jeopardize the environment for future generations. Issues of class, race, gender, language, religion, politics, economics, globalization, and education must be worked out in terms of eco-justice (from the Editor's Call).

The Earth Charter, with its core principles of the recognition of the importance and value of all forms of life, regardless of their worth to humans, and of intergenerational equity, and with its ethics of right living, provides a powerful heuristic. It speaks directly to this responsibility, to the specific issues raised by the editors, and to the concerns of environmental justice. My hope is that attention to the particular concerns of race, class, gender, language, religion, politics, economics, and globalization in relation to education will assist you in keeping these issues in mind and in relation to each other. I also trust that the Earth Charter will assist you and your students in the transformation of what is foundational in educational studies at this time of deepening crisis.

MAIN PRINCIPLES OF THE EARTH CHARTER

PREAMBLE

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms, we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Toward this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Earth, Our Home

Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life's evolution. The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air. The global environment with its finite resources is a common concern of all peoples. The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.

The Global Solution

The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species. Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

The Challenges Ahead

The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life. Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being

more, not having more. We have the knowledge and technology to provide for all and to reduce our impacts on the environment. The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world. Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.

Universal Responsibility

To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world. The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community. Therefore, together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed.

I. RESPECT AND CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.

2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful

4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

II. ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.

6. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.

7. Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

9. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.

11. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.

12. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

IV. DEMOCRACY, NONVIOLENCE, AND PEACE

13. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.

14. Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.

15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

Note

1. My account of the early history of the Earth Charter relies on the writing of others, primarily Steven C. Rockefeller, Chair of the Drafting Committee, to whom I am indebted for his insight. It was he who linked John Dewey's work to Earth Charter principle 4B.

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