

Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, & Planetary Crisis: The Ecopedagogy Movement by Richard Kahn. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. 186 pp. ISBN 978-1-4331-0545-6.

Richard Kahn discusses in his book the much needed movement from current non-critical environmental education to ecopedagogy which critically reads and rereads environmental devastation within frameworks of social and environmental justice. Traditional environmental education helps sustain environmental devastation, and often systematically increases it, by ignoring the links between social conflict and environmental devastation. At first this may seem counterintuitive, but by analyzing environmental devastation in a vacuum, separated from societal context, the links between environmental devastation and social conflict become hidden. For example, water pollution is taught on a biological and physical level; however, the politics of the reasons for the pollution and how society is affected by it are often ignored. When social aspects are taught, change is only discussed within the current social systems rather than the transformation of them. In addition, analysis of environmental devastation is examined through sustainable development¹ defined only through economic, anthropocentric frameworks and within western Scientific frameworks² which is seen as having unquestionable analytical processes and “truths.” When environmental-social links are hidden, the prominence of this type of environmental education becomes a hidden curriculum as defined by Henry Giroux (2001). Knowledge and actions of environmentalism, promoted by such an education, become ones that focus upon conservation with sometime oppositional ideologies between saving nature for its “inherent goodness” and the use of nature for human needs and the wants of economic/hegemonic gain. Biocentric viewpoints that view the Earth as a part of us and us as part of the Earth are necessary to develop a sense of planetary citizenship (Gadotti, 2009) and emphasize that humans do need Earth’s other resources to live. The Earth as a citizen is the most oppressed of all citizens and in the sense of planetary citizenship, because we are part of the earth, this fact means that we are all oppressed by the planetary crisis (Gadotti, 2008, 2009).

Kahn’s book helps define and develop through theories and subsequent praxis, as the title suggests, a critical pedagogy and ecoliteracy to combat the current planetary crisis. Kahn, a Freirean himself, stresses ecopedagogy to be “concerned with the larger hidden curriculum of unsustainable life and look to how social movements and a democratic public sphere are proffering vital knowledge about and against it” (p. 22).³ Environmentally ill actions need to be deconstructed and reconstructed to determine what is being done to the Earth, why it is being done, who it benefits, and who or what is negatively impacted. These are the most essential questions of ecopedagogy because, as education

cannot be apolitical (Freire, 1998), traditional environmental education is political. Without any benefits, acts of devastation would not occur because there would be no reason and subsequently no motivation for them. These “benefits” are a contested terrain in themselves because there is little doubt that a family needs certain resources for basic needs such as shelter, warmth, and nutrition; however, the deforestation of large areas of land for corporate farming to maximize profit is on the other end of the spectrum. Kahn develops foundations of analysis for pedagogies which determine the social and environmental injustices between who benefits and who/what⁴ are negatively impacted.

Kahn develops the idea that ecopedagogy must, among many other tenets, be critical, dialectical, interdisciplinary, and culturally and historically relevant. He writes the book from a macro perspective in which, at times, the reader has to be reminded that the book is about ecopedagogy. However, this is one of the reasons why the book gives such a great understanding and need for ecopedagogy. Pluralistic in nature, ecopedagogy has a vast array of definitions depending on disciplinary focus (social, political, economic, etc.), but all of them have the essence of being progressive, critical, and transformative. In his work, Kahn transverses a path through his scholarly interests to construct the subject matter (ecopedagogy in this case) as in all excellently written publications on any interdisciplinary field.

Beyond the well written introduction, he does not describe ecopedagogy in a linear development pattern, but develops critical analyses of various important segments of society and develops these topics in a dialectical development within an ecopedagogical framework. If a reader wants to read a step-by-step textbook guide on ecopedagogy without delving into its theoretical essence and resulting praxis, then the book’s introduction should suffice. The book develops a deep understanding of ecopedagogy as transformational in three different aspects: cosmological as recognizing and critically analyzing dominant ideologies historically; technological by critically determining the use and influence of technologies from sustaining hegemony to promoting social justice; and organizational which examines knowledge from Sciences and sciences. He uses various literary media, such as poems, myths, and theories from various fields, to give a multi-perspective, interdisciplinary understanding on these transformational aspects. In a circular fashion Kahn deconstructs and then reconstructs the subject of each chapter with broad strokes and then explains the reasons why his chosen path develops a deeper, more critical understanding of ecopedagogy. The book gives an excellent example on structuring a Freirean reading and rereading of environmental and social problems to more fully understand their complexities and interconnections towards more complete solutions—basically praxis as Freire defined it (Morrow & Torres, 2002).

In conclusion, Richard Kahn provides a thorough overview of the complexities of ecopedagogy by focusing on many important contested terrains. The contested terrains that Kahn discusses are not simply labeled as binary—either negative or positive. The complex and conflicting subjects are critically and dialectically developed as educational tools for analyzing and developing the negatives and positives within historical and cultural perspectives. Some examples of these contested terrains include globalization, technologies, S/sciences, and knowledge. All these and others are critically examined throughout the book to develop both an understanding and a way to educate others to develop critical pedagogies of ecoliteracy to view, learn, and develop effective solutions to the planetary crisis. Kahn's book should become a classic in the environmental education field, as well as other social sciences, humanities, professional schools, and even the hard sciences. Although many in these fields are likely to disregard Kahn's book because it inconveniently goes against their canons (profit making, capitalism, consumerism, western Sciences, etc.), it is the need to critically analyze these canons, as Kahn did, to overcome the crisis.

Notes

¹ For example, there are around 70 definitions of sustainable development in Brazil and Argentina, with only a few using an economic framework.

² Processes of top-bottom globalization promote an ideology that values western, "hard" Sciences (denoted by Sandra Harding with a capital "S" in the word Science; S. Harding, 2006; S. G. Harding, 1991, 1998) as the only framework by which to view nature, because it provides objective views of its unchanging "laws." Science views the observation and manipulation of nature as not subjective, but instead as a method towards observing, stating, and manipulating what *is reality*. Non-western, indigenous sciences are denoted by a lowercase "s."

³ Paulo Freire's last book was to be on ecopedagogy but was left incomplete on his writing desk due to his death in 1998 (personal conversation with Moacir Gadotti at the Paulo Freire Institute, Sao Paulo, Brazil, on September 11, 2009).

⁴ "What" is used here to denote all in nature that is non-human.

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Reviewer

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