

From tragedy to comedy: reframing contemporary discourses

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This paper argues that environmental destruction arises from a discourse rooted in Western Economic and Scientific Theory. This discourse artificially separates individuals from our natural world and argues that competition and utilitarian actions are beneficial to society. It is however, a discourse that is taking us to a Shakespearean tragic end: it is resulting in actions that actively harm our natural world, as all too familiar statistics of environmental damage make clear. It is a discourse that does not match our underlying physical reality, which is why calls for Environmental reform *within* this discourse will not be effective. Hearing about global warming, deaths caused by hunger every two seconds, and the extinction of plants and animals on a scale never seen before can be enough to envelop us in a sense of hopelessness: we are headed, it seems, for an inevitable tragic ending. However, Shakespeare makes clear that this is not necessary the case. We are not yet at our end; we are yet still storying ourselves. We can thus rewrite a better ending by shifting ourselves into a Shakespearean comedy. The potential lies in our discourse which is not truth, but a contingent creation. After describing these ideas in more detail, this paper goes on to present the parameters of a new Ecological discourse rooted, like Shakespeare's Comedy, in care and humanity that dovetails with our natural world and provides for hope through transformed consciousness. It concludes with recommendations on how this new discourse can be spread and taught in schools.

Keywords: environmental education, holistic education, hope

Introduction

Learning about the condition of our world today can lead one to an overwhelming sense of despair. For example, to offer just a few statistics: Over 9 million people will die world wide of hunger this year, yet people in the UK and the US don't eat 40-50% of their food. Americans, 5% of the world's population, contribute 45% of the world's automotive carbon dioxide. The world's population grows by a quarter of a million people every day (3 per second) and one dies of hunger every two seconds. A person in a "developed" country uses eighteen times more energy than one in a "non developed country" (Global Issues, 2008). These statistics do not even begin to explore the depths of environmental and sociocultural damage our world faces. The more we learn, the more we can feel ourselves to be enveloped in a Shakespearean tragedy: the only ending we seem to be headed for is unpleasant, and--like the grand plays of Othello, Hamlet, and Macbeth--we are headed there because of the actions of some within our current discourse. However, we do not have to choose a tragedy. We can "write" ourselves into a Shakespearean

comedy (Orr, 2004). After describing this vision of the Shakespearean comedy that envelops within it the seeds of an alternative Ecological discourse, some of the key elements of this alternative are explored. The argument presented is developed from research into theoretical and historical explorations of the meaning of discourses and of alternatives and is supported by current research and writing in the field. The paper then concludes with suggestions as to how this new discourse can be achieved through Ecological Education.

Shakespearean Comedy

A Shakespearean comedy is not light entertainment. It often includes dark and tense moments. However, what distinguishes it from a tragedy is a positive ending in which love, joy, and hope triumph over despair. Love is our greatest human potentiality, the achievement of our highest humanity. We have love when we can move beyond our own egocentricity to see the beauty and worth of others. Love “wins” against animosity and despair. For example, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, bitter Don John attempts to destroy the love between Hero and Claudio. He tricks Claudio into believing that Hero is unfaithful. Claudio then refuses to marry Hero. However, the deception is uncovered and Hero’s death faked. Claudio is filled with remorse and agrees to marry Hero’s cousin. In the end, Hero is unmasked as Claudio’s bride at the second wedding ceremony. Claudio is delighted at his second chance at love, and Hero is joyful at reclaiming her lost lover. In *All’s Well that Ends Well*, Helena gains Bertram’s love through a crafty scheme. The giving of love results in the achievement of love. This perspective matches symbiosis in an ecological system. It is a connection in which all creatures find nurturance and growth from and in each other.

A “positive ending” for our environment does not need to be fantasy, for we are ourselves constructions that emerge from our lived discourses: “It is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies” (Foucault, 1995, p. 217). If we are fabricated by our society’s discourse(s), we have the potential to transform ourselves and our discourses: “those who are inserted in these relations of power, who are implicated therein, may, through their actions, their resistance, and rebellion, escape them, transform them” (Foucault, 2007). The “writing” of a discourse in which we may construct a more hopeful future encompasses three recommendations.

Deconstructing Damaging Discourses

Much environmental destruction emerges from a Western discourse that is rooted in: (a) rational Scientific philosophy and (b) economic theory. The first separates society and nature by viewing nature from an “objective” standpoint. Philosophers such as Descartes argued that nature existed “out there” and that we could discover it and, thus, control it through the use of reason. In this discourse, exemplified by Bacon’s scientific method, nature was an object to be measured, studied, and used in people’s interests. This philosophy still underlies much work in science and technology today, as illustrated in the “food science” industry where food is genetically modified in order to make it more attractive to consumers or easier to grow. It has led to the death of nature (Merchant, 1989).

This rationalistic, objective view of nature consciously cuts emotional ties that bind us to each other and our world and is often tied to classic economic theory. Western thinkers such as Smith, Malthus and Mills argued that measureable national income illustrated a nation’s wealth. This income was produced through labour. Methods of increasing wealth included strategies such

as the production line. By rationalizing work into a series of steps, each of which could be learned quickly and was simple, production could be increased. The loss of the master craftsmen was not to be a concern, as more was produced, thus improving the wealth of (some in) the nation. Other economists, the Utilitarians such as Mills, added that individuals should be viewed as primarily unidimensional and self-concerned, interested in maximizing their “happiness” or wealth: greed was good. Each person, working individually in his or her own self-interest, was like a small cog in a giant machine whose output was economic prosperity for all. Little government regulation of factories or individuals was needed. If each individual was left to maximize his or her interests through utilitarian behaviours, society as a whole, they argued, would benefit through increased wealth.

Scientific rationalism and economic utility underlie our present discourse and result in actions that lead to environmental damage. For example, as more profit can be achieved by having economies of scale in farming, small farmers all over the world are losing their lands to large corporations. These large and wealthy corporations become wealthier by using technologies to grow a single crop over large areas. Some nations in Latin America have consequently become known as “banana republics.” The loss of farmers’ livelihoods is not counted in economic statistics of “wealth” and a nation’s or company’s GDP. The formulas for both profit and GDP thus illustrate their limited nature as they do not consider environmental damage, laid off employees, and insecurity, among other results.

This discourse however, is only a construction. It is not truth but rather is composed only of theories through which our world can be viewed. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault (2001) explores the relations between knowledge, truth, and power, in a manner similar to Kuhn’s paradigms. He argued that all historical periods have “Truth” discourses arising from an “episteme” (historical grounding with unconscious rules and relations—the “strategic apparatus” for separating what is considered acceptable or not). The knowledge inherent in a certain discourse is constructed within it. We can see the constructed nature of discourses through “genealogy...the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles...to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory” (Foucault, 1980, p. 167).

In other words, we can see discourses’ lack of truth, by presenting alternatives and considering history. Different ages in Europe, for example, had different economic theories. Prior to classic economic theory, Europe lived mercantilist theory, where wealth was tied to concrete assets, in particular, gold. Trade was consequently encouraged. Feudalism underlay a very different understanding of economic wealth: control through and in land. Lords lent out their land to farmers, who in return gave the lord an oath of military service. Land was wealth, not stocks and bonds as in our world. In the Ancient World, wealth was tied to concrete objects, land, and people (slaves) that could be bartered.

The danger with discourses that are accepted as truth is that they become powerful lived realities: individuals who adopt them as truth act through them. Stocks and bonds provide an example today. People buy ownership into companies. If individuals feel optimistic, they demand more shares in a company and its value increases. If, however, individuals feel pessimistic, they sell off their shares, resulting in a company’s loss of value. The “actual” value of the company (such as its assets) may not change. If enough individuals feel pessimistic, more sales of stock occur. If panic erupts, the market collapses, as occurred on “Black Monday” and at the start of the Great Depression. Faith influences stock value, as does our belief in banks as safe places to hold our savings. However, if we all went to the banks to withdraw our full savings, banks would collapse, as illustrated in Argentina during its economic crash in the 1990s. Banks hold very little

actual currency. If faith in the theory is lost, in short, the theory's "reality" crashes, with consequences for all. The constructed nature of discourses thus provides us with the possibility of creating a new lived reality, one which is more in harmony with our natural world.

Constructing a Harmonious, Integrative Discourse

Our current rational and economic discourse is harming ourselves and our environment and increasing inequality among nations. North Americans, for instance, will throw out the equivalent of 1,000,000 Styrofoam coffee cups today; 15,000 trees were cut down for today's newspaper. An estimated one species goes extinct every hour. The world's air fills with toxic pollutants and rains down as acid rain harming all life. Global warming is damaging ecosystems. The hole in the ozone layer is letting in harmful UV rays, leading to cancers. Meanwhile, "only 22 per cent of global *wealth* belongs to the so-called 'developing countries', which account for about 80% of the world population...[and]...the abysmally meager 2.3 per cent of global wealth owned by 20 per cent of the poorest countries thirty years ago has fallen by now still further, to 1.4 per cent" (Bauman, 1998, p. 70-71). These discourses, lived by some, are writing us into a Shakespearean tragedy. They do not fit our natural and cultural worlds. Metaphorically, they are like the child's toy in which the child must place the correct shape into the corresponding mold—circles into circles, squares into squares, and triangles into triangles. Current economic theories are like square pegs that the child attempts to insert into circular molds: they don't "fit" our natural world, and they result in actions that cause the environmental and social issues discussed above.

This is why attempts to foster environmental change within the current discourse will not work: while a few people will try to follow suggestions to turn lights off when not in a room or to recycle their waste, these small gestures are not enough when companies and government will continue to aim for continued growth through the consumption of our natural resources and actions that disregard environmental care. *Earth Hour* is an example: I can turn off my lights for one hour symbolizing that I care about the environment. Then, I can feel as if I have done my part, and I can continue on with my regular life without disruption. If the underlying discourse changes, these lights will be *off* all the time, and not just for one hour of one Saturday of one day a year. This will be normal behaviour and will be encompassed within numerous caring actions towards our natural world, such as buying and growing local and organic food, refusing consumer culture, driving little or not at all, and living sustainably. Further, these actions will also underlie government and company actions. Companies will no longer aim to continually increase their profits and to grow, but rather to find balance and harmony, to develop their products in environmentally friendly ways. Their measure of success will not be continued growth of profit but how much they add to the *health* of a place. Governments will be responsible for ensuring that they regulate the actions of individuals and people. These significant changes require a new discourse, which slides smoothly into place, nurturing our surrounding environment for all living creatures and embracing emotive connections.

This alternative discourse draws on Orr (1990, 2004), Capra (2007), McKenzie, Hart, Bai, and Jickling (2009) and ecology in a manner that re-stories us into a hopeful, Shakespearean Comedy. Unlike our current discourse, it views humans with hope and from a *multidimensional* perspective: mind, spirit, emotion and body are integrated. The mind, or our reason, provides us with the intelligence to bring positive changes, such as better technologies and better policies. For example, human ingenuity can be turned to new technologies that bring health rather than focus on economic profit. Political policies that regulate companies and false advertising and that charge fees for environmental damage and introduce "ecological economics" are also moving in the right direction.

However, as reason can be corrupted by, and used to serve, base needs such as greed (as occurs in our current discourse), it must be linked to our higher emotions: love, care, and forgiveness, as found in Shakespearean comedies. Indeed, one study found that “emotion discourses” actively support environmental education (Reis & Roth, 2010). Love is mature love: it understands love to be about giving, not taking; growing not stifling. This love for and of others is necessary for love of and for self: “The person who tries to live alone will not succeed as a human being. His heart withers if it does not answer another heart” (Buck, 1967). Love and care for others leads to interconnected webs based in respect and builds a “community of life”—effectively, an ecological discourse in harmony with our natural world. It is illustrated in action (our body) and fired by the last element: spirit. Our spirit is our philosophic understanding of what it means to be and to live. It is the root of our ethics and our morality. It underlies our values, what we believe to be the “good.” We can define the latter as emotions and thoughts that overcome our flaws, such as greed and selfishness, as we come to see the falsity of certain discourses we may have lived. This good is thus linked to care and love and expressed in positive action that is maximized through reason. It leads to happiness, understood from the Greek perspective as *eudemonia*, or satisfaction that arises from worthy actions and is fostered through our re-engagement with nature’s “soul” (Sabini, 2002)

This multidimensional understanding of people is linked to a different understanding of wealth. Wealth is perceived as health, as *the vibrant flourishing* of individuals and of physical *place*. In this view, a person must grow in body, through nourishing food and exercise; in mind, through intellectual endeavour; in emotions, through greater love and care of self and others; and in spirit through reflection on the meaning of being and joyful interaction with place. Gibson (2009) argues that some are already starting to live this new discourse through a *re-enchantment* with our natural world that brings joy and purpose, unlike current economic and rationalistic discourse that discounts emotive and spiritual elements of our natures in ways that are damaging to self, others, and place, as the following statistics illustrate: if rates of suicide (indications of “health”) are used as a measure of wealth Canada rates far below some nations we consider “underdeveloped.” Canada had 19.5 male suicides per 100,000 in 1998. Mexico had 5.4 in 1995 and Iran had 0.3 in 1991. Correlations exist between apparent development and higher rates of suicide: the United States had 17.6 in 1999, and Japan a staggering 36.5 in the same year (World Health Organization). A couple of other interesting indexes are already in use. One measures “gross national happiness,” or growth as a function of socioeconomics, spirit, environmental awareness, and good governance (Gross National Happiness). One such index ranked Canada in the bottom half of world nations. The second, the “Happy Planet Index” measures individuals’ perceived life satisfaction and expectancy as a function of one’s ecological footprint (The New Economics Foundation, 2006). According to this index, Latin American nations rank near the top. Canada ranks 111th. These statistics can change our perception of what it means to be “developed.”

This ecological discourse goes beyond respect and care for self to the cultivation of our planet’s health. At it values health as prosperity, production does not need to continually increase. That is, wealth is not tied to production. Production is only necessary to satisfy essential life needs. As it views all life as valuable and interconnected, the aim is to create a functioning system in which living creatures need and depend on each other in symbiotic relations. The aim is harmony and connection. If this goal is achieved, society will be viewed as “successful.” For example, Figure 1 illustrates a simple, balanced water cycle. In this system, the essential element of water cycles through a natural environment without end. Nutrients and energy move in a similar manner. Carbon dioxide is released by aerobic living creatures into the air, where plants then absorb it and use it to create food. This food is then consumed by living creatures. The human

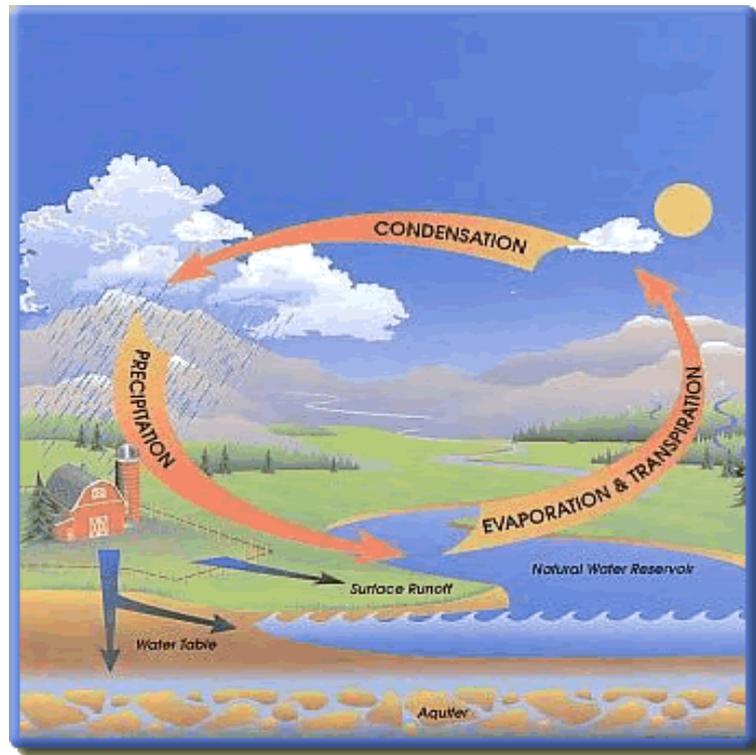


Figure 1. A Natural Balanced System, as illustrated by the Water Cycle.

<http://www.aucklandcity.govt.nz/council/documents/hgi/images/hgiFigA15.4.jpg>

body, itself a natural system, functions in a similar manner, as illustrated in the connections between glucose level of the blood and insulin.

These natural systems, however, can be damaged by human actions when these are informed by a non-ecological discourse. Figure 2 illustrates how the use of fossil fuels affects all natural cycles. These no longer work in self-sustaining balance. Rather, human actions result in positive feedback cycles. For example, the building of roads results in less movement of water into the ground and more overland runoff. As a result, the soil becomes drier and plants and animals suffer. This is compounded by the loss of topsoil through weathering. Less trees are available for transpiration, resulting in less water in the atmosphere. Less rain falls, compounded by a warmer atmosphere. The result is a positive feedback loop in which the environment becomes drier and drier, and all living creatures are affected. This figure illustrates how our current discourse is unsustainable, fails to consider our physical reality, and does not lead to long term health for individuals or place.

These two figures are gross simplifications of the full number of connections in an actual environment. But, they illustrate the danger of human actions on our natural world that are the product of our current discourse, and how an alternative discourse encompasses nature (including ourselves) as composed of integral elements which work together to create a fully functioning system in which all parts of a system work together. They illustrate that wealth lies in health, in connections that benefit oneself, society, and all living creatures. Mckibben (2010) states that we need dramatic behavioural change to address the environmental damage we have caused. This paper argues that this change will occur through the move to a new ecological discourse.

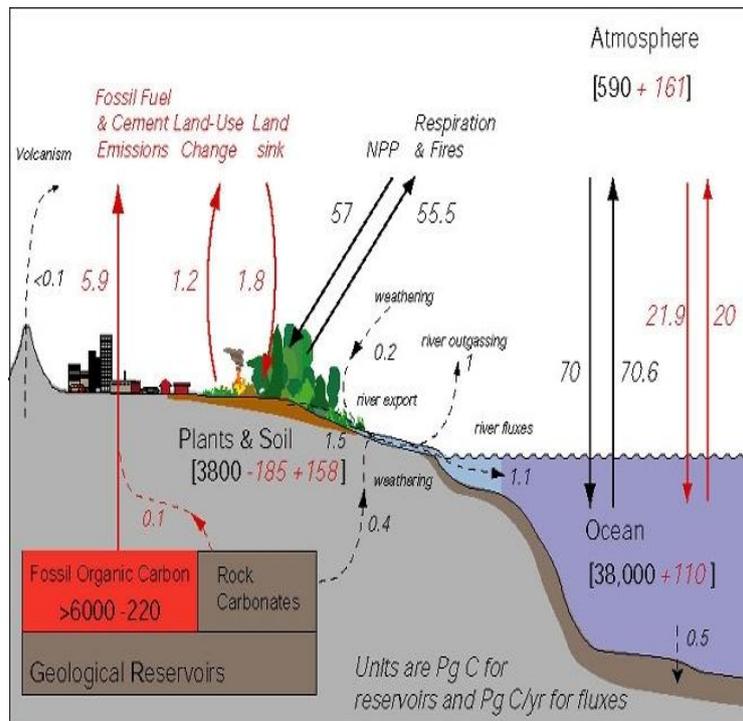


Figure 2. A Damaged Ecosystem.

http://www.pmel.noaa.gov/co2/OCO_Report/fig1.jpg

Features of a society built on an ecological discourse include the following:

(a) *Property*. In nature, living creatures cannot be said to be “owners” of parts of the environment. Rather, the concept seems to be closer to a commonly owned space in which all share and benefit. Nature is something we hold in trust for our future children. Property ownership is a human construct that ignores our temporary place in this world. In the novel, *Saturday*, the protagonist had to clean out his mother’s house, after she had been placed in a seniors care centre. The author writes that: “as the shelves and drawers emptied, and the boxes and bags filled, he saw that one didn’t own anything really. It is all rented, or borrowed. Our possessions will outlast us, we’ll desert them in the end” (McEwan, 2006, p. 274-275). While the concept of private property is not likely to end, greater redistributions of property and greater common holdings of property in the form of common green spaces, such as squares, communal gardens and farms, and parks, are possible.

(b) *Work*. All “honest” labour should be fairly valued. Currently, some jobs, such as those of business managers, are seen to be better than others, such as those of farmers. However, farmers play an important role in ensuring we are fed, and thus, alive. They should, consequently, receive respect and better living conditions. Government could play a role through the taxes that different groups in society are expected to pay. As “honest” work is understood to develop “health” in individuals and society, not all work is honest. For example, drug dealing would be considered dishonourable and shameful work, for drugs harm the individuals who take them as well as have harmful ripple effects through society through increased violence.

(c) *Media*. As some individuals who work in mass media aim at monetary profit: they appeal to violence, to crime, and to sexuality. Musical lyrics, for example, are worrying. Current pop

stars such as 2 Pac advocate violence and drug use. In one song, he states, “Tha cops can't stand me, but they can't touch me...Call me a dope man, cause i rock dope beats” (2 Pac). Video games, too, often promote violence. Unfortunately, our young turn to these media to learn societal behaviours and the features of its discourse. They adopt the dress and style of their “stars,” as well as some of their regrettable behaviours such as taking drugs. Perhaps, Plato had a point: the Arts are powerful and they can be dangerous when in the wrong hands. They influence the “democratic man” who does not:

Receive or let pass into the fortress any true word of advice; if any one says to him that some pleasures are the satisfactions of good and noble desires, and others of evil desires, and that he ought to use and honour some and chastise and master the others --whenever this is repeated to him he shakes his head and says that they are all alike, and that one is as good as another...he lives from day to day indulging the appetite of the hour...His life has neither law nor order; and this distracted existence he terms joy and bliss and freedom; and so he goes on. (Plato, 360, Book VIII)

We should realize the power of the Arts in socializing our youth and spreading discourses.

(d) *Violence and Crime*. Violence often spawns further violence, decreasing our chances of solving issues. Fostering better living conditions, combined with respect for nonwestern philosophies and understanding of the web of connections that bind all humans together, will lead to a decrease in hatred. Problems can be solved by dealing with the underlying issues that spark the violence, not by violent retaliation. For example, the conditions that gave rise to Hitler were economic despair and shame that turned to anger. These resulted from the peace treaty terms of World War I. More compassion and less retribution could have led to a different outcome. If crime is a product of poverty, then poverty must be addressed through providing training and opportunities.

(e) *Respect for Self, Others and the Environment*. Respect is an attitude that arises out of love. It is necessary towards oneself, others, and the environment. One must have love—self esteem—for oneself and others as illustrated in the ancient golden rule: “treat others as one would like to be treated.” One can look at others with empathy and care, if one keeps in mind that all people are largely constructs emerging out of their environments and if one considers the web of connections that bind us all irrevocably together. Perhaps, the individual who steals is desperately hungry, the one who sells drugs knows no better, and the boy who walks down the street with anger and violence in his heart is lost and confused. By showing care for others through respect, we can gain understanding and develop social networks. We can spread hope and opportunities for transformation.

If we follow these five elements of an ecological discourse, our actions will change towards others and our natural environment. Technology, for instance, has played a large role in damaging our environment. It has allowed for the gross exploitation of natural resources and mass production and has contributed to our Baconian split from the natural world. In Western nations, electricity provides light and heat; medicines heal diseases; and grain elevators store massive amounts of grain in case of famine. This technology provides a false distance from nature, but it only takes an electric power outage, or a serious natural disaster, such as a tornado, earthquake, or tsunami to illustrate the chimera. Once we connect ourselves again to our natural world, we can turn our intelligence and creativity to using technologies that enhance it and ourselves. For example, technologies exist which create energy naturally, an ecologist in Toronto has developed a fully functioning ecological home, and an American designer has created a natural ecosystem which cleans dirty water (Orr, 2004). Further, in our communities, we can advocate greater environmental protection and better urban planning such as mixed land use and

higher taxes and regulations against polluting industries. We can use new “time-space” compressed technology (Bauman, 1998) to “de-urbanize,” to create small, new towns in which mixed land use and sustainable practices are promoted.

We can also refuse to buy into “consumer culture.” Bauman (1998) among other Post Modern theorists (Usher and Edwards, 1994) has described our culture as one that cultivates unsatisfiable needs in order to keep us perpetually buying: “To increase their capacity for consumption, consumers must never be allowed to rest. They need to be kept forever awake and on the alert, constantly exposed to new temptations and so remain in a state of a never wilting excitation” (Bauman, 1998, p. 83). Customers’ attempts to satisfy their cravings through buying can never be satisfied, yet consumers are duped, unaware of the depth of their complicity. They believe they are free individuals making their own choices:

To act like this is for a fully fledged, mature consumers a compulsion, a must; yet that ‘must’, that internalized pressure...reveals itself to them in the disguise of a free exercise of will. The market might already have selected them as consumers and so taken away their freedom to ignore its blandishments (Bauman, 1998, p. 84).

Cultivating authentic freedom requires that we choose not to buy, that we deny compulsions to do so. If we buy only when and if we need to replace an item that has worn away beyond its intended use and we buy with awareness of whom we buy, we refuse to buy into today’s contemporary economic discourse. If we don’t buy, the companies don’t sell. If they don’t sell, they will be forced to change in order to survive, or they will not survive. Some dislocation will be necessary, but change will be inevitable. The power lies with us; creating emerges from the doing:

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts...but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who does them as temperate men do them (quoted in Peters, 1968, pp. 95-96).

We can spread this new discourse through “living” and “educating.”

Spreading the New Discourse

Schooling can be used to maintain the dominant discourse. Mass public schooling, for instance, is an industrial product. Germany led the transformation of education by instituting public schooling at the end of the eighteenth century. The Prussian state used education to indoctrinate compliant and loyal citizens (Cordasco, 1976). Industrialization melded with this conceptualization of schooling to produce the common, public school for children amassed together in dark, industrial cities, who were—the business class argued—in need of training in “proper” work values, effectively, socialization into the current discourse. Reformers similarly argued that public elementary schools would create the docile, trained workers desperately needed for labour hungry industries (Osborne, 1985). They would also form loyal citizens. They would, in words from an 1898 *Teacher’s Guide—Programme of Course Study for Public Schools* prepare students “for the ordinary employments and duties of life” (Department of Education, 1898).

At the turn of the twentieth century, developments in schooling continued with “mass production” and the emergence of Social Efficiency (Callahan, 1962; Dunn, 1980). Developed from

Taylor's business rationale, it applied business principles to schools. For example, BC's Department of Education instituted compulsory attendance and child labour laws, established graded classrooms, developed a more complex bureaucracy, professionalized teachers through certification and increased vocational courses (Dunn, 1980, pp. 23-51). Many of the features we accept as "normal" and "natural" school features, such as bells, timetables, and grades, are relatively recent creations.

Schooling today maintains the dominant discourse by fostering competition, work skills, and "socializing" compliant workers. Spreading a new discourse requires a new form of education, one in harmony with an ecological discourse. It features will include the following elements:

New administrative structures

Grades are used to foster competition and inequality. They are used to divide "successful" (winners) and "unsuccessful" (losers) students and to rank schools as "good" or not. They, thus, support the current discourse of competition *against* one another in order to receive the spoils of success. Further, grading defeats the purposes of education which should be to help students learn and improve themselves, not to divide some as "better" than others. Attention should be focused on providing written comments to students on their strengths and weaknesses. Universities can work to develop alternative means of assessing "worthy" candidates. For example, students could be asked to submit biographies of their work in their communities and their aims. They could be required to support their assertions with references from community leaders. New technology could make this viable. Students who are having difficulties should be provided with support, encouragement, and alternatives. They should be given more varied options. Each student should be helped to find a place in and succeed in life.

Curriculum

Orr (1990) describes problems with schooling and curricula today:

Disconnectedness in the form of excessive specialization is fatal to comprehension because it removes knowledge from its larger context. Collection of data supersedes understanding of connecting patterns, which is the essence of wisdom. It is no accident that connectedness is central to the meaning of both the Greek root word for ecology—*oikos*—and the Latin root word for religion—*religio*." (Orr, 1990, p. 208)

Orr recommends reconnecting subject matter and a greater integration of education with our world, a holistic education in which mind and heart are integrated:

There is, as Whitehead reminds us, only one subject for education: 'life in all its manifestations... Failure to connect mind and feelings, as Gray writes, 'divorces us from our own dispositions at the level where intellect and emotions fuse.' (Orr, 1990, p. 207-208)

Students should be involved in multidisciplinary studies, exploring their integration with the environment around their school (Orr, 1990). They ought to be introduced to the values and traditions of different cultures and worldviews and experience "life" through real-world activities.

That is, the curriculum needs to be restructured around an Ecological discourse: Environmental education should be the centre around which all subjects are constructed and integrated. Currently, for example, in BC, students receive very little environmental education.

Some Environmental Education is included in the science curriculum and is briefly added to a few units in Social Studies curriculum guides. In high school, the curriculum centres on History, so students only briefly are introduced to Environmental Issues in the grade 11 course (as a general unit on Geography) and occasionally as it can be brought to relate to historical narrative. In addition, many teachers have very little training in (or feel very comfortable teaching) Environmental Education. No separate Geography courses exist except at the Grade 12 level, and this Physical Geography course is an optional course.

As this paper has made clear, our world is facing serious Environmental issues that threaten our very survival. In order to address them, we require a change in our consciousness, and this change can be initiated through structural change of schooling structures. If we are going to raise students who respect and care for the harmony and balance integral in nature, we need “public intellectuals” who push for and achieve curriculum reform. Historical research has demonstrated that public intellectuals who push for Geography integration in the curriculum can be successful (Broom, 2008).

Field work

Students should spend more time outside of the classroom engaged in hands on and integrative projects. For example, each year, students can be involved in local community-building projects that enable them to use knowledge from all subjects. Projects should be real projects and those necessary in a local community. These could include studying the resources used by a school (Orr, 1990), cleaning up a local stream or educating the public on recycling. They should visit local government offices. One student should be elected to serve on local government committees in order to provide a “voice” for the young. Further, students could be given responsibility for a certain area in the local community: they will have to determine how to ensure the area is kept clean and administered in a manner that increases its value to the community. Studies can include farm or garden work, which can help students to graduate with knowledge and respect for nature and the effort involved in growing food. For example, students can plant small herb or fruit and vegetable gardens. They can watch the gardens grow through their care. At the end of the year, the students can have a special lunch where they enjoy consuming some of the vegetables they grew, if they are successful in growing the plants. If the plants die, they can explore how difficult growing food is and consider such factors as weather. Being aware of the manner in which all our food is grown for consumption can be something young city children in particular are not aware of. The author remembers the strange feeling of close to cannibalism experienced upon first eating the leaves of a carefully nurtured herb bush. It cultivated a feeling of awareness and respect for food and for the manner in which our lives depend upon the lives of other living creatures—much like the manner in which First Nations people in Canada always give thanks to the plant or animal they are about to eat. Stone (2007) provides practical examples of how school lunches can be tied to sustainability education and to addressing the rise of obesity linked to our current discourse.

Older students can go further through research projects, debates and discussions about such issues as industrial agriculture, the mass use of pesticides and GM foods and the horrific conditions in which animals are “raised” as food. The new documentary *Food Inc.* is a good starting point for these discussions. The latter can be made even more real by the raising and adopting of a class pet, which can develop students’ awareness of the “humanity” found in all living creatures. This class pet should be not kept in the classroom, as many cases exist of the neglect and death of pets kept in school. Rather, the “pet” should be visited in its wild (or semi-wild) state, such as a bear in a nature reserve at an aquarium or an eagle at the local wildlife sanctuary.

As another example, students can be taken out to see the local city dump or sewage disposal plant. Western society is particularly good at “separating out” and hiding ugliness in society. Thus, food is available in a department store far from the woes or troubles of farmers or the cruelty of animal “food” factories; garbage is conveniently picked up and removed from site; sick people are hidden away hospitals; and toilets flush away waste. It thus becomes easy for students to grow up in artificially clean worlds where they cannot understand the manner in which their actions have real consequences for our world. When they are taken to see a dump, or a sewage disposal plant, or an animal slaughterhouse, their perspectives can be radically altered, and they can come to see how we are intimately connected together. In an interview study conducted by the author with high school students who have engaged in active experiential learning (including a visit to a local garbage dump and participation in the building of a sustainable farm), students made clear that such activities changed their perspectives and their behaviours in a manner not possible from simply reading textbooks in a classroom. Another activity to increase students’ awareness of the connections between power, discourse, and action is to have them conduct interviews with government officials (Brooks, 2010). As Dewey theorized, it is only through active doing that we can come to understand—to make sense of—an issue or problem: by “...extending the limits of experience [we are able]...to enlarge the mind...by remaking...meaning” (Dewey, 2007, 166). The procedure to be used throughout these investigations can encompass the scientific method, as well as alternatives such as literature.

Classroom activities

Teacher-led, chalk-and-talk and content-driven learning can be replaced with activities that develop students’ understandings of the connections that bind us all and of the need to respect and work together—essential components of an Ecological discourse. These can be developed through integrative, group work and more student-led learning. Teachers can teach students how to work together, how to value the voice and varying talents of each student, and how to solve conflicts of opinion with respect and without resorting to violence (both symbolic and physical). They should help students learn how to self-reflect on their learning, in order to become self-directed learners. As well, teachers should present alternative societies to that of Western Society positively in order to extend their perception of alternatives, and students can learn of different ways of measuring worth such as “health.”

Teachers can present the two Ecological systems described in this paper (one healthy and the other damaged) to students and discuss with them which one is the “successful” system and why it is so. They can explore together the ways in which components of systems worked together to create systems in balance. A particularly powerful idea for students is that of “symbiosis.” Often, as previously mentioned, Western classrooms are structured around competition through grades and student rankings. This type of competition supports a discourse of taking from (rather than living in) nature. The teacher can present the alternative of a symbiotic relationship, in which, rather than competition, positive interrelations exists that benefit all participants. Students can discuss which is the “better system” and learn that it is not necessary to have losers, but that we all “win” if we take care of our planet and each other. Students from difficult backgrounds or with attitudinal and behavioural problems can be invited in through the creation of a space in which every individual is valued and respected for the strengths he or she brings. Children and teens often mirror the worlds they come from, and so their behaviours can be changed by new environments. In the book, *We Make the Road by Walking* (1991), Freire and Horton conclude the book by reflecting back over their lives and what created them as individuals active in social change. Freire describes the importance of the child’s family background in creating a sense of security and care. As some students are not able to

receive this in their homes, teachers can provide environments that foster both of these and thus present possibilities for student transformation and the development of care for others, including care for our planet.

Further, teachers can use stories to “re-story” how students perceive their world. Many excellent Ecological stories exist: the website: <http://www.sisterschoice.com/ecostories.html>, for example, lists a number of excellent stories that can be read to students or performed as a readers’ theatre or play. These stories illustrate the principles of harmony and balance and provide openings to a new discourse. Throughout all of these activities discussion and reflection are vital. All of these suggestions are not new. Indeed, they are the generally recommended strategies of teacher educators in the Social Studies (see Sears & Wright, 2004, for one example), but they are not always found in classrooms due to influences such as tradition and testing.

In short, solving environmental issues is argued to be only possible in a new ecological discourse grounded in care for self, for others, and for our planet, rooted in the concept of health as wealth. This new discourse is a comprehensive one (that is, more than just a Band-Aid that focuses on short term solutions to some environmental problems) which can be nurtured through classroom practice and can pervade all features of life. It encompasses hope and environmental healing.

Conclusion

In the news we hear of the gunning down and death of 7 innocent American university students by one of the college’s former students, the identification of a murdered body found along a Nova Scotian river as that of a missing 12 year girl (her mother was later charged with her murder), and increasing rates of cancer among climbing numbers of obese Americans. Our time appears to be a “dark” chapter. Upsetting news, combined with statistics on environmental degradation and poverty world wide, may exacerbate a sense of hopelessness. Yet, not all is necessarily lost. We are still writing our ending by our actions today. We can choose our play: a Shakespearean comedy or tragedy (Orr, 2004). Both have dark moments. For example, in *Othello*, we see a man’s love turning to jealousy. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, we see Hero wrongly abandoned and shamed on her wedding day. In both, the potential for destruction exists. Yet each play’s outcome differs substantially. Othello is not able to gain control of his emotions, leading him to kill his love. In so doing, he kills himself and wrecks havoc on others. Hero, on the other hand, forgives Claudio (himself deceived) and is willing to marry him at a second wedding ceremony. She lets her love triumph over her anger and shame, thus bringing love back into her own life and joy all around. The end is determined by a discourse in which love rules. Shakespeare’s comedy provides the means through which this more humanitarian and ecological discourse can emerge: he often made his audiences laugh by parodying social customs. By poking fun at conventions, he illustrated the tentative and constructed nature of society’s discourses, thus provoking insights into the existence of alternatives.

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Trajediden komediye: çağdaş söylemleri yeniden şekillendirme

Bu çalışma batılı ekonomik ve bilimsel teorilerde temellenen bir söylemden ortaya çıkan çevresel yıkımları tartışmaktadır. Bu söylem bireyleri suni bir şekilde doğal dünyamızdan ayırmakta ve topluma yararlı olan faydacı eylem ve rekabeti tartışmaktadır. Ama bu söylem, Shakespear'ın trajik sonuna bize götüren bir söylemdir: çevresel yıkımların istatistiklerinin açıkça ortaya koydukları bizim doğal dünyamıza zararlı olacak eylemlerle sonuçlanan bir son. Bu öyle bir söylemdir ki çevresel reform olarak adlandırdığımız söylemin niçin etkili olamayacağı bir söylemdir ve fiziksel gerçeklikte örtüşmez. Küresel ısınma, her iki saniyede açlıktan dolayı olan ölümler ve hayvan ve bitkilerin şimdiye kadar görülmemiş bir oranda yok olmaları bizi umutsuzlukla kuşatmak için yeterli olabilmektedir: öyle gözüküyor ki kaçınılmaz bir trajik sona doğru gitmekteyiz. Ama, Shakespeare bunun böyle olmasının bir gereklilik olmadığını açıkça ortaya koymuştur. Bizlerin henüz sonu gelmedi ve hala kendi hikayemizi yazabiliriz. Kendimiz Shakespear'ın komedisine yöneltmek daha iyi bir sonu yeniden yazabiliriz. Hakikati olmayan ama arızı söylemimizin arkasında bu potansiyel yatmaktadır. Ayrıntılı olarak bu fikirleri betimledikten sonra, Shakespeare'ın Komedi'sindeki gibi yeni bir ekolojik bir söylemin parametreleri bu çalışmada sunulacaktır. Bu söylem doğal dünyamızı açıklayan dikkatli ve insanca bir söylemdir ve dönüşmüş bir bilinçle bir umut ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, bu yeni söylemin okullarda nasıl yaygınlaştırabileceği ve öğretileceğine yönelik tavsiyelerle son bulacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: çevre eğitimi, bütüncül/holistik eğitim, umut