

Greening Media Education

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Though there is increasing interest to guide education towards sustainability issues, so far there are very few examples of green approaches to media education. In spirit, though, many of the goals and aspirations of media education are in perfect alignment with the cause of sustainability. As John Blewitt argues, media literacy and environmental education have in common the goals of participation, action and critical engagement.

But in order to truly green media education there needs to be a radical rethinking of many underlying premises that have led to a deficit in sustainability discourse among media education advocates (for example, take a look at the tag cloud of this Website). Part of the problem has been the lack of a sufficient bridge between ecoliteracy and media education. In important ways their approaches are epistemologically different. For example, the traditional divide between the biological sciences and the social sciences and humanities is well-reflected in the history of media studies. With the exception of Raymond Williams and the newly emerging field of environmental communication, the problems of the environment generally have not been linked to the other social justice issues taken on by media studies and cultural studies. So though racism, sexism, homophobia and postcolonialism have been tackled by media education, the environment has not received similar attention.

Another part of the problem is the assumption that environmental education is “nature”-based and is outside the task of media education. The critique of technology, which should be a primary job of media educators, is generally assumed to be the territory of so-called Neo-Luddites. I concur with Jaron Lanier who recently argued that media users, engineers and producers should be allowed to discuss the merits of media technology without being ostracized by digital utopians. It’s possible to be a media user and a critic simultaneously, as Ivan Illich’s discussion of tools for conviviality shows. He argues that there is an appropriate human scale and application for communications technology while also recognizing their limits.

While experiential nature initiatives certainly remain an important aspect of ecoliteracy, the environmental crisis, in particular climate instability, is primarily a cultural crisis. As eco-educator David Orr has argued, “all education is environmental education,” meaning our cultural attitudes and beliefs about ecology are embedded into education in the same way they are integral to economics, in particular non-sustainable beliefs. The problem is that rarely do fields like education or economics acknowledge the ecological dimension of their models of reality. Same goes for media studies. So riffing on Orr, by extension we can argue that all media are environmental education, picking up on the critical pedagogists who talk of media as a kind of cultural pedagogy, but then expanding this notion to promote a green critique.

Part of the solution is for social sciences, humanities, and media studies to take seriously the environmental implications of their work. Remaining silent about the role of culture as a primary aspect of global ecology will only further the ecological crisis. But it's not merely a matter of changing the information. In other words, simply applying traditional media literacy tactics to environmental issues won't be sufficient, like doing discourse analysis of news coverage of climate science or policy. Of course approaches like these are very important, but they are incomplete.

Rather, there are fundamental shifts that need to take place concerning how we engage the world. As Gregory Bateson argued, trying to solve problems with the thinking that created them results in double binds, or what CA Bowers calls the colonization of the present by the past. In this regard, media education is not immune. For instance, there is a major epistemological difference between what Bowers refers to as "ecological intelligence" and standard mechanistic educational approaches derived from Enlightenment thinking. Whereas Bateson defines a person as not simply an autonomous "self" but part of an interconnected "thinking system," a lot of media studies still assumes the Cartesian model of the mind. The Cartesian view regards the mind as a repository of symbolic representations based on a machine metaphor: representations move through space from person to person, and as a result individuals construct an individualistic identity that is disconnected from living systems.

An example of mechanistic thinking is the magic bullet or syringe theory of communication derived from Shannon-Weaver. Though this model has been widely discredited, in my review of media education literature, there is still a large body of thought that has internalized the assumption of media effects that presumes media program human minds. They are exemplified by many of the "content analysis" approaches that assume that media literacy is a matter of changing and improving information through the deconstruction of media texts. Theories of the public sphere and democracy retain this concept of rational communication between autonomous beings, and are central to many media education strategies.

The concepts of "memes" and media "viruses" are another way mechanistic thinking enters into media education. Though the definition of a meme is contested, it is largely based on a biological view of information that assumes that ideas and concepts are like DNA: they can be copied and replicated between people. What this approach leaves out is how ideas grow from a cultural commons that draws on intergenerational dialog, specificities of place, and intercultural diversity. Moreover, as James Carey argued, thoughts are not private, but are public. Language, which comprises thoughts, is organic. Our culture is based on a complex feedback system, not the isolated musings of an autonomous character in an Ayn Rand novel.

In contrast, Bateson argues that the mind is a thinking system, eminent in the environment. A rough parallel of this concept is the theory of intertextuality, which approaches texts as communicative "utterances" that make sense based not on the meaning of a specific work, but how they dialog with other cultural artifacts. Their

meanings are connected to various cultural contexts that comprise a larger “thinking system.”

The classical concept of communication has been critiqued by Carey who differentiated between a “ritual” and “transmission” view of communication. The transmission metaphor, he argued, derives from the 19th century notion that communication is moving things through space, whereas ritual places communication in real time within a cultural setting.

Mechanistic thinking—or a machine model of the mind—leads to what Bateson called an “ecology of bad ideas,” in which techno-scientific progress is viewed as part of a linear path of history, and that whatever the autonomous thinking self can invent is independent of its consequence on the environment. Consider how this has played out in terms of our communications technology. Though there is considerable evidence about the danger concerning electromagnetic pollution from our wireless devices, there is very little discussion or debate for how the use of these gadgets impacts living systems (humans included). I imagine that some reading this are prepared to dismiss this concern as irrelevant to the purpose of media education which is supposed to celebrate the creative uses of media. However, this doesn’t mean we should eschew such a critical and important discussion. After all, if the culture at large won’t engage in this discussion, who will?

There are signs that a new paradigm is emerging. The cultural studies model of the “circuit of culture,” which views media production and consumption as an interrelated circuit of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation, is a step towards a systems approach to media. Why not extend that model to incorporate a green perspective? So if we take the example of the “Story of the Sony Walkman” and green it, perhaps updating it to look at the Blackberry or the iPhone, we’d want to include as part of the inquiry those aspects that directly concern the environment, such as the production and waste cycle of electronics, social justice issues related to resource extraction, the relationship between consumerism and the ideology of growth, and the political economy of globalization. On this last point it will be necessary to challenge the assumption that our communication technologies are necessarily a form of progress. Not all communications approaches are appropriate for all cultural contexts (ditto media literacy). Here I like to draw on Vandana Shiva’s concept of monoculture versus biocultural diversity in which she argues that many cultural attitudes emanating from the global economy are actually provincial and evolved within a specific cultural and historical context that is not applicable to many cultures in the world. Think Avatar.

Additionally, it would be important to look at the phenomenological experience of electronic gadgets and how they impact our perception of time and space. Finally, it would mean a close examination of language and concepts that emerged from the Industrial Revolution, and how they continue to carry over through the metaphors we use to describe communication and cognition today.

Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller has begun tackling some of these issues through his discussion of green cultural citizenship. My hope is that as advocates for media education that we don't relegate sustainability for other educators to tackle. I would like to see media education be green to the core so as to not force yet again another division that makes "sustainable" or "green" approaches mere specialities or subfields. The danger is that if we simply change the object of study without challenging the double bind thinking that has brought us to our ecological crisis, then we will simply be "green washing" our field.

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