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Environmental Education

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Environmental Education Philosophy

“The ultimate aim of education is to shape human behavior,” (Hungerford and Volk). Education has acted as the driving force for molding the collective consciousness for years. Societies have depended on teachers to guide people through constructed systems to develop desirable behaviors for a particular culture or community. In regards to environmental education, the goals are to promote awareness and “to help social groups and individuals acquire a set of values and feelings of concern for the environment and the motivation for actively participating in environmental improvement and protection,” (Tbilisi Declaration). Given these goals, it is know that learning occurs in many different ways; some acquire knowledge better visually, some are auditory learners and others prefer movement and hands-on interaction to learn. Further, due to the variety of learning styles there are various approaches to teaching and accessing participant learning.

My experience with learning is that it has always occurred without full awareness that it is happening. For instance, I will repeat something over and over or will have the information presented to me in an assortment of ways – hands-on activities, pictures, readings, lectures, etc. – and I often do not feel as though I have gained anything after the initial interaction with the information; however, when I continue to expose myself to the material, I grow more comfortable and it becomes familiar to me. Often times, my behavior changes significantly after I experience application of the material. For example, in my

Instructional Strategies of Canoeing course, I gained a deeper insight about the importance of risk management on whitewater after I capsized my canoe twice on the Tuckasegee in 40-degree weather. Feeling as though I was experiencing the first stages of hypothermia made me realize how quickly one must act in this sort of situation. For environmental education, I think repetition and an interactive approach to learning is beneficial for the students. I believe that in order for participants to gain knowledge and awareness of the environment that will eventually lead to action, they need to have experiences within their community interacting with their environment. Through this interaction, perhaps they will feel more inclined to act on any feelings that have from these experiences.

In order to facilitate a change in behavior, I believe the most important thing a teacher can do is to build a relationship with his or her students. Getting to know the learners “is an approach that embraces our complex identities, biographies, and the stories we bring that serve to humanize the subjects we teach, (Goodman). Through these relationships, trust is built and both the students and teachers can learn and grow from the interaction. The people that have influenced me the most in my life are those who have invested in me: they put in time to get to know me, and adapted their teaching styles to ensure that I was moving forward and feeling comfortable with the information. In addition to building relationships, I believe experiential education is crucial to changing behavior for environmental education. Hungerford and Volk explained that a true change in behavior towards the environment would require instruction beyond knowledge and awareness. “Students must be given the opportunity to develop the sense of ‘ownership’ and ‘empowerment’ so that they are fully invested in an environmental sense and prompted to become responsible, active citizens,” (Hungerford and Volk). From my experiences, I

believe that a sense of ownership and empowerment towards the environment would best be facilitated through direct interaction and experience with said environment. There is a difference between having knowledge of the negative of effects of littering and experiencing first hand the damage it can do to nearby rivers, streams and wildlife.

As an educator, I believe through building a relationship with your students, you will be more equipped to accommodate different learning styles and abilities. If you have background on your participants and have reached a more intimate level with them, you will have a broader understanding of their capabilities; this is crucial when it comes to challenging them appropriately or assisting them when frustrated or stuck. Not only does the student's abilities affect the teaching style, but the instructor's characteristics and competency will affect the teaching and learning as well. After reflecting my previous teaching events, I am aware that I am very sensitive to peoples' feelings and cautious not to push people too far. I try to modify my teaching to assure the students are comfortable in their learning environment. I do not believe that learning will occur if students are upset or focused on other issues. Perhaps students need frequent breaks or additional time to ease their minds before tackling new material. I am also aware that I can get very nervous when instructing; if I am anxious, it affects my ability to instruct a group. I have learned through repeated instances of this occurring that practice, repetition and mastery of the material makes me less anxious and more comfortable with the material. I also feel more prepared to answer questions and lead others once I have mastered the information.

The Tbilisi Declaration outlines specific overall outcomes for Environmental Education programs. It states that the goals of Environmental Education are:

1. To foster clear awareness of, and concern about, economic, social, political, and ecological interdependence in urban and rural areas;
2. To provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment, and skills needed to protect and improve the environment;
3. To create new patterns of behavior of individuals, groups, and society as a whole towards the environment, (Tbilisi Declaration).

Given these clear outlined goals, educators will shape their programs to ensure their participants will be able to reach these goals. Something that I have been very passionate about is recycling and waste management. Creating an environmental education program to promote an awareness of waste management could include things like educating students on where their waste goes and taking the students to a local dump to witness first-hand where the trash goes. There could also be observation activities at local restaurants or public parks to observe for people who litter and what types of trash is being littered. Students should be able to examine their own waste management and organize their recyclables. Towards the end of a program like this, student should feel a change of attitude and a sense of responsibility towards managing their waste responsibly and should encourage and instruct others on how to do the same. I believe that through building a relationship with my participants and

encouraging them to directly experience these things, they will have a change in behavior.

Throughout my career thus far, I have grown more comfortable and confident with myself. I have become more confident when instructing, leading and educating people. I hope that I continue to grow and master the material that I am presenting to others, but through this mastery my goal is to remain humble and kind. I do not ever hope to get to a point where I believe I have all of the answers. I want to always stay open to opposing beliefs and challenge myself and others to go further and work harder. I feel confident that through building positive relationships, I will be able to reach people on a deeper level and encourage change and challenge them to reach their full potential. I look forward to the day where I can have a significant, positive impact on students.

References

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