# Using the Earth Charter to Re-imagine Education Toward an Ecological Civilization

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## A Prelude

As a prelude to my thoughts on re-imagining education, I would like to revisit some related ideas I shared previously at an Earth Charter conference. This part of my work represents an effort to create a pedagogy that is consistent with an expanded worldview articulated by the Earth Charter. Too often our pedagogical approaches are more reflective of a discrete and fragmented mechanistic model than a more scientifically accurate organismic and open-systems understanding of the world. This latter view of the world is supported by both scientific and Indigenous understandings. It is in alignment with assumptions necessary to create and sustain an ecological civilization.

We are not machines and a pedagogical approach that mirrors mechanistic principles is unlikely to shift the consciousness needed to create a true ecological civilization. The root of the word “human” is derived from the Greek word “hummus,” or soil. We come from the Earth. To perceive ourselves as separate from the Earth is to deny our true nature. It is time to reclaim this heritage. So with this in mind, let’s revisit a view of 4-E Cognition. These understandings are consistent with a worldview of connectedness, relationship, and emergent, transformative adaptive systems. They represent a pedagogical approach to the Earth Charter that encapsulates an eco-identity and builds upon an Earth-based model rather than a machine metaphor.

The first “E” conceptualizes learning as “embodied.” It represents the vast new research around the physiology of learning and that cognition is enhanced by Embodied experience. The second “E” refers to Embedded learning. When learning is embedded in the culture, languaging, and social context, there is a powerful recognition that transcends words and explanations. There is added cognitive power when there is consistency between the embedded environment and what is being taught. the third “E” is Engaged learning. Humans are creative agents. Cognitive processes that create engaged participation where students can access their passions and interests provide inherent motivation and agency. This is particularly significant in teaching for sustainability. The fourth “E” is Enactive. This view of cognition recognizes that all learning is contextual, especially that learning which is important to be applied. Context defines the specific nature of content and its applications in the world.

I would like to add a fifth “E” - Entangled cognition. Entanglement is a biological principle beautifully illustrated in fungi and mycelium where it describes a network of endless communication systems in the natural world, life in relation to itself. Entanglement is also an important concept in quantum mechanics as a descriptor of the sub-atomic world. Quantum entanglement denotes a basic inseparable wholeness that is foundational to an understanding of matter, time, and space. Entanglement may become an important new metaphor that can be used to fully re-imagine ourselves, the world, and an education for an ecological civilization.

These five “E’s” are part of an integrated Earth Charter Pedagogy that can enliven any learning process but are especially effective when applied to Education for Sustainable Development using the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter comes alive when it lives in the values and actions of learners and within the institutional contexts that embrace its commitments. Yet, there is more to re-imagine that pedagogy alone.

Re-Imagining Education Using the Earth Charter

The process of re-imagining education is a creative one. While we may necessarily have to address various transitional stages, many, maybe most, of us intuitively know that education cannot continue in its current state if we are to achieve a sustainable, just, and peaceful world. Currently, institutional education is organized and designed to maintain and support a view of the world that is no longer viable for the long-term future of humanity or the planet. Making changes in pedagogical approaches alone or adding a course on ecology here and there will not be enough to affect the change that is currently needed. Education as it is currently conceived is complicit in the planetary destruction and crises of our time. We simply cannot have a "better and improved" version of what we already have.

Re-imagining education is an imperative and it starts with changing the essential purpose of education to create an ecological culture for the future. Importantly, re-imagining is not a deductive process, it involves questioning the very nature of learning as well as its content. It requires us to create an "image" of an education for an ecological civilization.

Visioning is not analytical. It is a receptive state of mind where we let go of our previous biases and learned categories of what education must be. As we enter this state of mind a wandering emptiness emerges where images appear and fade away; where feelings are felt but not absorbed; where short narrative fictions occur absent of plot or conclusion. What do you see - feel? What context develops? What storyline begins to unfold? Stay with this without forcing your predispositions upon it. Explore what comes before and after with curiosity and wonder, as if you are walking through the scene with innocent receptivity.

As you open your eyes, write or draw the details and impressions that came to you. Now is the time to used your analytical mind to explore and extend your visioning. Like an architect, use this combination to design and create multiple possibilities. Don't limit yourself to a single conclusion, but open yourself to scenarios and contexts that seem to make sense. Share this with others engaged in a similar process and start to create conversations that may lead to alternatives that can be not only desirable but feasible.

Bringing leadership to this process requires us to integrate key aspects of distributed leadership and apply them in timely ways. Schwahn and Spady (2010) provide an integrative view of leadership which synthesize five functions that are important to any organizational setting. They are relevant for re-imagining education and in considering the work of making it a reality. The first is a sense of **Purpose**. A re-imagined education from the perspective of the Earth Charter needs to be centered around creating an ecological civilization. The centrality of this purpose will functionally guide a new version of curriculum and be inclusive of the values so beautifully articulated by the Earth Charter.

Without a clear sense of purpose the next component of **Vision** cannot be effectively developed and implemented. Vision includes not only what something looks and feels like but also considers how to move toward a "new picture of reality." Purpose and vision are essential characteristics. The Earth Charter is particularly useful in developing these two essential aspects of leadership.

A third need of leadership is building a **Culture** that supports and extends the purpose and vision as an ongoing process of creative development. Culture requires ownership. Participants act as co-creators in the important processes of unlearning and learning. Values and support structures are put into place that sustain the inevitable ups and downs of the change process.

The Earth Charter's emphasis on values open a space for a deep dive into sometimes difficult conversations that need to take place in order to establish truly ecological identity.

**Capacity-building** will become apparent as the process of creative change and reconstruction take place. This fourth aspect of leadership has been an area that the Earth Charter Education Center has invested its time and development. We have observed that professionals at all level who are interested in creating a more substantive education for sustainability have been amazed at the comprehensive insights that the Earth Charter can provide. this is an area of emphasis that will continue to grow and develop.

A fifth area of emphasis is **Service.** The very nature of bringing the Earth Charter to life is to serve - to contribute to making a difference in the world. ECI's emphasis on Planetary Citizenship is embedded in the four pillars of the Earth Charter: Respect and Care, Ecological Integrity, Social and Economic Justice, and Democracy, Non-Violence, and Peace. Inspiring hope and service in the world as we educate for an ecological civilization is built into the intention of this work.

Bringing creative imagination to the work of integrating purpose, vision, culture, capacity, and service is a collaborative process incorporating the skills, perspectives, and voices of many peoples of the Earth. The Earth Charter can provide the foundational roots of this collaboration. It was born out of a common vision - "We are one human family with a common destiny (EC Preamble)." We cannot rely solely on the knowledge of the Global North. In re-imagining education it may be helpful to consider a de-colonized set of values and understandings that can add to the larger visioning process toward an ecological civilization and an education that guides us toward this intention.

Examples From the Global South

Traditional wisdom from the Global South can provide important considerations for how we might re-imagine education from a decolonized perspective. In the examples that follow, you will notice that the emphasis is on values. These certainly can be translated into more targeted and measurable goals, but as values they remain a present and living set of intentions rather than merely a target to be reached and then forgotten.

In Bhutan, for instance, much attention has been given to their commitment to Gross National Happiness (GNH). But less is known about the values and pillars of attention that lie behind this. The values of kindness, equality, and humanity are at the core of these efforts. These are translated into four pillars of action that include 1) Good governance; 2) Sustainable Socio-economic Development; 3) Preservation and Promotion of Culture; and 4) Environmental Conservation. These are conditions that are collectively recognized as important to well-being and happiness built on a compassionate way of living with regard to the larger community.

Another example of perceiving our collective state of being as a link to compassion and care is the idea of Ubuntu from various parts of Africa. It views the foundation of our humanity as rooted in the spirit of community and that our essential identity is relational - beings in relationship with others and one's sense of well-being is attached to theirs. This view is consistent with Native American philosophies that speak of relatedness, not only with the community but with the natural world that are "brothers" and "sisters."

From traditional peoples in South America comes the idea of Buen Vivir. This echoes the previous examples and describes a way of living that is in harmony with nature and the community. Living a good life is attached to integrating these values into everyday life. The Inga

people in Amazonian Columbia are creating an Indigenous University based on living in deep connection with the Earth and all its beings. Here, learning and knowledge generation include affection, solidarity, wisdom, and the pursuit of harmony with all beings. These are the foundations of their university!

Similarly, the Huni Kui people in Amazonian Brazil offer what they call the University of the Forest. The subject area disciplines are divided into what they consider to be “relational sciences “ - the departments of Reverence, Respect, Reciprocity, Responsibility, and Regeneration. The contrast with the Global North is evident in these examples. These are different ways of viewing what is important to “know.”

Both the North and the South are value-driven, although we don’t usually acknowledge the underlying values of the North’s classical disciplinary categories. Its values tend to reflect those of a consumerist and reductive mindset aimed at growth and productivity rather than those of harmonious relationship. The process of re-imagining education for an ecological civilization takes us into the heart of the values and purposes we want to be reflected in an education for a sustainable, just, and peaceful future.

## The Earth Charter as a Bridge

The Earth Charter, with its values grounded in Care, Diversity, Ecological Integrity, Social and Economic Justice, and Democracy, Non-violence, and Peace, provides a connective bridge between two world views. As a global purpose of planetary citizenship becomes not only necessary but desired, the Earth Charter can frame a much wider conversation that needs to happen. In a significant way, this is a process rather than an event. As a process, we enter the uncertainty of outcomes trusting that a common framework of intention and purpose will provide

the thematic boundary that allows chaos to find its order. Like a quantum strange attractor, the energy created by the process dynamically moves forward.

This is not a “straight-line” process. It is a movement toward multiple emergent, though uncertain, outcomes all at once. We have not been educated to navigate complexity, especially when the navigation includes an inner compass of vulnerability, hope, and dreams. But let the wonder of the process guide us as the beauty of emergent possibilities, like the murmuration of starlings dancing across the sky, makes itself known. And let the process as well, become part of the pedagogical palate.

The Earth Charter speaks to hearts and minds. It inspires policy and art, technical solutions and activism, new models of social enterprise and alternative visions for security. It connects us with Earth-based traditions as we traverse the ethical dilemmas inherent within artificial intelligence. In 1992, the world proclaimed the need for a people’s charter of the Earth if we were to survive the twenty-first century. This inclusive and value-driven outcomes years in creation, must be more than just a document, the Earth Charter can be a movement, a conversation starter, an ethical compass, an embedded set of values, and an ongoing aspiration toward an ecological civilization.

Re-imagining education for an ecological civilization requires commitment and leadership at all levels. The essential purpose of education must be the first stone overturned. Creative imagination after that will be unleashed. Let’s start the conversation, engage in the process, and keep the conversation going as we focus our attention on connecting humanity with the planet we call home. And so it is.

References

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