

SAVING THE PLANET BY SAVING ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION. WHAT CAN ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY OFFER?

Martin Braund

Faculty of Education, Nelson Mandela University (South Africa)

Abstract

Climate change has produced the hottest summers, worst droughts, wildfires and flooding ever recorded. Yet, Environmental Education (EE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) have largely failed to generate levels of eco-literacy and citizen action necessary to address the climate crisis. In this interactive workshop the aims, systemic policies and pedagogy of EE and ESD are critically examined using a paired and snowballed group activity. Participants from all educational disciplines (maximum 32) and all age phases are welcome. Pairs are given a statement about aims, policies and practices of EE and ESD to debate, and then join a pair who have debated a corollary of that statement. As groups of four, emerging issues about relative effectiveness of EE and ESD approaches are argued and summarized by the workshop leader. Examples of Arts-Based Pedagogy (ABP) are shown that address issues emerging from group feedback. Participants work in pairs on different questions providing foundations for research to explore how ABP in EE might operate at different levels of the educational system. Participants leave with a sense of how the educational research and teaching communities might work together to help reinvigorate Environmental Education, providing routes for young people to act responsibly for sustainable futures. At a time when the turn to neoliberal populism is taking hold, threatening greening actions, this workshop is most timely. Bringing Environmental Education back to core principles of working for social justice, environmental protection, and addressing climate change are essential priorities for saving the planet.

Keywords: *Environmental education, sustainability, arts-based pedagogy.*

1. Introduction

In this workshop we critique ways in which the shift from Environmental Education (EE) to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has stripped away some of the more humanizing elements of EE that, ironically, functioned well for what ESD is trying to achieve, in terms of personal sensitization towards the environment and to stimulate environmental action and improve social justice. The objective of the workshop is to explore how employing methods of Arts-based Pedagogy (ABP) might show how teaching communities can reinvigorate Environmental Education, providing routes for young people to act responsibly for sustainable futures and at the same time stimulate educational research.

With roots in 18th and 19th Century romanticism and nature study, Environmental Education became established in the global North in the late 20th Century and by the early 1980s had become established as a cross curricular element in many countries (Braund, 2025; Palmer, 1998). A common framework for EE emerged promoting teaching and learning ‘*Through, About and For* the Environment’. The idea was that learners would experience environments (through), gain knowledge and understanding (about) them, that would lead to action required to improve, conserve or campaign (for) the environment. In effect the ‘about’ part of this triumvirate dominated at the expense of the other two with much content learning established, often in science and geography lessons. Commenting on the status of EE in the late 1990s, Steve Van Matre critiqued the *through, for* and *about* approach as becoming, “a bit of everything to everyone and consequently not much of anything to anyone” (Van Matre, 1999, p. 46). Contemporaneous with development of EE and in reaction to it, Van Matre and others promoted a more learner-centered approach which they called Earth Education (see, Braund, 2025, pp. 52-55). Earth Education reasons that, when one is too full of one’s own thoughts, one cannot make room so easily for the impressions of the other life around oneself and so nonverbal skills like watching and waiting, silencing and stilling, opening and receiving come to the fore. While not wholly promoting an arts-based approach, Earth Education activities lend themselves to it. In this workshop the author draws on experience of teaching EE through Earth Education at a teacher education college in the UK where many Arts-based approaches were developed.

2. The rise and critique of education for sustainable development

Emerging as part of the UN's decade of sustainability (2005-2014), ESD began to be established in schools in many countries, eventually subsuming or even replacing EE. While the aim of ESD in terms of fairer distribution of resources, living within sustainable means and with social justice as principal foci are hard to argue against, there have been criticisms that ESD shows theoretical weaknesses and political and ideological bias compared with the relatively rich historical development for EE (Cartea, 2005). Cartea sees ESD as something of an attraction, even an obsession, or just an aesthetic, which connects with a certain 'neo-liberal' environmentalism rather than providing attainment of justice and equity at a more personal, community and therefore local level.

It is from this critique of ESD that we reimagine the relationship between EE and ESD in the initial stages of the workshop through a paired card activity. Pairs are given a positional statement about EE and ESD to discuss such as, "Environmental Education was such a vague idea that teachers had no idea what to teach or how to teach it. At least Education for Sustainable Education has clear aims, and it is on-trend to help save the planet." Pairs then migrate to a pair who have discussed a corollary of that statement such as, "*Education for Sustainable Education* – who knows what that means? At least Environmental Education had a clear idea of teaching *About, Through and For* the environment." The ensuing discussion highlights some of the issues about ESD including Cartea's critique and that learners find concepts of ESD abstract and hard to grasp and may have personal alienation from ESD principles, leading them to say such things as – "why should I be involved?" – "Isn't it just governments who should sort all this out."

3. Arts-based pedagogy and environmental education

In a recent review of the literature on ESD, Gagen finds that teaching about the facts of environmental degradation and climate change dominate and concludes that, "teaching people of any age climate facts alone, to fill a perceived gap in knowledge, is not the best climate-communication strategy for achieving action" (Gagen, 2025, p. 34). Gagen goes on to posit that, "there is much to be learned from stepping away entirely from a science-based approach to climate communication and exploring the climate emergency through arts and creative lenses" (Gagen, 2025:41). It is at this stage of the workshop, that we delve into examples of how this might be achieved.

3.1. Examples of arts-based pedagogy (ABP) for environmental education

In a recent book on language arts and EE the author provided a list of arts-based methods that can be used to address EE principles and reconnect youth with personalized experiences of and for environments, along the lines of Earth Education: creative writing, dance, drama, drawings, fabric, films, models, music, literature, natural samples (for example leaves, mud, rocks, soil and wood), painting, photographs, poetry, sculptures and videos (Braund, 2025, p. 49).

In the workshop we look specifically at a selection of approaches discussing how each provides contact with issues that help young people establish a more personalized learning and appreciation of their locale so that broader issues of climate change, degradation, conservation and pollution are manifestly addressed.

From experiences with education students at a university college in the UK, the author relates how he led a group of graduate students to empathize with the environment using circle games (see Braund, 2025, pp. 52-53). Also exemplified are role-play dramas such as survival games, ephemeral art arrangements of fallen leaves and experiences at a Finish Nature School of Earth Education activities, such as creating an aesthetically pleasing, yet representative littoral ecosystem, in a jam-jar.

4. A discussion on arts-based capital for environmental education

The idea of 'capital' is often associated with life chances of individuals. Bourdieu (1986) conceived people's cultural capacities, being able to engage with the diversity and richness offered by society, linked with background and informal (social-family), or institutional (education-based) experience. It is worth noting that most of Bourdieu's writings were about the cultural capital derived from activity in arts and humanities arenas rather than from science and environmental activity and experience. More recently Archer et al. (2015) have expanded on Bourdieu's ideas of capital considering how these might extend to the language, values and activities that they see as cultural capital in science. In the workshop I argue for an expansion of the concept of cultural capital for science to embrace creativity and aesthetics afforded by arts-based pedagogies (ABP). The ASPIRES project (Archer et al., 2015) suggests science capital is strongly influenced by social and familial relationships and practices linked to socio-economic

status. I suggest that arts capital is more naturally evident and arguably easier to come by, in the lives of young people, than science capital and so less likely to be linked with socio-economic status.

5. Researching arts-based pedagogy (ABP) for environmental education

From issues emerging from the workshop, participants are presented with a series of possibilities for research. Each of these is discussed in terms of how these might be enacted:

1. To what extent do ABP approaches in EE/ESD help learners access ideas in multilingual classrooms?
2. Does using ABP to teach environmental education impact personal environmental actions?
3. What are age-appropriate strategies for using art in environmental education?
4. What are the progression steps in learning using ABP in environmental education?
5. What are learners' and teachers' predispositions to using ABP in EE/ESD?
6. What are learners' and teachers' reactions to having used art-based approaches in EE/ESD?

6. Conclusion

There is little doubt that climate change is now more than an existential threat. It is a systemic problem of such scale and complexity that fundamental and transformative changes to society's systems are required, implying fundamental and transformative changes to EE. The workshop provides opportunities to think more deeply about how ABP contributes to improving Environmental Education. From our workshop it emerges that in the turn to ESD, with its very laudable aims, the personalized education gained from best applications of EE and Earth Education have been lost. Biesta (2022) calls for a change of educational priorities, putting students as emotionally sensitized and environmentally aware individuals to the foreground. The big issues facing the future of our planet often seem over-facing and so using arts-based pedagogies offer a way of rekindling EE at a much more personal level, drawing on the arts-based capital that many young people possess. If we really want realistic changes in behavior and lifestyle choices, then connecting at local and community levels is a priority. Also important is to engender a sense of critical eco-literacy. In the last few months, we have seen a significant turn away from a commitment to net-zero (carbon emissions) to address climate change. Partly, this trope is being fed by Right Wing Populism, fueled (most notably by the Trump MAGA rhetoric) and by eco-skepticism on anthropogenic climate change. The world needs future generations equipped with good environmental knowledge, but who are not afraid to challenge neoliberalist agendas and want to act because they care about what happens to the places they have come to value and love. In this workshop we see how ABP has power to refocus EE to provide personal connections for young people to turn more naturally towards sustainable behaviors and challenge eco-skepticism.

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