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## **The Earth Charter, a Radical Document: A Pedagogical Response**

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### **The Earth Charter**

The Earth Charter is, for several reasons, a radical document. First, the Earth Charter is a people's document intentionally created outside the usual context for international agreements and, initially, not formally adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. It proposes solutions that are transnational and that address people and their personal interactions with their environment rather than setting an agenda for political bodies, national or international. Thus the Earth Charter is non-formal in its mode of creation and readily accessible to the public. Its consensual nature allows it to have a broad appeal, and its publication represents an alternative to conventional ways of producing such international documents. In short, there is an intent in this process to do things differently. Some words from the brief history of the document (History of the Earth

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Charter) make this clear.

The Earth Charter Commission made a decision to draft the Charter first and foremost as a people's treaty rather than as an intergovernmental instrument for two reasons. First, during the 1990's most state governments were preoccupied with the promotion of economic growth, and they failed to meet the challenge of adopting patterns of sustainable development...they were not prepared to embrace new and stronger ethical commitments. It was clear that an intergovernmental drafting process would not produce a strong document. Second, the collapse of Russian communism and the end of the Cold War has led to a renewal of civil society in many nations. The result has been the emergence of an increasingly influential global civil society involving a worldwide network of NGOs linked together by the new communications technologies. (History of the Earth Charter)

This new civil society has provided a forum in which the proposals contained in the Earth Charter are accessible and meaningful to the average, informed citizen of any country and, as will be seen later, a pedagogical response to the Charter needs to be similarly radical, accessible and informal.

Second, the Earth Charter places the Earth front and centre and insists upon the interrelatedness of environmental and human well-being. "The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air." (Earth Charter) Though the conceptual separation between humans and their natural environment is acknowledged in the very making of this statement, the Charter recognizes that any such separation needs to be reconciled. This is made clear in a later passage, which is, at the very least, a step towards eco-centrism. "To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local

communities” and, in a similar vein, one ought to “treat all living beings with respect and consideration.” (Earth Charter) It follows, then, that, when making choices on issues related to ecological safety, one ought to employ the precautionary principle that suggests, in the absence of certain knowledge, do not proceed. “Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm.” (Earth Charter)

Third, the Earth Charter calls for a shift in thinking and in the way we live. This is perhaps the broadest and most radical aspect of the document. It states: “We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.” (Earth Charter) Though it is not stated what “being more” means, we can assume that, rather than amassing more material goods, humans should seek to enrich themselves in terms of their relationship to others and to their environment, by increasing their understanding of the world around them, their respect for it, and their awe of it. The Charter states that “this requires a change of mind and heart” (Earth Charter) and that, of course, necessarily implies the involvement of education.

A fourth reason that the Earth Charter is a radical document involves the narrative that seems to be partially implicit in the text. Discussions of non-violence, claims that “every form of life has value”(Earth Charter), and questioning the “dominant patterns of production and consumption” (Earth Charter) all suggest that this document is positioning itself as being substantively different. This is an attempt to imagine other possibilities and to open the space for another narrative that is obviously distinguishable

from the “dominant patterns”. Here to we see education implied in function as well as in position. How does education currently reify those dominant discussions and what things can education do to respond? How might education situate itself in order to tell, and allow for the telling of, this different narrative?

We believe that an educational response to the Earth Charter should be as radical as the Charter itself. But also, being teacher educators, that response needs to understand the current reality in many schools and offer an immediately implementable component, build a practical bridge between two separate paradigms. Our challenge is to offer practical tools that are positioned within the radical, thus giving teachers something that will, at the very least, become the seeds for ongoing sustainable change. It is not enough that such a curriculum simply introduce ecological content (Evernden, 1986), it must also integrate and exemplify the fundamental principles of the Charter, those of universal accessibility, a change in narrative and narrative emphasis, interdependence with and respect for the environment, and the need for new values and relationships attuned to ecological balance. The Charter proposes a paradigmatic shift in the way we understand our environment and, if we are to take its message seriously, a similar shift is required of our classes, schools and education systems.

The Earth Charter confronts the way we currently think about the environment and makes a convincing case that we need to change. If our schools are to be major players in this process of change, -- and undoubtedly this will be expected of them -- then we need, first, to examine our current assumptions and practice, then to develop new

ways of thinking about, integrating and presenting a fundamentally different world-view into our schools. A major problem, and a very immediate one, that will arise when educators are faced by such a profound change to current practice is how this can be effected in the classroom; what models exist, what resources are available to help teachers as they confront this daunting challenge. What follows are six pedagogical responses which, if incorporated into the curricula, will begin the process of “a change of mind and heart” (Earth Charter) and allow the greater change called for by the Earth Charter to occur.

### **A Pedagogical Response: Taking Root in the Earth Charter**

“This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility.” (Earth Charter)

In an upcoming article, Blenkinsop (2008) addresses concerns teachers might have in preparing a curriculum that better aligned itself with the philosophical position we see undergirding the Earth Charter. The goal of that paper was to offer teachers a series of components that might begin the process of changing attitudes towards the environment and providing concrete examples of how that might be done and current programmatic examples. These components were, then, both practicable and potentially subversive of the mindset that has led us to the current environmental crisis. Here, we propose a condensed synopsis of those six components, the purpose of which is to offer immediate suggestions for teachers to consider but, more importantly for this discussion, to draw connections between those pedagogical tools and the more radical project for

change reflected in the Earth Charter. As such, this paper will focus less on exemplifying each component in practice<sup>1</sup> and more on situating each within the larger paradigmatic discussion it appears the Earth Charter is having.

#### #1: Involving the Body.

“We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.” (Earth Charter)

Descartes, especially in the *Meditations*, drew a clear distinction between mind and matter. Though his sole responsibility for this distinction has been contested, he was certainly a major contributor to a perspective in which the body is seen as no more than a machine that carries out the directions of the mind but contributes nothing to the mental process. It seems fair to suggest that this separation between mind and body has had some less than desirable results, and that it may be more useful to think about the mind as being intimately connected too, influenced by, and reliant upon the body. Through this lens the body becomes not only a “container of” or “tool for” the mind, but also as a “partner in” and “contributor to” the process of making sense of the world. It makes a difference that we have an affect, that we have senses, systems of gestures and non-verbal communication, and that we have a particular physical structure. For example, our understanding of the world is profoundly affected by the structure and location of our

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<sup>1</sup> For more specific practical and programmatic examples the reader is encouraged to find the above mentioned article.

eyes<sup>2</sup> or our nervous system, which gathers information from across the body.

Philosopher and deep ecologist Arne Naess (2002) makes a useful distinction between being *active* and *activeness*, which is helpful when thinking about engaging the body in learning rather than simply getting the body to do things and assuming that learning is happening. *Activeness*, in the sense Naess uses the term, “is applied to the process of developing our essential nature” (2002, 76), it is about “being more”(Earth Charter). So, too, the argument we are making about getting the body involved is not just about being *active*. For Naess, being *active* is externally manifest but lacking in relationship to self-understanding. Without this relationship Naess, following Spinoza, suggests that our emotions become/are *passive* which limits our ability to change and allows ill will and apathy to flourish. The claim here being that those who are engaged in *activeness* have a wholeness of self-understanding that allow them, and their political structures, to change in positive ways. Thus, if the Earth Charter is advocating for positive, more fulfilling change then according to Naess that requires feelings, the body and *activeness* as an internal form of relationship that can alter our understanding of ourselves and of nature. “To do a great many things is not enough; what is important is what we do and how it happens. It is those of our actions which affect our whole nature that I call activeness” (Naess, 2002, 76).

Teachers need to consider how to introduce “activeness” into their classes and how to involve those bodily functions -- emotions, gestures, intentions, senses, etc.-- in

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting discussion about the “despotism of the eye”, objectivity, and a historical move away from the kind of relationship between mind and nature but better reflects the Earth Charter’s call for “global interdependence” please see Evernden (1999, pp 88-106).

their students' learning. Such a new approach implies moving away from recycling projects and collecting garbage, activities in which the body is treated as an instrument and the emotions are "pacified" to perform ideas generated by the mind, towards an activeness in which the body becomes a partner in the learning and students have a chance at "being more".

## #2: Telling stories

"Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must 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." (Earth Charter)

For thousands of years the story has played an important role in community. Prior to the written word it was the primary means of organizing information that any community wished to store and potentially disseminate to future generations. The story played a role as a vehicle to assist us in better understanding our positioning with regard to our society and environment. This occurred not only through the content of story but also in the very structure of the story itself. There is a qualitative difference in the way I come to understand my world if it comes through reading the Napoleonic code or listening to Elders recount how the world came to be. Educational philosopher Kieran Egan has discussed at length the educational role of the story (Egan, 1997). He argues that, in much of education today, we ignore the fact that our culture provides tools (e.g. stories, emotions, dramatic images, metaphors, etc.) that assist students in the process of making sense of the world, and that one of the most powerful tools of understanding is

the story. Along with this, eco-theorists Bowers (1995) and Abram (1996) suggest that literacy itself, because of its greater level of abstraction, is one step further removed from the natural world and can run contrary to the goals of interdependence, community, and relationship. Bowers argues that many oral cultures are more attuned to the principles espoused by the Earth Charter, and that literacy, data, or “high status knowledge” is a manifestation of the abstraction that has played an important role in the ecological crisis. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky has argued along similar lines as Bowers in suggesting that the technology of literacy, which has drawn us away from the oral story, has changed the shape of what it is to think (Vygotsky, 1962). When the Earth Charter asks us to “transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth’s human and ecological communities”(Earth Charter), we hear a cry for the story.

The story “Raven Brings Colour to the World” is an excellent example.<sup>3</sup> Once, in times long ago, the world was completely black. All the animals and plants, everything was black, and the only time colour was seen was on the rare occasions when two perfect rainbows appeared side by side in the sky. Now raven decided that there was something here worth exploring and so, when the next rainbow appeared, raven flew into the sky and up to the rainbows in order to get a better look. Unfortunately, in his desire to get close he ran into one of the rainbows, and it shattered into millions of pieces which were scattered all over the land. That is why today there is colour everywhere. It is also why

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<sup>3</sup> This story was given to me by two First Nations boys from Northern Ontario in Canada.

raven is still completely black and why, on days when there is a particularly bright rainbow, you can see the ends or outline of a second rainbow close to the first.

To use such a story as a means to enter a curriculum related to colour and light rather than to have them memorize ROYGBIV<sup>4</sup> is to change the underlying understanding of how we engage with and are related to our world. We might begin to see that the “Earth, our home, is alive” and develop a “reverence for the mystery of being”(Earth Charter). The story does not act as a hook to catch the interest of the students before worksheets appear, but provides an overarching theme, a rich context, for the students’ work, and can act as a resource upon which to draw repeatedly. The story shapes the way students encounter the natural world and allows wonder and inquiry to engage together: Where else do rainbows appear? What are moon and sun dogs? What is the halo effect? What are the conditions necessary to form a rainbow? Learning through the medium of the story allows greater scope for the imagination, which is not only valuable in itself, as a means towards open-mindedness and thoughtful awareness, but also serves as a stimulus to students to pursue answers to questions raised by the story.

### #3: Establishing a Relationship

“The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.” (Earth Charter)

Interdependence is a critical concept if we are to understand how the natural

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<sup>4</sup> Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet

world, including ourselves, works. It also appears to be fundamental to the Earth Charter. There are no fewer than 5 references to some manifestation of it (community of life, one human family, larger living world) in the preamble alone. Relationship has long been seen as a key to education with the focus being on those relationships between teacher and learner, learner and learner, and between teacher or learner and the subject matter. The relationship between teachers and students with the environment has been largely overlooked. Eco-theorists Cobb (2004), Tomashow (1996), and Nabhan (1994) have all argued, often using the biographies of well known environmental figures, that the key to leading environmentally conscious lives is to allow children to establish a sound relationship with their own environment. If one of the aims of the Earth Charter is to have us “imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life”(Earth Charter) then students need that opportunity to enter into relation with each other, with their teachers, and, most importantly, with the non-human world. Those theorists argue that deep relationships, extended immersion, positive and ongoing encounters with nature become the source for continuing interest in and care for the environment, they become the stuff of interdependence.

For teachers the implication of the need for a closer relationship with the environment is that we bring students frequently into contact with the natural world around them. Over the years, teachers we have worked with have been doing this. In one instance some teachers in Northern British Columbia, working with grade three and four students, assigned each student a site of about a square metre in a nearby forest. When a

new project was introduced, students went to their sites to observe and record. Thus far, they have drawn maps and taken photographs of their special spots. They are keeping lists of animals and plants found, doing experiments on soil and detritivores, and they are keeping journals about their discoveries. As a result the students are building an affinity for a particular place and coming to see the extraordinary diversity of life that exists even in a small space.

#### #4: Getting an early start.

“4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.” (Earth Charter).

Another important factor that emerges from the lives of those who have a deep connection to the natural world is that their experience began at an early age. Their biographies reveal that some of their earliest memories are of moments when parents or others showed them a plant, an animal, or even a rock and talked to them about it. As we have seen above, Sobel (2005) and others have suggested that there is something important about coming to know a particular spot really well, but it is also important that this knowledge be sustained over a long period. Plants look dramatically different at different stages of their growth, from seed through first shoots and on into flowering. It is only through immersion, or by returning repeatedly over time that the fine distinctions appear and, at the same time, it is only through such repetition that the skills of observation, comparison and differentiation develop. What is also likely to develop is a greater understanding and appreciation of the natural world as well as a sense of

connection to it. These skills and deep connection might be necessary building blocks, if those theorists are to be believed, to bring to fruition the Earth Charter's project of bringing "forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace"(Earth Charter). Nabhan (1994) and Louv (2006) suggest that part of becoming fully human is having opportunities to encounter the world around us. This "full humanness" may not be what is directly implied by the Earth Charter in references to "being more", or "sacred trust", or the conscious and explicit choice to combat poverty and violence whilst preserving diversity, community, and wisdom however, the parallel exists.

In his book *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez, tells about the Innu people's skill in discerning and then discussing a range of snow typologies of which he was woefully unaware. He continues by telling of hunters caught outside during whiteout type blizzards and being able to find their way home due to the sophistication of this ability and their historical situatedness in that particular place.<sup>5</sup> However, this skill need not be confined to the Arctic but is one that exists as a possibility for all of us. We could share in it should we either choose to, or need to, develop it. It may, to push the discussion a little farther, be part of our "capacity" as members of the human species. But the development of sensitivity of this sort takes time, and suggests that we should start to become aware of nature early in life, and start to work on projects to develop skills early in the school year. The need to start early is also supported by research which indicates

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<sup>5</sup> Lopez acknowledges that this is simply an assumption on his part since situating oneself in one's place is not a skill which he possesses with regard to the Arctic nor is it one easily described across between people of different places.

that as small children we have a proclivity for the non-human world as something we both want to make sense of and have relationship with (Buber 1970, Blenkinsop 2005). The key to relationship is not the ability to connect initially so much as the ongoing opportunity to continue to connect over and over again. For teachers the point is to arrange for connections to happen early and to happen often.

#### #5: Integrating the Curriculum

“14. Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life. -- b. Promote the contribution of the arts and humanities as well as the sciences in sustainability education.” (Earth Charter)

In order to understand the world as interdependent, interconnected, and democratic we need to have opportunities to experience it as such and this goes beyond simple early immersion in the natural world. If our experiences in school are such that they indicate the world is atomized, individualized, and open to ongoing reductionism then it will be difficult to sustain the “myths” of interdependence or global responsibility. Our students need to experience, practice, and learn about that interdependent world in a structure, system, or “semiotic soup” that undergirds the concept and normalizes those experiences. If integration is consistently the way in which we experience the world then several things might begin to occur. First, students will begin to possess “habits of mind” that are themselves more systematic, they will see things more holistically. It is this ability to consider a larger holism that is implied in section b. above and in concepts such as “diversity”, “community”, and “reverence for life” that are littered throughout the

Earth Charter. The second thing that will occur is the reduction in the alienations we experience. Eco-psychologist Theodore Roscak (1972) has suggested that the modern world is suffering from three serious alienations: from the natural world, from each other, and from ourselves and this has allowed us to shamefully exploit each other and the resources of the world and to so shamefully misuse them. For Roscak, it would be these alienations that allow us to ignore all four of the principles of the Earth Charter. Being immersed in and developing habits of mind through an integrated curriculum offers a response to this challenge.

#### #6: Demythologizing nature

“Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life.” (Earth Charter)

Demythologizing nature implies making use of the preceding five pedagogical tools, but it also means that we need to change current “myths” about the natural world around us. The argument being, these myths tend to put a distance between ourselves and the natural world, a distance that makes it a challenge to meet the explicit principles and implicit spirit of the Earth Charter. Thus, by identifying and putting to shame these myths a wall crumbles and the potential to draw closer in genuine relation appears. The first important myth is that which depicts the natural world as “red in tooth and claw” and filled with potential dangers. Most of us recognize that ignorance is the major reason for our fear of the unknown or unfamiliar, yet we don’t seem to be conscious of our own ignorance or the role we play in furthering that fear for others. In sharing stories of summer camping trips, how long is it before the conversation turns to bugs or,

especially, bears? And how news reports love those bear stories. Getting students outdoors regularly begins to break down these barriers of fear, so that they can begin to form a realistic view of nature and to feel comfortable in this unfamiliar environment.

I have worked with many teachers who see getting outside as a large project requiring hours of organization. This is because of a second myth that associates being outside with a major expedition into a wilderness area. However, there are a tremendous number of experiences to be had right next to the school. School yard greening projects, abandoned lot or stream bed reclamation, community gardening, heritage seed cultivation, bird counts are all things that require significant time spent outdoors, but that can happen close to home and without a lot of paperwork. Furthermore, an advantage of such local activities is that they bring students into contact with the immediate community. Yet another benefit is that such projects lend themselves to an integrated curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

The third myth do be debunked is slightly more abstract but is related to education's seeming unwillingness to consider that where the learning/experience occurs might have an effect on the what of learning. To push this idea even further, education does not seem to want to consider that the place itself might teach us things separate from, in parallel with, below, or beyond what we think we are doing. All the things that form what might be called a semiotic background, a metaphorical and literal window of containment that shapes and influences what and how learners make sense of course

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<sup>6</sup> Organizations such as Evergreen and Greenteacher are excellent sources of information for teachers wishing to create an environmentally aware classroom. ([www.evergreen.ca/en/](http://www.evergreen.ca/en/), [www.greenteacher.ca](http://www.greenteacher.ca)).

content and, by extension, of their world. This “backgrounding” (Plumwood, 1997) of the environment of learning probably has its roots in a subtle anthropocentrism and is something that the Earth Charter seems to tacitly recognize and be concerned about. Ultimately, the goal of pointing out these myths is to allow teachers to thoughtfully mitigate these real inhibitors of our ability to genuinely encounter the non-human world.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to throw six small pebbles into a pond in the hope that the resultant splash and ripples cause a dissonance that impels the larger pond of education to change shape in response. The Earth Charter is a radical and non-formal document that points towards and sets a framework for a paradigmatic position that resists dominant discourses of consumption, economic resourcism, isolationism and, by implication, the resulting social and environmental disenfranchisement and violence. It is a document that, by its nature, implicitly asks educators to think differently about their pedagogy. By using six pedagogical tools aligned with the Earth Charter educators have the opportunity to set in motion the beginnings of a radical response to those dominant patterns. These tools are intended to align themselves with the spirit of the Earth Charter while also being immediately implementable thereby avoiding the incredible challenge of trying to bridge across theoretical paradigms and their corresponding praxes. But this is just the start of a much larger project that we believe involves deep philosophical work and substantially extended practice. The hope is that we can contribute, in our own ways to the final sentiment expressed in Earth Charter.

“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.” (Earth Charter)

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