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Speaking From the Deep: The Problem of Language in
Deep Ecology Education

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JANET PIVNICK: Over the past fifteen years, I have worked as an environmental educator throughout Canada and the United States. While many places have been home, few places call to me as Calgary does. The Bow-Chinook Bioregion is a land of great diversity where the prairies meet the mountains. The expansiveness of the prairies provides space for quiet contemplation. This harsh land holds profound and subtle beauty which places demands on inhabitants.

In this place, my work has taken root. Since completing a masters degree in environmental education in New Hampshire, I have been haunted by a dissatisfaction with environmental education approaches. I have wanted to address issues that I believe underlie sustainability: beliefs about what it means to be human and to live well. Ecophilosophy seemed to offer the sanity and wisdom which was required. A desire to figure out how to bring ecophilosophical ideas into education led me to undertake a doctorate in environmental education. As I attempt to infuse my work with such ideas, I am struck again and again by the challenges that an ecophilosophical outlook poses for educators.

My reflections here are intended as preliminary excursions. Comments, perspectives and anecdotes related to this theme are appreciated and can be sent to Graduate Division of Educational Research, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive N.W., Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4 or via e-mail to jcpivnic@acs.ucalgary.ca.

In speaking of ecophilosophy, Henryk Skolimowski states: "Since I wish to go beyond the canons and precepts of contemporary philosophy, I cannot be constrained by its criteria of validity."¹ His claim is familiar and sensible to change agents, environmental advocates and activists. New visions, whether in philosophy, politics, or science, frequently stem from ways of seeing that call old visions into question. The two thought systems may not share assumptions about knowledge, life priorities or the human place in the world. This change of ground is at the heart of Kuhn's notion of paradigm shift.² Being constrained by old assumptions does not allow room for new visions to emerge. Such a realization is imperative in support for deep ecology,³ a movement which calls into question the assumptions of "the dominant, modern worldview"⁴ and advocates sustainable alternatives.

Skolimowski's comment, however, raises problems for educators. In education it is the criteria of students, parents and educational administrators by which teachers are constrained. Yet the criterion of validity on which modern education relies has little room to admit the ideas found in the deep ecology movement. Educators teaching in deep ecology face the challenge of finding the language to make sense of an "ecological approach" within the confines of "the dominant, modern worldview" held by the majority of students and educators.

Consider the following example. Alberta implemented a new elementary science curriculum in September 1996. The curriculum revolves around two emphases: Science Inquiry and Problem Solving through Technology.⁵ When the curriculum was first proposed, I was involved in a discussion about its implications with a group of elementary science teachers. I was concerned that the strong focus on technology would lead young children to believe that technology is value-neutral, or that technological fixes are appropriate solutions to social challenges. I asked the teachers whether they felt that ethics could enter this aspect of the curriculum, citing the idea that "not everything that *can* be done, *should* be done." There was a pause and some quizzical looks. Finally, one teacher ventured, "if we have the students use recycled material in the projects that they construct, then there won't be a problem, will there?"

As I tried to figure out how to respond, I felt a gulf open in front of me. It is not that the teacher's comment wasn't sensible. He was, after all, only living out the claims that environmental educators often espouse. The difficulty was that, from the deep ecology movement from which my thoughts arose, I asked a question that seemed fairly simple and innocent. The teachers' quizzical looks provided a jolt of recognition for me. This innocent question held little sense for educators who do not question the value of technology. Furthermore, the work required to make my question comprehensible was so overwhelming that I was at a loss for how to proceed. We would not reflect on this question together unless I could explain the assumptions behind my question, which I had naively believed needed no explication. These teachers had pointed to the first difficulty with teaching a deep ecology approach: comprehensibility.

Joel Weinsheimer, in speaking of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, articulates the second problem with "speaking from the deep." According to Weinsheimer, Gadamer's ideas "cannot be proved, not because of their intrinsic irrationality, still less because they are false, but rather, precisely because they call into question the belief that proof is our sole means of access to truth."⁶ Within the confines of modernity, ideas that cannot be proved do not appear to be based on a differing view of knowledge: they appear to be irrational. The tenets of modernity and its scientific worldview, seem to render key ideas of deep ecology impossible.

For instance, deep ecology supporters strive to encourage a sense of knowledge that is contextual, embodied and intuitive. They strive to move away from a mind-body duality and to displace the intellect as the *sole* locus for understanding. In a school system where rational thought and critical thinking are the hallmarks of knowledge, deep ecology is bound to be marginalized. Within modern rational discourse, contextual knowledge has no valid claim.¶T¿

The negative reaction to a belief system that eschews enlightenment views of knowledge has been noted by Wendell Berry. He claims that his approaches⁷ are "notoriously subject to the charge of sentimentality or nostalgia. People ... ask if (he) 'want(s) to turn back the clock."⁸ Elsewhere he speculates that

he "will be perceived to have crossed over into 'utopianism' or fantasy."⁹ Such comments are familiar to deep ecology supporters. The problem here is not that Berry is being sentimental. The difficulty is much larger. The charges Berry describes follow from the modern worldview. His work is based on assumptions that hold no credibility from a "value-free" scientific perspective. Deep ecology educators must speak within a culture whose very mode of understanding does not admit what supporters of the deep ecology movement need to say.

The recognition of the gap that deep ecology educators must bridge, may be more clearly understood if we temporarily move away from the classroom and into the forests of northern Ontario. As I write, a storm is brewing in Temagami. Environmentalists have chained themselves to old-growth trees. Loggers are manning heavy equipment waiting for approval to begin felling operations. This is not a new story. It has been played out in Clayoquot, in Carmanah, in the British Columbia interior, in northern Alberta forests, along the coasts of Washington and Oregon.

Nor is the portrayal of this situation particularly new. Loggers vs. environmentalists. Jobs vs. conservation. Yet this portrayal is at the heart of the difficulties in "speaking from the deep." The debate, as represented, assumes that the two factions hold the same basic understandings of the world and that they differ only in their priorities. As the argument goes, loggers are more concerned about economics and jobs. Environmentalists have preservation of the land as their priority, whether for recreational, aesthetic or spiritual reasons.

On the surface, the clash certainly is about land use. But there are also deeper disagreements that are occurring in this situation; disagreements that are almost never brought to the forefront. The two groups hold differing assumptions about what it means to be human. For example, forestry companies claim that "a logging freeze in the (area) would cost hundreds of jobs and up to \$85 million a year."¹⁰ For a moment, I'd like to resist the temptation to argue this statement and look to one of its embedded values: the notion of work.

Berry claims that "it is possible ... to believe that there is a kind of work that does not require abuse or misuse."¹¹

"There is work that is isolating, harsh, destructive, specialized or trivialized into meaninglessness. And there is work that is restorative, convivial, dignified and dignifying, and pleasing. Good work is not just the maintenance of connections - as one is now said to work 'for a living' or 'to support a family' but the *enactment* of connections. It is living, and a way of living."¹²

Within Berry's definition, the logging taking place in Temagami would not be considered work, or at least, not "good work." The question in Temagami is not: are jobs or the environment more important? The question, rather, is: what is

work? Is anything which yields a profit considered viable as work regardless of what is destroyed as a consequence? Where are human limits? What does it mean to live or work with integrity?

Schumacher's notion of Buddhist economics raises the same questions:

"The Buddhist point of view takes the function of work to be at least threefold: to give a man a chance to utilize and develop his faculties; to enable him to overcome his egocentredness by joining with other people in a common task; and to bring forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence."¹³

Undoubtedly, these definitions of work would be odd to the logging interests who suggest that "loss of work" is a consequence of environmental preservation. "Becoming existence" rarely finds a place in an economic argument. Yet "becoming existence" is essential to supporters of deep ecology.¹⁴ These fundamental differences are at issue in the dispute between loggers and environmentalists.

The issues in Temagami illustrate the difficulties that arise when the discourse and actions of two groups emerge from differing ground. Different understandings of work also have direct pedagogical implications.

Suppose that, as educators, we subscribe to the belief that

"Good work finds the way between pride and despair. It graces with health. It heals with grace. It preserves the given so that it remains a gift. By it, we lose loneliness: we clasp the hands of those who go before us, and the hands of those who come after us."¹⁵

Such an account will give rise to certain expectations of work done in the classroom. If we are teaching students who hold the common perception that work is something to be endured or to be eliminated, our expectations will be incomprehensible. Further, such views of work, when articulated, sound "sentimental" or "utopian" from the students' perspective. Again, issues of comprehensibility and credibility can arise, because of differing worldviews between students and teacher.

The problem of "incommensurable viewpoints" is made more critical by an inability to explicate assumptions.¹⁶ In Temagami, the result of ignoring the clash in worldviews is two-fold. First, the deeper issues can never be considered or discussed. Second, an argument of jobs vs. environment is an argument couched within the economic terms of logging companies, a language and a framework that is inappropriate to environmental concerns. Environmentalists become embroiled in proving that job loss is attributable to increased technology or mismanagement rather than cessation of logging. Alternatively, they turn

to other economic arguments such as the economic viability of eco-tourism or recreational land use. They also get caught up in scientific arguments regarding erosion, appropriate logging methods and replanting success rates.

These arguments are not all in the language of the deep. By avoiding the question of differing values, a deep ecology approach is betrayed. Why then are the differing perspectives not addressed? Why do environmentalists accept the media portrayal of the Temagami situation?

The answer engenders the most difficult tension in the pedagogical attempt to "speak from the deep." I suspect that such questions are not raised because, by and large, environmentalists and educators do not see that they exist. While we can articulate the principles of the deep ecology movement and how it differs from the "dominant, modern worldview," we cannot always see these differences at play. This inability is not a deficiency on the part of deep ecology educators. The inability, rather, is a function of the odd place in which we find ourselves. Deep ecology is a sub-culture within the "dominant, modern" culture. As such, supporters of the deep ecology movement are shaped by modernity even while we decry its belief system.

Bowers and Flinders, following Heidegger, claim that "language speaks us as we speak the language."¹⁷ "The language already hides in itself a developed way of conceiving."¹⁸ Similarly, culture shapes us as we try to shape culture. Culture defines what is admissible. It prevents us from seeing around its edges to other possibilities.

Over the years, as I have observed the framing of environmental issues such as the logging disputes in Temagami, I have experienced a vague uneasiness. While the discomfort has been palpable, only occasionally could I pinpoint the trouble or attempt to articulate the problems that I have seen at play. My ability to interpret the clash in Temagami as anything other than a land use disagreement was hindered by my own enculturation into an industrial, modern belief system. Other ways of thinking were obscured by the taken-for-granted assumptions that nature is instrumental; all decisions have an economic basis; and problems need be debated according to the literal, clean, clear surfaces which they first reveal.

Even given the obvious attempt in the deep ecology movement to question modern perspectives, the cultural belief system in which supporters are embedded has, to a certain extent, lost the possibility of seeing life differently. Finding the language to speak otherwise poses a challenge for supporters of the deep ecology movement raised in such a culture.

If deep ecology movement educators can see and articulate the differing assumptions at play, they encounter yet another problem in communicating with students. In order for the ideas of the deep ecology approach to make sense, they need to have *already* made sense. Deep ecology rings true but only to those who already hear its calling. "Belonging contains the actual presence of the

way” towards understanding.¹⁹ That is, belonging is an a priori requirement of understanding. This paradox lies behind the belief that supporters of the deep ecology movement are ”preaching to the converted.”

Deep ecology support has an inside and an outside to it. Once one moves into the inner circle, then the ideas espoused become sensible. What does that mean for students who are not predisposed to such ideas? How does the corresponding understanding happen?

In deep ecology movement education, winding our way through this problem is where the ”real work” lies.²⁰ Speaking to like-minded colleagues is essential to sustain us but the ”real work” is facing the ”quizzical looks” of students who do not ”speak from the deep.”

As I attempt to work my way through these dilemmas, two seemingly contradictory approaches have become apparent. On the one hand, we need to break this sense of insideness and outsideness. We need to realize that at a certain level, the tenets of the deep ecology movement are already experienced and lived out by everybody. While the insights of deep ecology supporters may be obscured from view and may not be apparent in our day to day approaches to life, such understandings ”always waver there in the distance, ... never far from consciousness.”²¹ This approach allows for a trust in students, and a sense of working through the difficulties together.

At the same time, we need to be aware of how enculturation has deeply buried deep ecology insights. In order to recover this wisdom, educators must acknowledge the truth in the confusion and resistance experienced by students. We can attempt to open up assumptions by pointing to the historical and cultural embeddedness of perspectives, and bringing alternative worldviews into the classroom.

I’ll conclude by straightening out the meanders of this paper. Educating from a deep ecology approach poses difficulties because i) teacher and students are speaking from different assumptions about the world; ii) deep ecology movement educators are themselves part of the dominant, modern culture and are not always able to see the different assumptions at play and iii) accepting the principles of deep ecology requires a faith or a sense of already ”being there.” As a result of these difficulties, deep ecology movement educators face problems of comprehensibility and credibility. ”These halts and difficulties do not ask for immediate remedy; we fail them by making emergencies of them. They ask, rather, for patience, forbearance, inspiration - the gifts and graces of time, circumstance, and faith.”²² Yet they also ask that we, as educators, continue to confront the difficulties and gently prod them as we search for a way through.

Educators do not have the luxury to present the deep ecology movement as a clean, clear, simple alternative to modernity. We are confronted with the resistance to such ideas head on, in the faces of our students. Refusing to face

the difficulty may result in a betrayal of both the deep ecology movement and our role as educators.

Notes:

1. Skolimowski, H. 1981. *Eco-philosophy: Designing New Tactics for Living*. New York: Marion Boyars, p.26.
2. Kuhn, T.S. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. (Second Edition). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
3. In this paper, I am drawing on Des Jardins' interpretation of the term, deep ecology. Des Jardins states: "Deep ecologists are committed to the view that solutions to the present grave environmental crisis require more than mere reform of personal and social practices. A radical transformation in worldview is required. ... Deep ecologists also seek to develop and articulate an alternative philosophy to replace the dominant worldview, which is responsible for the crisis."
- Des Jardins, J.R. 1993. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, p.216. [Note: *The Trumpeter* editorial policy is to adhere to Arne Naess' terminological distinctions. He does not say "deep ecologists" but supporters of the deep ecology movement. ARD]
4. Devall, B. & Sessions, G. 1985. *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith, pp.42-4.
5. Curriculum Standards Branch. 1995, June. *Program of Studies, Elementary Schools: Science*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education, pp.A2-A4.
6. Weinsheimer, J. 1985. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p.2.
7. In this case, he is referring to his ideas regarding the desirability of community.
8. Berry, W. 1987. *Home Economics*. New York: North Point Press, p.184.
9. Berry, W. 1990. *What are People For?* New York: North Point Press, p.113.
10. Canadian Press. 1996, October 2. Court rules in loggers' favor. *Calgary Herald*. Calgary, AB: Southam.
11. Berry, W. 1977. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, p.140.
12. Berry, W. 1977. pp.138-9.

13. Schumacher, E.F. 1973. *Small is Beautiful*. London: Sphere Books, p.45.
14. Devall & Sessions. 1985. p.70, Principle 7.
15. Berry, W. 1990. p.10.
16. Kuhn. 1970. p.200.
17. Bowers, C.A. & Flinders, D.J. 1990. *Responsive Teaching: An Ecological Approach to Classroom Patterns of Language, Culture, and Thought*. New York: Teachers College Press, p.33.
18. Heidegger, M. 1927/1962. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper & Row, p.199.
19. Heidegger, M. 1959/1971. *On the Way to Language*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, p.126.
20. Snyder, G. 1980. *The Real Work*, New York: New Directions, pp.81-82.
21. Pivnick, J. In review. A Piece of Forgotten Song: Recalling Environmental Connections. *Holistic Educational Review*.
22. Berry, W. 1983. *Standing By Words*. San Francisco: North Point Press, p.205.

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