

Roundtable Presentation: A social ecological research program in education

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What is social ecology?

- So as to make sense of my research in progress and other possible related research, I want to briefly describe that which is complete.
- I've published a social ecological model of education, which I think can provide a framework for research in education. Before briefly describing it, I should say something about social ecology itself.
- The core idea of social ecology is that ecological problems (e.g. biodiversity loss and climate change) stem from social problems (e.g. patriarchy and racism): hence the name, social ecology.
- In particular, social ecology is concerned with problems centering on power and its distribution, so, more specifically, its guiding principle is that humans' power over nature, stems from humans' power over one another, which is everywhere (e.g. media, law, family structures, etc.).
- The goal is to seek out systems of humans' power over one another, and flatten those social hierarchies, thereby distributing their power more evenly within that system
- The underpinning supposition is that this more evenly distributed power and its associated control over resources, will be better able to sustain the natural environment, than the more concentrated and pyramidal forms of power, expressed for example, in corporate hierarchies.

What is the social ecological model of education?

- OK, so how have I applied this idea to education?
- In the SE model I've published, the argument is that education for employment, now widespread, serves by its nature more concentrated forms of power, since, by definition, an employee is one who "performs work under the direction and control of their employer".
- Worth remembering, is that the big goal of the labour movement was, and theoretically still is, to abolish employment, or more properly wage labour which

underpins it, for precisely this reason: that employees have a subordinated role in the production process and thus limited control over their work

- On other hand, active citizenship education, I argue, better serves by *its* nature more evenly distributed forms of power, since, by definition, it aims at “working [freely] for the common good”.
- I add the important word ‘freely’ in two senses: citizenship activity is unpaid, and taken on one’s own initiative.
- I think it’s readily seen that these are two radically different concepts of ‘work’, and that therefore education in preparation for one, will tend to occur at the expense of the other, creating a social tension in the SE model: education for employment prepares students to “work [for money] under the direction and control of someone else” whereas active citizenship education prepares students to “work [freely] for the common good.”
- There is a retreat from the radical aspects of this model and a compromise to this argued tension, which I talked about on Monday but don’t have time to elaborate here, but basically centres on full employment, where anyone who wants a job can have one
- Briefly, the second tension or conflict in the SE model, which I’ll address briefly at the end, is between economic growth, and ecological sustainability, and worth noting that growth is inherent in capitalism, and as economic growth proceeds, it encroaches on natural environments, displacing and degrading ecosystems. So this is a big problem, and there’s lots of literature on this.
- And finally, also want to point out that, active citizenship, the solution proposed by the SE model, has been an Australian educational policy goal for over 3 decades now, and thus, a research program that contributes to its fulfillment, has longstanding policy support, which I think is important

What research is to be done within the SE model of education?

- So what research might be done within this model of education? I can see two principal ones.
- First line is a macro-level historicisation of the model. Very preliminary research, which I’ve published in this vein, suggests that during the full employment era following WWII, employment was not a major educational goal, while active citizenship was highly effective;

- But in the neoliberal era of *un*-employment which began in the 1970s, and persists today, preparation for employment has become the dominant aim of education (I talked about this on Monday).
- How *citizenship* education has evolved across the transition from full to un-employment has not, to the best of my knowledge, been investigated in Australia, or anywhere else so far as I know.
- But Importantly, if subsequent research supported the initial findings, it'd suggest that full employment *is* an appropriate compromise of the SE model, and would lend support to the centrality of active citizenship education in a progressive research program to help resolve our inter-related social and ecological crises.

- Second line of research is a micro-level exploration of the model, to see how various educational actors (e.g. students, teachers, parents and community, etc.) understand and respond to its two tensions.
- Results from such an investigation can inform the creation of teaching resources to help achieve the SE model's goal: which is the collective imposition of limits on resource-use (that's the ecological goal) through active citizenship education (that's the social means to achieving the ecological goal).
- Preliminary results from my own PhD research suggest that economic growth means a variety of things to young people, but that, with few exceptions, they do see it as conflicting with the goal of ecological sustainability
- As for the second tension in the SE model, there appears to be much confusion and lack of knowledge about what citizenship education even is, obscuring any results about the modelled tension with e4e, but suggests in itself, more emphasis needs to be placed on citizenship education, especially if we're to take it seriously, as one of Australia's longstanding educational policy goals, which I think we should.
- Finally, to the extent that having control over one's life and participating in society contributes to human well-being (for which there is abundant evidence and research), active citizenship education, as espoused in the SE model, can help address the youth mental health crisis.
- So, if anyone is interested in teaming up to carry out what I've suggested or any related research, please get in touch. Thanks.