

## VALUES REFLECTION AND THE EARTH CHARTER

*the ability to critique the values of an unsustainable society and consider alternatives*

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Education for Sustainable Development is based on values of justice, equity, tolerance, sufficiency and responsibility. It promotes gender equality, social cohesion and poverty reduction and emphasises care, integrity and honesty, as articulated in the Earth Charter. (UNESCO Bonn Declaration 2009)

Educators are now teaching learners whose prospects seem to be darkening year on year. Presently jobs are scarce, the economic outlook is poor and the timescale for recovery uncertain. In the background looms the shadow of an environmental crisis that threatens to degrade or even destroy the life-supporting and life-enhancing systems of the Earth. This calls for a response at a deep level of values, a rethinking and reorganization of what is valuable, important, and worth sustaining in an uncertain future. Educators are, however, faced with a double edge sword. If values are explicitly incorporated in the curriculum they could be accused of imposing ideologies on learners. But if all mention of values is expunged from education then this leaves little choice but for learners to draw their values from the unsustainable society around them, or from the values latent in the 'hidden curriculum' of their educational institution.

Values reflection is one way out of this dilemma. Rather than having values imposed on them, learners reflect on the dominant values of society and their institution in the context of the changes that are occurring in the world around them, and ask themselves whether these values are now outdated, or even dangerous. They may reflect on a wide range of things that tend to be valued in unsustainable societies, such as economic growth, profit at all costs, personal success defined in terms of salary, conspicuous consumption, directionless technological progress, convenience defined in terms of avoiding physical tasks, human superiority over other species, cold rationality, mastery over nature and so on.

If learners do find fault with the dominant values of the society around them, then they will also need to consider additional and alternative values, ones which might help contribute to a more sustainable future. This is where the Earth Charter (2000) is useful, not as a doctrine to be forced on learners, but as one among many places to seek possible alternative values. The alternatives, of course, will need to be subjected to just as deep and critical a process of reflection as the dominant values.

It is easy for learners to find nothing but despair as they discover the situation that the world finds itself in, but the Earth Charter provides a framework that offers hope - a way responding to a time of exceptional challenge and opportunity. The Charter's opening words spell this out succinctly: 'We live at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future' and 'The future at once holds great peril and great promise' (p1)<sup>2</sup>.

The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental principles for a just, sustainable and peaceful global society which has been formally endorsed by thousands of organisations including UNESCO and the IUCN (World Conservation Union). The preamble states that ‘We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community’ (p1), and the remainder of the Charter attempts to create such a vision through sixteen principles under four main headings: *Respect and Care for the Community of Life; Ecological Integrity; Social and Economic Justice; and Democracy, Non-violence and Peace*. Given the intensity of the arguments and disagreements which took place during the drafting process – considered the widest ever undertaken, involving more than five thousand individuals and hundreds of organisations – the existence of the Charter is itself a symbol of hope and provides opportunities to explore its own Principle 14: ‘Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life’.

The Charter recognizes that a deep change in values is imperative: the Preamble states that ‘Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions and ways of living’ (p1), with the conclusion calling for ‘a change of mind and heart’ (p4). This can encourage learners to move beyond isolated economic, political and technological responses, to consideration of the more fundamental ethical, psychological and spiritual responses needed to cope with emerging ecological crises. The importance of this is well expressed by Theodore Roszak:

The great changes our runaway industrial civilisation must make if we are to keep the planet healthy will not come about by the force of reason alone... Rather, they will come by way of psychological transformation... What the earth requires will have to make itself felt within us as if it were our own most private desire.

One area where the charter calls for a deep change in values relates to consumerism. It describes production and consumption, which were once valued as the foundation of human development and economic wellbeing, as instead being a root cause of unsustainability when taken to excess: ‘the dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species’ (p1). Rather than consumerist values of ‘having more’, the charter extols the value of ‘being more’: ‘We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more’ (p1).

Studying the Charter enables learners to imagine alternatives to the anthropocentric values that lie at the heart of many unsustainable cultures – values which may be unhelpful as we face the future. It encourages learners to question the place of humanity in relation to Earth and life itself and introduces them to ecocentric values. Principle 1a reads: ‘Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings’. Reading through the Charter, students come across expressions such as ‘the Earth community’ (p1); ‘the greater community of life’ (p1); ‘a unique community of life’ (p1); ‘a magnificent diversity of cultures and lifeforms’ (p1); ‘reverence for life’ (p4); ‘respect for nature’ (p1) and the ‘joyful celebration of life’ (p4). The expressions encode a worldview quite different from lonely human beings surrounded by a sea of ‘natural resources’ worth something only for their utility value. Learners will discover that recognition of the intrinsic value of life in its many forms is basic to many indigenous cultures and this then may help

them form a necessary ‘new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility’ (p4).

Values such as intellectualism, competitiveness, rationalism, technical instrumentalism, reductionism, and scientism may well be hidden within the presuppositions of the curricula of learners’ institutions, their textbooks, formal lectures and assessment strategies (see *A Learning Society*, this volume). The Earth Charter provides a set of alternative values that learners may never come across in the day to day business of formal education. These include valuing: cooperation (p4); humility (p1); the spiritual potential of humanity (p2); compassion (p2); love (p2); human dignity (p3); the Earth’s beauty (p1); reverence for the mystery of being (p1); traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom (p3); loving nurture of family members (p3); human solidarity (p4); peace (p4); and the sacred (p1). Exploration of these alternative values is essential for the future since technical instrumentalism, scientism and rationalism are capable of as much harm as good, particularly when combined with a neoliberal world economy bent on profit. They therefore need to be complimented by deeper ethical values such as compassion. The Charter also provides opportunities for reflection on values in relation to crucial issues such as biological diversity (Principle 5), the precautionary principle (Principle 6), population (Principle 7), democracy (Principle 3), poverty (Principle 9), international finance (Principle 10) and gender equality (Principle 11).

The Charter not only provides potential alternative values, it also models a process where a diverse range of people come together to reflect on, negotiate and carefully express values. The process demonstrates how even the choice of a capital letter or definite article can be significant, for example in the two-year debate over the term ‘Earth’ as opposed to ‘earth’ or ‘the earth’. Capitalisation for planets is common practice in the scientific community and was widely supported by representatives of indigenous peoples, but opposed by some religious conservatives who were concerned about pantheism or deifying the planet. The decision was eventually made to use the capital since ‘when one speaks or writes of “the earth”...[t]here is a tendency to imagine [it] as merely a thing that is taken for granted and to view it as nothing more than a collection of resources that exists solely for the purpose of human use and exploitation’ (Rockefeller in Corcoran 2008).

Studying the history and evolution of the Charter and its drafting can help learners become clearer how, as the Charter states, ‘Life often involves tensions between important values’ (p4). For example, leaders of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference objected to the use of the term ‘compassion’ in the original draft of Principle 15, which covers attitudes to animals in hunting and fishing communities. An Inuit leader challenged: ‘Mr Rockefeller, have you ever killed a whale?’ (Rockefeller in Corcoran 2008). Eventually it was agreed that the word ‘compassion’ be moved from Principle 15 which now reads: ‘Treat all living beings with respect and consideration’ to Principle 2: ‘Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love’. This was acceptable to the Inuit and it particularly pleased the Buddhists, Hindus and Jains that the concept of compassion now had a prominent place early in the Charter. Learning about this history of joint values reflection and negotiation could help introduce the skills of conflict resolution, mediation, collaborative working and networking which will play a significant role in developing a sustainable, just and peaceful world. Learners need to learn how to express and explore differences in creative and flexible ways so that they can help ‘deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter...for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom’ (p4).

The Charter demonstrates that there is growing international awareness of the Earth's sickness and that paths for healing are taking shape. The Charter is not only a text; it is also a movement, and this global perspective enables us to note the contrast between those of us for whom *sustainability* is the issue and the increasing number of us for whom the issue is *survivability* (Manteaw 2009). It is also practical, that is *action-orientated* – every Principle and sub-principle is introduced with an imperative verb which strongly encourages readers to follow the principle in their lives. The Charter shows that there need not be an end to dreams of a better world or to the belief that life can be well lived. Learners can feel there is a global movement acting for their wellbeing that they can become part of if they wish. If they do decide to work within such a framework, they will become more keenly aware of what needs to be done and sufficiently resilient in spirit to do it.

Some texts are so powerful that they can transform our way of thinking, enabling us to see the world in a new way. The Charter may be such a transformational text. Striking claims have been made for it, comparing it with the Magna Carta and the American Declaration of Independence which 'stirred human imagination and changed the quality of life of peoples all over the globe' (Hassan in Corcoran 2005). One leading Hindu has even suggested that, 'Like the Gita, the Bible, the Quran, or whatever holy book you may follow, the Earth Charter, too, requires serious consideration, re-reading, re-interpreting and meditation' (Chowdhry in Corcoran 2005).

The Earth Charter, however, has not yet been officially recognized by the UN. Presumably our globalized world is not yet ready for the values which it expresses, particularly those which might interfere with economic growth. There was a proposal by the Netherlands that it be presented at the Johannesburg Summit, but when it was clear that there was insufficient support it was decided not to go ahead. Nevertheless, the Charter has been endorsed by thousands of organisations including educational institutions at all levels, in many different parts of the world. If it can be widely used as a resource in education for stimulating learners to reflect on values that are marginalised by their institution and the unsustainable society in which they live, then, perhaps, the final, hopeful words of the Charter will be realised: 'Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life' (p4).

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### *Notes*

- 1) With many thanks to John Pickering of Warwick University and the editor for help and advice
- 2) Unless otherwise stated, all references are to the Earth Charter (2000)

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