

Lessons from Environmental Education: Developing Strategies for Public Consultation within the Georgia Basin Futures Project

Janet Moore, University of British Columbia, Canada

Abstract

This paper describes an interdisciplinary project involving university researchers, community groups, and industry partners in a collaborative dialogue about sustainability. The goal of the Georgia Basin Futures Project (GBFP) is to increase public and expert knowledge about issues of sustainability within the region of the Georgia Basin, British Columbia. The purpose of this paper is to consider whether environmental education is a fundamental component of public consultation processes about sustainability. The paper presents two possible strategies for sustainability education and examines the potential for adopting these strategies within the Georgia Basin Futures Project. The paper concludes with a section on the current directions within the Georgia Basin Futures Project community engagement team.

Résumé

Cet article décrit un projet interdisciplinaire comprenant des chercheurs universitaires, des groupes communautaires et des partenaires de l'industrie dans un dialogue concerté au sujet de la durabilité. Le but du Georgia Basin Futures Project (GBFP) consiste à accroître les connaissances du public et des experts à l'égard des enjeux de la durabilité dans la région du bassin de Géorgie, en Colombie-Britannique. Cet article cherche à examiner si l'éducation environnementale est un volet fondamental des processus de consultation publique au sujet de la durabilité. Il présente deux stratégies possibles pour l'éducation en matière de durabilité et considère la possibilité d'adopter ces stratégies dans le cadre du GBFP. Il se termine avec une section sur les orientations actuelles au sein de l'équipe de la mobilisation communautaire du GBFP.

The Georgia Basin Futures Project is an interdisciplinary project attempting to increase public and expert knowledge about issues of sustainability within the region of the Georgia Basin, British Columbia. The public consultation component of this project will engage various groups throughout the region with a computer model called QUEST and facilitate workshops and focus groups on the subject of sustainability. The intention of the project is to engage the public and local and regional decision makers in a collaborative

dialogue about sustainability and to develop potential future scenarios for the Georgia Basin. The purpose of this paper is to consider whether environmental education is inescapably part of this type of consultation. Through the presentation of a wide array of strategies within the education literature concerning sustainability, ecological issues, and social change, this paper raises critical questions for university researchers and educators to address before planning or implementing public consultation processes on the topic of sustainability.

The first section of the paper examines the project proposal for clear statements concerning the goals and objectives of the public dialogue. This exploration leads to reflective questioning concerning the role of environmental education in community engagement about sustainability issues. The second section of the paper presents a range of approaches to environmental education that demonstrate the breadth of the environmental and sustainability education movements. The final section of the paper presents two possible strategies for sustainability education and examines the potential for adopting these strategies within the project. The paper concludes with a section on the most recent directions taken by the Georgia Basin Futures Project community engagement team.

Background

As a graduate research assistant of the Georgia Basin Futures Project, I have spent the last two years thinking about how my personal interests in environmental education fit within the objectives of the project. Within the field of environmental education, a variety of strategies are available for consideration that potentially fit within the goals and objectives of the Georgia Basin Futures Project. The reason I began thinking about this topic is directly related to an incident that transpired during a team meeting of this project. During an early brainstorming session, researchers were asked to put two colours of sticky notes on a large piece of paper in front of the group. The green coloured notes were to represent the goals for the project and the pink coloured notes represented the directions that we did not want the project to go. One of the pink stickers is still vivid in my mind. It read, “this is not an environmental education campaign.” I later inquired about the reasoning behind this statement. It was explained to me by one of the project leaders that the project was not designed to preach to the public about sustainability in the region. It was at that moment that I realized that my understanding of environmental education was different than many of the researchers involved in the project. After this meeting, I stopped calling my work “environmental education” while I investigated the literature in an attempt to articulate a wider range of environmental education strategies. I strongly suggest that environmental education (properly conceived) must be an integral part of the Georgia Basin Futures Project’s consultation process, but this does *not* mean that the project should advocate **one** particular strategy about sustainability.

The Mission of the Georgia Basin Futures Project

The Georgia Basin Futures Project is comprised of a group of professors and graduate students from a variety of academic institutions that are partnered with a wide variety of establishments including governmental and non-governmental, public and private organizations (for a full list of partners see www.basinfutures.net). While most of the original researchers involved in the project are advocates of a sustainable future, very few are familiar with the literature of environmental education. The Georgia Basin Futures Project represents the University of British Columbia as researchers and educators but we are also a group of concerned citizens interested in social change. These dual roles place the members of the Georgia Basin Futures Project in a difficult position. It is of strategic importance that the members of the Georgia Basin Futures Project understand how their beliefs and values are unquestionably related to the goals and objectives of the project.

As members of a project funded by a range of partners and organizations we undoubtedly share a set of values that are unlikely to be in line with the other communities present in the Georgia Basin. Given a project of this size, it is likely that a wide spectrum of values and moral principles are held by the researchers involved. I am interested in the collective visioning that underlies the writing of the project proposal, for example the assumptions that lie within the project's mission statement.

This project will explore how to reconcile limits to global carrying capacity with human well being in the Georgia Basin over the next forty years. Our objectives are to increase the level of public and expert understanding of how complex ecological, social and economic systems interact and to discover ways of achieving a sustainable future. (Georgia Basin Futures Project mission statement, 1999a)

The mission statement is obviously extremely broad and raises many questions that cannot be answered in this short paper. Who is the “public” that we are referring to? Can we agree on a definition for “human well being”? What does it mean to increase understanding? Is it possible to assess levels of expert and public understanding before and after consultation? This type of broad mission statement is indicative of the size of the project—because the researchers have difficulty finding common ground, we choose to make statements that are unlikely to be critically questioned by the public or other researchers.

At the heart of the Georgia Basin Futures Project lies a computer model called QUEST that will be accessible to students, teachers, governmental agencies, and many community and corporate groups throughout the region. “Through the interactive model, interested citizens and groups will explore the tradeoffs and consequences associated with their preferences for the future. Their attitudes will be informed by this intensive learning process on

how ecological, social and economic systems may interact over time” (Georgia Basin Futures Project, 1999b, p. 5). One of the explicit goals of the QUEST dialogue is to elicit core values from the players of the game. QUEST:

will be used to generate and analyze a series of alternative scenarios by which sustainable conditions might be achieved over the next four decades. These scenarios will be developed by combining the expert knowledge of the research team with regard to how ecological, social, and economic systems interact, and the values and preferences of interested citizens with regard to population, transportation, social health and wide range of other decision areas. (GBFP, 1999b, p. 14).

It is important that the project be aware that the process by which these values and preferences are solicited will have a large impact on the conclusions drawn. If the project is attempting to increase understanding within the aforementioned publics about sustainability then I would suggest that environmental education (and perhaps sustainability education) is a key component of this project.

Despite the obvious links to environmental education, it is clearly stated in the original proposal that the public consultation component of the project is *not* public education. “The title of this component deliberately refers to public consultation rather than to public education, to reflect its interactive nature. The project will not just be delivering information to user groups and stakeholders, but incorporating their views in the research” (Georgia Basin Futures Project Proposal, 1999, p.13). This statement clearly suggests that early versions of the project proposal equated education with a one-way transfer of information, a definition that few educators would agree with. The proposal also clearly states that consultation is thought to be more “interactive” than education, hence the name of the component.

Semantics are an important component in any public endeavour. The connotations surrounding the meaning of the terms “education” and “consultation” change depending on the specific audience. After many members of the public consultation component stated their concern with the choice of the name “public consultation” others options were investigated. Eventually, the term public consultation was changed to “public engagement” and finally to “community engagement” to reflect developing ideas about the overall objectives of this component. The progression of name changes for this component, from the initial proposal to the present state, clearly demonstrates a shift in thinking about how this consultation will occur. The name changes suggest an awareness of the possible implications that our work and processes might have on the region. We must be able to contemplate the potential impacts, positive and negative, that could occur as the result of this large-scale engagement process. Despite the project’s initial rejection of the term “education” from this component there are distinct educational messages in any type of engagement process. People will learn from the material supporting

QUEST as well as through the process in which we engage people with QUEST. “In the conduct of teaching, we must also acknowledge that the process of learning is often as important as the content, and that institutions teach by what they do as well as what they say” (Orr, 1996, p. 9). As members of an academic institution, we must be aware of the broader vision that we are presenting to the public through our consultation processes.

Academia, Environmental Education, and the Dominant Paradigm

A dilemma that is often addressed in the literature on environmental education contrasts the purpose of schooling with the goals of environmental education. Environmental education is often thought to be able to “transform values that underlie human decision making from those that promote environmental degradation to those that support a sustainable planet which all organisms can live with dignity” (Hart, 1990, p. 360). Whether or not environmental education is attempting to transform values is one perspective on the subject. Hart’s (1990) statement is directly contrasted with the purpose of school that is to maintain social order by “reproducing the norms and values that dominate” (p. 360) our current decision making processes. Herein lies the dilemma, how does a large project of researchers decide which norms to reproduce and which to challenge or question? Can a project of this magnitude partner with corporations at the same time as challenging the very systems which are allowing corporations to dominate? What type of responsibility do we have as academics taking our message (or our computer models in the case of the Georgia Basin Futures Project) to the public? Hart (1990) suggests that we need to reconsider our perspectives on how knowledge is constructed and respected.

If Canada is to adopt an authentic approach to environmental education a different view of knowledge would be necessary—a constructivist view in which knowledge is individually and socially constructed through active participation in the process of decision making in light of the historical and cultural context. Environmental education would be informed by deliberative enquiry into the rationales of alternative courses of action. In this view educational practice becomes praxis—a process of critical reflection upon personal improvement involving a dialectical relationship between thought and action. (p. 362)

Academics currently have the ability to challenge the status-quo and to create spaces within our current political system for open deliberation on these issues. Creating this space is a difficult proposition as the institutions and bureaucracies that universities are a part of are resistant to change and are more likely to promote narrowly-focused approaches to environmental education. Val Plumwood (1996) addresses this issue and suggests that we need to make a conscious move away from the dominant paradigm that currently exists.

Since the dominant paradigm of scientific neutrality and value-freedom renders philosophical and social critique unwelcome or illegitimate (Harding, 1991), the placement of environmental education predominantly within this dominant paradigm serves to mute the important corrective challenge critical environmental thought poses to present forms of social organisation and to the dominant version of our relationship with nature. These structures disempower environmental education and prevent it from addressing the main problems we have to face. (p. 77)

The problem with addressing the dominant paradigm within this type of academic collaboration is that it conflicts directly with the ideologies existing in the corporate partners and academic institutions that support and maintain the project that we are a part of. As researchers we need to be prepared to challenge the institutional and socio-economic structures that currently exist in our society without having to fear that we will lose our funding sources.

What is Education For?

If one of the many objectives of the project includes education, it is important to take a step backwards and attempt to answer the question—what is education for? The purpose and goals of education will never be agreed upon completely. A few of the many interpretations include education as a means to increase intelligence, to create citizens who will function better in society, to increase knowledge, and a passage of self discovery. David Orr, who advocates for ecological literacy, considers ecological issues and ecological literacy as central to the purpose of all education. Orr (1992) suggests that all education is environmental education, because students are a part of (or apart from) the natural systems in which they live. Alternative perspectives on the purpose of education are fundamental to the choice of strategy for community engagement as they are central to the issues of knowledge creation and understanding. Education can be constructed as an open process of critical thinking or with a specific goal in mind.

Another perspective on the ultimate goal of education is presented by Hungerford and Volk (1990) as shaping human behaviour . . . “a broad picture of behaviour encompassing not only knowledge, attitudes and skills, but also active participation in society” (p. 9). This perspective on education is fundamentally opposed to many other definitions because it specifically focuses on changing people’s behaviour. These two perspectives:

- education as a means to understanding the environment (social, economic, political, and ecological); and
- education as a means to change behaviour, are two of hundreds of interpretations of the purpose of education.

Hungerford and Volk (1990) contend that good environmental citizens can be created through proper education.

The recent field of social marketing for sustainable behaviour is predicated on this type of thinking. Recent publications such as *Fostering Sustainable Behaviour* (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999) and *Tools of Change: Proven Methods for Promoting Environmental Citizenship* (Kassirer & McKenzie-Mohr, 1998) offer step-by-step instructions on how to change people's behaviour in order to create environmental citizens. While behaviour change for increased recycling and community involvement seems harmless, others caution that education should not be equated with behaviour modification.

I believe that the role of environmental education should be to help people assess, evaluate, and critically consider the possible options available for all citizens in the community as opposed to attempting to create good environmental citizens. The actions and methods necessary for calculated behaviour change should be carefully considered by anyone interested in using them. "While educational achievement should enable individuals to act intelligently, people will not act intelligently if they have been trained, brain-washed, conditioned, indoctrinated, cajoled, coerced, or bribed to behave in a certain way" (Jickling, 1991, p. 173). The Georgia Basin Futures Project has had difficulty in addressing the objectives of the consultation process. Are we attempting to create environmental citizens, change peoples behaviour or engage citizens in creating and implementing policy initiatives towards sustainability? The most common answer within the project is to suggest that we will "engage" the public in a dialogue. Promoting "engagement" is safe territory as it does not speak to specific behaviours or goals. It is my understanding that the project feels that we are at the top of the wave of a massive dialogue on sustainability and we are unsure of how to proceed. We will remain cautious for the time being.

What is Environmental Education?

When I imagine environmental education I don't think of changing peoples' behaviours directly, nor do I think about information campaigns. I envision environmental education as a process for mutual learning, critical examination, and contemplation of a wide variety of environmental issues. This is not to say that changes in behaviour will not occur, but that these changes are not the objective of the dialogue. However, my understanding of the goals and objectives of environmental education are obviously only one of many possible interpretations. The word "environment" is commonly used to describe the surroundings that humans and other organisms live in. Environments are seen as external entities surrounding the human domain, a perspective that upholds the dominant view that ecological systems are externalities separated from human society. "For in a very real sense there can only be

environment in a society that holds certain assumptions, and there can only be an environmental crisis in a society that believes in environment” (Evernden, 1985, p. 125). Thinking about environmental education as education with the intent to learn about or alter the external environment is a misleading representation of the possibilities. Environmental education may also be defined more broadly as “an open ended process that helps people make sense of an increasingly complex world” (Stapp, Wals, & Stankorb, 1996, p. 5).

In the public domain (outside of the classroom), environmental education is often equated with public health campaigns, recycling advertisements and government slogans to “do your part” for the environment. Most information campaigns transfer messages from experts to the public in a manner that rarely promotes deliberation, community involvement, or critical thinking by anyone. If this perception of public education currently pervades our community, then the alternatives to this type of education must be realized. We need to be clear that information is not knowledge, knowledge is not understanding, and understanding is not wise action and that few educators distinguish these. By allowing public education to include a wider array of strategies and approaches we can envision environmental education as a dialogue about the interconnectedness of the social, economic, and ecological systems in which we live.

Education About and For Sustainability: Where Does the Georgia Basin Futures Project Fit in?

In their recent book, *Education for Sustainability*, Huckle and Sterling (1996) address the differences between education *about* sustainability and education *for* sustainability. These distinctions are adapted from Sterling (1996) in Table 1. Education *about* sustainability focuses on awareness and behaviour change in citizens. In this strategy, education is thought of as a tool for policy implementation and it is suggested that power and control are maintained at the center of the current systems. On the other hand, education *for* sustainability is presented as participative and transformative whereby policy decisions are created through a process of mutual learning. Learning and democratization are the focus of education *for* sustainability. It is also important to note that Sterling (1996) clearly states that these strategies are not exclusive and should be considered to be located at two ends of a continuum.

After assessing these strategies it is clear that the strategy of education *for* sustainability is more democratic and inclusive than the education *about* sustainability. The process underlying education *for* sustainability is flexible, integrative, and transformative and appears at first glance to be the ideal model for consultation.

| Strategy 1: Education about Sustainability | Strategy 2: Education for Sustainability |
|---|--|
| Instructive | Constructive |
| Education, training, and public education are seen as important for implementing public policy. | Environmental policy is shaped, negotiated, owned, and enacted locally through a medium of learning. |
| Education is a tool for policy. | No distinction between learning for change and making policy decisions. |
| Public are recipients of a message, knowledge, or information | Emphasis on participation, ownership, empowerment, generation of meaning. |
| Goal is to generate awareness and induce behavioural change and then adopt policy. | Participants' perceptions, values, and concerns are the starting point for change. |
| Power and control is maintained at the centre. | Role of the centre is facilitation. Process is flexible and integrative. |
| Change in values and perceptions is fast, but is often shallow and impermanent. | Change is slow and more difficult, but deeper and more permanent. |

Table 1: Two possible strategies for sustainability education, adapted from text (Sterling, 1996).

My perceptions about education *for* sustainability changed when I encountered the critiques that argued against the rhetoric of "educating *for* sustainability." Jickling's (1994) paper, "Why I don't want my children to be educated for sustainable development," focuses on the issue of the ambiguity of sustainable development and the problems with educating for a particular endpoint. How can we educate for sustainable development when academics cannot decide collectively what sustainability is? Because sustainability can be argued from either an eco-centric or an anthropocentric perspective, it is unclear which position is being advocated amongst educators working in the boundaries of sustainability education. Instead of addressing these issues many educators working in the field have shifted from using the term "sustainable development" to using the term "sustainability" instead. The term "sustainability" may be interpreted in even more ways than the term "sustainable development" but somehow is less contested. "The often invoked term 'sustainability' tends to obscure the seriousness of the situation; clearly no culture which sets in motion massive processes of biospheric degradation which it has normalised, and which it cannot respond to or correct can hope to survive for very long" (Plumwood, 1996, p. 76).

A greater concern stated in Jickling's (1994) paper is that students are being educated *for* a particular goal or endpoint. Is it the role of the educator to educate with a particular endpoint in mind? This question is of fundamental importance for the Georgia Basin Futures Project to address. Should public education aim to advance a particular perspective, e.g. towards sustainable development? When we think about education for sustainable development we undoubtedly have a goal in mind. To suggest that children should be educated to believe that sustainability constitutes a collection of

correct environmental viewpoints is directly opposed to the spirit of education (Jickling, 1994). Many authors raise similar critiques of the movement of education for sustainability and a growing literature is available on this topic (e.g., Sauvé, 1999; Jickling, 2000). With an increase in the number of interdisciplinary projects about sustainability and public involvement, environmental educators need to promote discussions of these critical questions in order to be clear about their objectives. Within the Georgia Basin Futures Project there are a number of educators and researchers currently creating (and contemplating) “sustainability education” materials and curriculum to support QUEST and the tools of the Georgia Basin Futures Project.

The positive aspect of research and education on the topic of sustainability is that it is bringing together researchers and community in new ways. The Georgia Basin Futures Project has brought together planners, regional governmental agencies, educators, economists, atmospheric scientists, medical doctors, foresters, and policy analysts (to name a few) to work towards an increased understanding and engagement on social and ecological issues affecting our region. We are learning slowly to communicate with one another with a common goal of creating a dialogue with the public. This process is difficult but it has led to many new interdisciplinary forums and relationships.

Environmental Advocacy and Environmental Education: Is the Georgia Basin Futures Project Advocating Sustainability?

As educators we need to be aware that our biases and assumptions about how the world *should* work and how people *should* behave will creep into our curriculum and discussions at any given moment. The project comprises a wide range of viewpoints on **how** a sustainable future will be created—those who believe in behaviour change, those who believe policy regulation is the answer, and others who believe in participatory democracy. It is interesting to note that the conversation within the project directly parallels the intentions of the community engagement component—to engage the public of the Georgia Basin in this exact dialogue. Hopefully we will learn more about ourselves as we *listen to* those outside academic walls discuss their views on the future.

The community engagement team of the Georgia Basin Futures Project has now created documents to outline the objectives and goals of the consultation process (www.basinfutures.net). The community engagement node of the project believes that modifying individual behaviour in a prescribed direction should not be considered the goal of our sustainability dialogue. The intention of community engagement is to engage people in a dialogue—to discuss tradeoffs, choices, risk, and decision making processes in the region. Our objective is to describe sustainability as a conceptual tool that is open to debate. After people play QUEST there will be a set of action tools that can

be used to help people make steps towards change. The debate around which tools we will choose to include in our toolkit is becoming a hotly debated area in the project. Action tools might range from letter-writing, to organizing protests, to retrofitting your home, and composter tips. Certain “sustainable” behaviours are rarely debated while others are quite open to heated discussion. Do we *know* that a mass switch to biking, retrofitting, and composting would create a more sustainable world? *Should* academics promote protest organization, and radical groups on their websites? These are some of the discussions that continue to emerge in the project and will likely continue long after the project is completed.

As academics we need to address whether or not the goals of our projects are to continue the discussion of sustainability or whether it is attempting to move public opinion towards accepting academic perspectives. Unfortunately we live in a world with tremendous constraints on our time. Decisions need to be made, funding has to be allocated, and projects must meet deadlines with community and corporate partners. Decisions get made without consensus because people cannot attend meetings in their increasingly hectic academic lifestyles. Professors have more and more responsibility placed on them as budgets in departments are reduced and graduate students are constantly being reminded about deadlines in their programs. The rhetoric of “publish or perish” has an impact on the ability for people to spend time discussing the philosophical underpinnings of the project. In my experience, it is often suggested that “the project needs to get more work done” instead of spending time deliberating about these larger issues. It is important that we consider these constraints as more academics are becoming involved with community in large scale collaborative projects.

Next Steps for the Georgia Basin Futures Project Community Engagement Team

I imagine that each of the academic researchers working on the Georgia Basin Futures Project has a particular view of what environmental education is and what it can and cannot be. It is clear after 2.5 years in a 5 year endeavour that our project will unlikely come to an agreement on what education is ultimately for. I would advise future projects of this size that it would be helpful to articulate perceptions about education and more specifically environmental education before academics attempt to take themselves into public dialogues about the future and sustainability. This is not to suggest that one answer will emerge from the dialogue—only that the dialogue will lead to a greater understanding for all of those involved.

The community engagement node wants to convey the idea that people do not need to conform to a particular model of sustainability and can choose from a variety of tools and methods. People can engage in a variety

of ways with our tools (e.g., QUEST, action tools) and Georgia Basin Futures Project is encouraging people to get involved in creating the future of our region. Community engagement on this project aims to provide a process for communities and individuals to do three things:

- To create enabling structure where constituents can see the long-term effects of their choices and compare these to other communities whose features and interests intersect with theirs;
- To provide a place where people can self-select their role in dealing with the questions or dilemmas that led to their initial interest in sustainability; and
- To employ the support for individual and community decision-making.

“If we are successful, the Georgia Basin Futures Project will be embedded in processes that support research and create social change” (Community Engagement Workplan, 2001).

Conclusion

The Georgia Basin Futures Project has struggled in creating open forums within the project for the larger questions raised in this paper. We work within an institution that values individual scholarship, promotion by publication, and increasingly demands more and more of our time. There appears to be less time to debate these important issues and less time to take a stand within society and allow the public to respond. Stevenson (1987) reminds us that environmental education has the potential to “transform the values that underlie our current decision making . . . [however] this contrasts with the traditional purpose of schools . . . of conserving the existing social order by reproducing the norms and values that currently dominate environmental decision-making” (p. 74). The dialogue needed will take a long time and will not be an easy subject to discuss. Jickling (2000) summarizes the need to discuss our core values when embarking on any discussion of sustainability. “We need to speak more confidently about assumptions, lifestyles, worldviews, and conceptions of human place and purpose in ecosystems . . . And, we must find space to discuss cultural identities, respect, society-nature relationships, tensions between intrinsic and instrumental values and other ideas that lie beyond sustainability” (p. 475). I hope that the Georgia Basin Futures Project will be able to create such a space both within and beyond academic walls.

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Notes on Contributor

Janet Moore is a doctoral candidate at the University of British Columbia in the School of Community and Regional Planning. She is studying the future of environmental and sustainability education at the university level. She is an active researcher in the Georgia Basin Futures Project at the Sustainable Development Research Institute.

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