

Awareness to Action: the journey toward a deeper ecological literacy

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Abstract:

Environmental education (EE) strives to strengthen the ecological literacy of individuals and society. Guiding individuals along their own journey toward a deeper ecological literacy should be a central tenet of any EE program, and at least a complementary piece of programs in other closely related fields like experiential and adventure education, sustainability education, ecotourism, the natural sciences, conservation biology, public lands advocacy, wilderness-based therapy, ecopsychology and human rights and social justice. Regardless of their background, expertise, or actual job title, environmental educators should consider themselves *key players in guiding individuals along their personal journey towards a deeper ecological literacy*.

Five phases of learning, referred to as the *Awareness to Action Continuum*, have been developed that are central to strengthening one's ecological literacy. These phases are sequential, cumulative, and temporally elastic. They represent a cogent learning process that is experienced continually throughout one's lifetime, and include awareness and appreciation, knowledge and understanding, attitudes and values, problem solving skills, and personal responsibility and action. The ultimate strength of the Awareness to Action Continuum is that it builds a positive and informed framework for individuals to deepen their ecological literacy.

Keywords: environmental education, ecological literacy, awareness, appreciation, love, personal responsibility and action.

In the broadest sense, environmental education (EE) strives to strengthen the ecological literacy of individuals and society. Ecological literacy focuses on advancing one's understanding of the interconnections among the Earth's natural systems and human systems. The biocentric and ecocentric views of ecological literacy support a paradigm in which *human systems are nestled within natural systems*; human communities sustain and enhance, instead of degrade the natural systems on which they depend. Ultimately, environmental education aims to help individuals, communities, and societies to cultivate a deeper sense of moral responsibility to the Earth and an intrinsic desire to make lifestyle and behavioral choices that embrace the three Es of sustainability (equity or Earth care, economics or economies of nurture, and ecology). Guiding individuals along their own journey toward a deeper ecological literacy should be a central tenet of any EE program, and at least a complementary piece of programs in other closely related fields like experiential and adventure education, sustainability education, ecotourism, the natural sciences, conservation biology, public lands advocacy, wilderness-based therapy, and ecopsychology. Environmental educators are interdisciplinary by nature; they are embedded in a wide variety of academic disciplines and professions, including those just mentioned. Cultivating a deeper ecological literacy can also be essential in programs focused on human rights and social justice. Regardless of their background, expertise, or actual job title, environmental educators should consider themselves *key players in guiding individuals along their personal journey towards a deeper ecological literacy*.

While the term *ecological literacy* gained wide recognition in the 1990's from the seminal works of David Orrⁱ and Fritjof Capraⁱⁱ, the EE field had embraced this concept since 1978 when the Tblisi Declarationⁱⁱⁱ was created at the world's first intergovernmental conference on EE in Tblisi, Georgia in Russia. Even though it does not use the term explicitly, the idea is clearly imbedded in the declaration's goals, objectives and guiding principles for EE. The content and spirit of the declaration still serves to guide today's EE professionals toward a common vision. Over the past three decades, scholars and practitioners have helped refine the definition of ecological literacy and explore how to elucidate its importance to individuals, communities, and societies. As such, how we understand and practice ecological literacy has evolved and matured along side our views of the human-nature relationship. William Stapp, Joseph Cornell, Judy Braus & David Wood, Steve Van Matre, C. A. Bowers, David Sobel, David Orr, and David Louv represent a potent sample of leaders in the EE field whose creative programming, writings, and research have made lasting contributions. One of the most enduring lessons gleaned from EE research and programming over the years is that *before people are confronted with the grim realities of environmental problems, they must be given the opportunities to experience the joy and beauty of the natural world*. Responsible stewardship *for the long haul* is much more likely once individuals have developed an appreciation for the complex and diverse life that inhabits the Earth^{iv}.

Based on the original objectives in the Tblisi Declaration and subsequent work of other aforementioned leaders in the field of EE, five phases of learning have been developed that are central to strengthening one's ecological literacy. Referred to as the **Awareness to Action Continuum**, *these phases are sequential, cumulative, and temporally elastic* (meaning they can occur in a relatively short and long time period in one's life). *They represent a cogent learning process that is experienced continually throughout one's lifetime*, and include awareness and

appreciation, knowledge and understanding, attitudes and values, problem solving skills, and personal responsibility and action (Figure 1).

The Awareness to Action Continuum **in Environmental Education**

AWARENESS & APPRECIATION

.... an awareness & appreciation of the diversity of life that shares the earth with humans.

KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

.... a basic understanding of how natural systems function, and how human systems are interconnected with and dependent upon them.

ATTITUDES & VALUES

.... a respect & concern for the earth's health, and the ethical motivation to participate in environmental stewardship.

PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

.... the skills needed to identify & critically analyze environmental issues, and to contribute to resolving the root of the problems.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY & ACTION

.... a deeper sense of moral responsibility to the Earth, & the ability to make ecologically sensitive lifestyle & behavior choices.

Figure 1. The Awareness to Action Continuum in environmental education*.

*Adapted from the Final Report on the Tbilisi Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education, as well as work by William Stapp, Joseph Cornell, Judy Braus & David Wood, Steve Van Matre, David Sobel, and Richard Louv.

This Awareness to Action (or A to A) Continuum reminds environmental educators of the importance of designing a holistic EE curriculum based upon a thoughtful and appropriate progression. It aligns itself with a sphere of EE research and literature that was pioneered by William Stapp^v, Joseph Cornell^{vi}, Steve Van Matre^{vii}, and more recently by David Sobel^{viii} and Richard Louv^{ix}. These authors elucidate the potential negative effects of using environmental problems as the primary context for learning, particularly in the early phases of one's journey toward a deeper ecological literacy. The sequential, cumulative nature of the A to A Continuum encourages educators to introduce environmental problems into a curriculum only after students have thoroughly explored the first three phases. A strong sense of personal awareness and appreciation for all life on Earth is absolutely essential to one's journey toward a deeper ecological literacy, *and* to embracing personal responsibility and action *for the long haul*. If educators give careful attention to the A to A Continuum and its sequential, cumulative nature, then individuals will be less likely to take actions for the Earth based on the nagging guilt they harbor from focusing on the problems they've

exacerbated. Individuals will, however, be *more* likely to take actions to protect, restore, and celebrate the Earth based on *inspiration from and love for the Earth*. When rooted in inspiration and love, the commitment to a deeper ecological literacy is more likely to be embraced for long haul. Indeed, the ultimate strength of the Awareness to Action Continuum is that it builds a positive and informed framework for individuals to deepen their ecological literacy.

ⁱ Orr, David. 1992. *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*. S.U.N.Y. Press.

ⁱⁱ Capra, Fritjov. 1995. *The Web of Life*. Harper Collins.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tblisi Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education. 1978. *Toward an Action Plan: A report on the Tblisi Conference*. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.

^{iv} Sobel, David. 1996. *Beyond Ecophobia. Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*. Great Barrington: The Orion Society.

^v Stapp, W.B. et al. 1969. The concept of environmental education. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 1(1):30-31.

^{vi} Cornell, Joseph. 1979. *Sharing Nature with Children: a Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Nature-Awareness Guidebook*. Ananda Pub.

^{vii} Van Matre, Steve. 1972. *Acclimatization*. Amer. Cmpg Ass. 1974. *Acclimatizing*. Amer. Cmpg Ass. 1990. *Earth Education; a new beginning*. Earth Ed. Inst.

^{viii} Sobel, David. 1996. *Beyond Ecophobia. Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*. Great Barrington: The Orion Society.

^{ix} Louv, Richard. 2008. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Algonquin Books.

