

Living as Part of the Whole: the implications of participation

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How do we as educators respond to the challenge of sustainability when, as is increasingly accepted, the activities of humans are fast overwhelming the self-regulating capacity of the planet of which we are a part? As Lester Brown points out that

the economic policies that have yielded extraordinary growth in the world economy are the same ones that are destroying its support systems. (Brown, 2001:7)

While the economic and technical dimensions of this crisis are important, I join the environmental educator David Orr in believing that current educational forms are at the centre of our ecological problems. Orr argues that they tend to divide the world by academic discipline, advocate domination over nature, promote individualism and rights over citizenship and responsibility and separate rationality from feeling and valuing:

The crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perceptions, and values; hence, it is a challenge to those institutions presuming to shape minds, perceptions, and values. It is an educational challenge. More of the same kind of education can only make things worse. (Orr, 1994:27)

My work includes introducing management masters and undergraduate students to questions of environmental sustainability. My colleagues and I invite students to explore the complex relationship between business decisions and their impact on local and world communities, economies and environment, and help students develop management practices that are responsive to pressures for greater awareness in these areas. (Marshall, 2004; Reason, forthcoming)

In this work, traditional educational forms have their place. We can offer evidence for the parlous the state of the planetary ecology—showing, for example, how the ecological footprint, a measure of humanity's use of renewable natural resources (Wackernagel et al., 1997), grew by 80 per cent between 1961 and 1999, to a level 20 per cent above the Earth's biological capacity so that 'since the 1980s, humanity has been running an ecological deficit with the Earth' (WWF, 2004:2-4).

We can relate this evidence to a broad critique of economic theory (Daly & Farley, 2003; New Economics Foundation, 2004; Robertson, 1998) and specific proposals for more ecologically sound economic processes, such as 'ecology of commerce', 'natural step' and 'natural capitalism' (Brown, 2001; Hawken, 1993; Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999; Robert, 1997; Tibbs, 1993). At the heart of such proposals are production and distribution processes that stay within natural limits and integrate with and/or replicate the cyclical systems of natural ecologies.

We can show how these models make sense in the context of systemic views of the planet, which leads to Gaia theory (Lovelock, 1979)—a description of the planet as an intricate, self-regulating and self-organizing web of life, maybe a living being. Gaia theory derives from scientific inquiry into the systemic, interconnected nature of the

planet—planetary systems science. It can also be seen symbolically as a rediscovery of *anima mundi*, the soul of the world (Harding, 2001). It is ‘the next big idea’, according to the philosopher Mary Midgley (2000; 2001), big enough to reunite science and spirituality, to give us an appreciation of how the Earth and her inhabitants matter for themselves, regardless of any use we humans might wish to put them to.

And this leads inexorably to questions about how we are to understand the place of the human species in this web of life, questions that cannot be addressed without including a spiritual and moral dimension.

Most of us in the West have been brought up in a broadly ‘Cartesian’ worldview which channels our thinking in significant ways. It tells us the world is made of separate things. These objects of nature are composed of inert matter, operating according to causal laws. They have no subjectivity or intelligence, no intrinsic purpose or meaning. And it tells us that mind and physical reality are separate. Humans alone have the capacity for rational thought and action and for understanding and giving meaning to the world. This split between humanity and nature, and the abrogation of all mind to humans, is what Weber meant by the disenchantment of the world. But the worldview of Gaia theory suggests we may better see ourselves, as Aldo Leopold put it (1949), as ‘plain members of the biotic community’; or with Thomas Berry that we must understand the living Earth not as a collection of objects, but as a community of subjects with the human community seen as *within* the earth community. (Berry, 1999; Reason, 2001)

So the place of humans in the web of life is as embodied participants, ‘living as part of the whole’. From this perspective we can begin to articulate a participative worldview to re-enchant our world and find new ways of education and inquiry. Such a worldview has several dimensions.

Participation as Method

My own journey of exploration started with the idea of *participation as method*—inquiry and education *with* people rather than *on* people through approaches such as co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001; Reason, 2003). It can be argued that these approaches are more effective because they are based directly on experience and tap people's own meanings rather than filtering them through the researcher's or educator's preconceptions. Participation as a *methodological* imperative means that the inquiry process must be based directly on the inquirer's understanding of their own actions and experience. Participative approaches to inquiry are having increasing influence in the social sciences (Reason & Bradbury, 2001); and developing in the natural sciences (Goodwin, 1999).

Participation as power and democracy

But participation is more than method. As we can see from doctrines of human rights and the contributions of political sciences, developmental studies, feminism, and new economics, participation also involves people's right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and claim to generate knowledge about them. Thus participation can also be seen as a *political*

imperative. It is about liberating the muted voices of those held down by class structures and colonialism, by sexism, racism, and heterosexism.

But this goes further: once we understand that humans are plain members of the biotic community, political rights and intrinsic qualities must extend to the more-than-human-world, to individual creatures, but more importantly to species and eco-systems. We can no longer assume that humans have a right to use the planet as a resource for their own benefit without wider regard for the wellbeing on the biotic community (Macy & Brown, 1998; Naess, 1990).

Participation as education and transformation

Participation, in addition to producing knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people, can also empower them at a second and deeper level to see that they are capable of constructing and using their own knowledge (Freire, 1970). It enables them to see through ways in which powerful groups in society tend to monopolize the production and use of knowledge for their own benefit. Thus participation is also a process of consciousness raising or *conscientization* and is thus an *educative imperative*.

Our experience of the participative nature of the world

We live in a participatory world. The reality we experience is the fruit of a co-creative dance between our perception and action in the world and primordial reality of the given cosmos. Subject and object are interdependent and all is interconnected in a cosmic web; Buddhist myth offers the image of Indra's net where all things both reflect and are reflected in all. Thus participation is part of the nature of our being and thus is an *ontological imperative*.

Participative in knowing and acting

Human persons do not stand separate from the cosmos, we evolved with it and are part of its creative force. As such we are required to act, to act to the best of our ability with understanding and responsibility. Thus primary value of our endeavours is the flourishing of life—both human and more-than-human—and the primary purpose of human inquiry is practical. Living as part of the whole requires of necessity an action science (Torbert, 1991). This means that we integrate all forms of knowing—immediate acquaintance, aesthetic expression, informative statements, practical competence—in our inquiry and education process and that participation is an *epistemological imperative*.

Participation, systems, and our place in ecology

As we are increasingly aware that the damage that is being done to the planet's ecosystems and the resultant sustainability crisis facing Western economies has some of its origins in our failure to understand the systemic nature of the planet's ecosystems, and humanity's participation in natural processes, we can also see that that participation is an *ecological imperative*.

Participation and beauty

Gregory Bateson argued that reliance on the conscious and rational mind unaided by art, religious experience, dream and such like is 'necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life' (Bateson, 1972:146; Reason, forthcoming).

The conscious mind alone necessarily fragments the whole. Since the experience of wonder and awe is at the core of our participation in the cosmos, and through beauty we can feel our sense of belonging, we can see that participation is an *aesthetic imperative* and we learn to walk in beauty on the earth.

Participation and spirit

Overall, this leads to the conclusion that one of the primary purposes of human inquiry and education is to heal the splits which characterise modern Western consciousness, and thus that participation can also be seen as a *spiritual imperative*. Living as part of the whole starts from the essential insight that we are already participants: we are part of the cosmos, always in relation with each other and the more than human world, glorious yet temporary centres of awareness and action in an interconnected whole. Yet in other ways the idea of living as part of the whole is aspirational, even utopian in that it offers a vision of humanity far from our present state. As David Abram puts it we no longer live in convivial relationship with the more-than-human-world, and that in itself is precarious (1996:ix). In this view, the purpose of education and inquiry becomes to heal the wounds brought about by the dualism in which we have been marinated.

Living as part of the whole is not a regression from the objective consciousness of Enlightenment thought to an earlier and more primitive ‘participation mystique’ or ‘original participation’ (Barfield, 1957) in which human beings are mythically embedded in their world with no differentiation of consciousness. Rather it reaches forward toward an emergent quality of participation which is self aware, reflexive, in which human experience is highly autonomous and differentiated, and yet recognizes its embedded in its world. The human mind is neither undifferentiated nor embedded, but

arises in the evolution of the cosmos, is an expression of the being of the cosmos, is the cosmos rendered self-aware, the perspectives we bring enable us to directly participate in the self-disclosure of the world (Ferrer, 2002)

The point, very simply, is that we are part of it all, and the moral and practical issue for all humans is to learn to live in a way that does justice to this participation.

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