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### Recommended Citation

Dentith, Audrey M.; Burke, Emily Kearns; Conmy, Kris; Frimpong, Daniel K.; Nadeau, Barbara; Sanders, Elizabeth; Saunders, Jennifer; Winfrey, Nancy; and Herchel, Sarah (2014). "Adult Environmental Education and the Cultural Commons: A Study of Community Practices for a Just and Sustainable World," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/symposia/1>

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# Adult Environmental Education and the Cultural Commons: A Study of Community Practices for a Just and Sustainable World

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**Abstract:** Ecojustice adult education, an extension of adult environmental education, has been spurred on by international efforts to educate adults about environmental issues. It is a new and evolving arm of the adult education field that studies the ways that dominant views are impacting human/earth relationships. Ecojustice education teaches about the natural and cultural commons that sustain all life. In this symposium, doctoral students investigated their own communities to find examples of the cultural commons.

UNESCO, the intellectual arm of the United Nations, has been developing various programs to address environmental challenges since the 1970s. UNESCO called for the field of education to focus on new visions and practical actions to address environmental challenges. The goal was to arm the public with knowledge and skills, attitudes and motivation to work toward solutions for current problems (Malone, 2004). During the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, various smaller groups including The Learning for Environmental Action (LEAP) of the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE), met to create a comprehensive definition of adult environmental education. A treaty, *The Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies and Global Responsibility*, was developed. It contained 16 principles and a strong call for social transformation, self-determination and collective action for environmental change through adult informal and formal environmental education (Malone, 2004).

Ecojustice adult education, an extension of adult environmental education, has been spurred on by these international efforts. It is a new and evolving arm of the adult education field that studies the ways that dominant views are impacting human/earth relationships. It is critical of the narrow focus of science that does not acknowledge indigenous language, memory, imagination, values and creativity in the sustainability of the world's people, its resources, and the environment. It is about our cultural ways of life and how these affect what we understand about ecological issues in our communities. Ecojustice adult education is interested in the ways that dominate ideologies work to shape the ways we interpret the environment and our responsibilities to it (Bowers, 2001; Clover, 1999; Clover, Follen & Hall, 2000).

Ecojustice adult education is also about expanding existing analyses of power relations to include a study of the ways that humans exert and practice unequal power relations over nature. We are becoming what Malone (2004) calls "a McDonald's world" (p.139) in which the gap between the rich and poor grows larger each day and power, and privilege and knowledge are at the root of devastation and homogenization. The world is becoming more and more impoverished – socially, culturally and environmentally. Nature is not to be overcome or treated simply as a resource. Adult ecojustice education seeks to help us understand nature and

ecological issues through a renewed relationships with what already exists in our world (Clover, Follen and Hall, 2000).

Ecojustice adult education is about the process of building capacities and creating nurturing yet challenging spaces for people to explore their creativity around the creation of sustainable life. It is about a better quality of life, for the world's people and better connections to the cultural practices that support sustainable practices (Clover, 1999; Clover, Follen, & Hall, 2000). It is concerned with revitalizing the "cultural commons" or the forms of knowledge, skills, and patterns of mutual support shared among humans that exist in every community and represent the culturally diverse legacies that are sustainable, and less dependent upon a money economy and consumerism (Bowers 2006, 2011, 2012; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2011). In this paper, we define education for the cultural commons in an ecojustice adult education and describe our own efforts to investigate these practices in our communities.

### **Educating for the Cultural Commons**

The culturally specific, local practices that lead to greater sustainability and support of ecologically informed intelligence should be reinforced through education. In addition, practices that erode the world's cultural and natural commons need to be viewed as colonizing forces to be resisted as they are detrimental to the very future of all forms of life on earth. A focus on the diversity and sustainability of the world's cultural and natural commons will lead to better understanding of the need to resist forms of enclosure and of the actions needed to establish a more ecologically sustainable planet. A focus on cultural commons practices brings out what is an important shift in how we think. Namely, it highlights the relational nature of existence, between humans, between humans and natural systems, and within natural systems. A focus on relationships in a market economy and the industrial system of work also brings out the relational nature of existence, but these relationships are often exploitive and consist of competitive practices such as getting ahead as individuals and beating the system. In understanding what is distinctive about the diversity of the world's cultural commons is that the relationships involve mutually supportive activities and the development of skills that rely less on a money economy and have a smaller ecological footprint. Local community gardens, farmer's markets, art enclaves, neighborhood centers, and craft fairs are examples of activities that support the development of skills and the cultivation of mutually supportive relationships in the cultural commons.

The need for adult educators to engage in an understanding of, as well as participation in an education that highlights relationships within a study of the local natural and cultural commons, should be a priority in adult education. This places adult educators on the side of taking responsibility for understanding the importance of conserving the life-renewing capacity of natural systems and of the intergenerational knowledge and skills that enable people to live less consumer dependent lives. This often does not occur because science and environmental educators are viewed as chiefly responsible for introducing us to environmental issues. However, a cultural commons framework differs from current thinking about environmental education. It concerns all and is the cultivation of practices that oppose the dominance of one group over another, of humans over non-humans, or humans over nature. Ecojustice work also challenges current conceptions of social justice education which fail to consider the ways that social justice efforts are too often framed in terms of middle-class values and lifestyle patterns. These approaches do not take into account the environmental limits and accompanying Western practices that foster hyper-consumerism and materialistic forms of wealth (Bowers, 2011; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2011).

In this spirit, adult learners enrolled in a doctoral program in adult learning and development entered their communities to embrace learning and teaching about work and cultural life through a focus on human/environmental and cultural relationships. In the Fall, 2013, graduate students investigated their communities to find local, indigenous examples of the cultural commons. Examples of the cultural commons included local, indigenous practices that are intergenerational, less reliant on a money-based exchange, sustainable, community-based, reliant on cultural exchange, and with a lessened ecological impact (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Characteristics of Cultural and Environmental Commons**

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- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 | Teaches skills, craft knowledge, and traditional practices |
| 2 | Little or no reliance on monetized exchange                |
| 3 | Renewal of intergenerational knowledge                     |
| 4 | Removes participation from the consumer culture            |
| 5 | Fosters interdependency through face to face interactions  |
| 6 | Positively builds a sense of community                     |
| 7 | Promotes cultural exchange and empathy for diversity       |
| 8 | Lessens ecological impact & promotes sustainability        |
- 

### **Enclosure**

The cultural commons are particularly important because much of the resources that have been shared collectively among people historically are rapidly being enclosed or privatized, traded in the market, abused or degraded. The process of converting the commons into market resources can accurately be described as enclosure because it involves the private appropriation of collectively owned resources (Bowers 2006, 2011; Bollier, 2002).

Enclosure is deeply problematic because it disproportionately benefits the ruling class and deprives everyday citizens of access to resources that they need to survive and live abundantly. The result is a free market that occupies and governs natural and cultural resources eroding public life and democratic processes. While we acknowledge with Bollier (2002) that the terms commons and enclosure are unfamiliar to most people, we use this vocabulary as it addresses the general need for citizen’s knowledge to be systematically connected to this largely unexamined phenomenon now occurring in all societies.

Engaging adults in the community to cultivate shared knowledge of the cultural commons and forms of enclosure and to take action to address environmental issues offers opportunities for adult educators to call upon theories and practices of adult learning with renewed purpose. The following topics represent the examples investigated. Theories of adult learning are used here to forge connections between the cultural commons, adult ecojustice education and adult learning theories.

### **Concerts in the Park**

Concerts-in-the-Park are free, informal concerts at the Brigham Young Historic Park located in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah. The concerts are one hour long and are held on

Tuesday and Friday evenings throughout June, July and August. Artists represent a variety of genres. Music has included Broadway show tunes, jazz, folk, bluegrass, bagpipes and classic rock-n-roll.

These concerts attract an audience each evening from 500 to 3,200 people. Family generations are often seen together. Individuals of varying abilities can access these concerts. The Park is considered part of the Temple Square Campus, which is a popular tourist destination in Salt Lake City. The concert manager states programming is selected for its quality, cultural-diversity, popular appeal, and overall alignment with family and community values.

Concerts in the Park demonstrates a type of learning that is active, communal and inter-generational. It supports the claim that spiritual learning is made more concrete through an art form, such as music (English, 2005; Tisdell, 2003). This perspective validates that a sense of wonder in a market-driven world contributes to the making of meaning.

### **Community Currencies: The Pittsboro Plenty**

In the last twenty years more than 200 community currency systems have been launched in the United States. An example of a community currency can be found in Pittsboro, North Carolina, a rural town of nearly 4,000 people and the county seat of Chatham County. In 2002 a group of active, forward thinking citizens launched the Piedmont Local EcoNomy Tender, or “Plenty.” Under the organization of the Plenty Currency Cooperative, they intended to safeguard local jobs, increase awareness of local resources, and support the community values of neighborliness, generosity and self-reliance as the Plentys were traded in face-to-face retail interactions.

Economists view the circulation of money as a process of recycling wealth within a bioregion and as a way to strengthen that region. Economic development, however, is traditionally controlled by distant elites who are focused on financial gain more than concern for natural resources or care for the common good of local citizens. When average citizens come together to create local industries and community development programs they increase circulation, but eventually those dollars migrate out to national or multinational corporations. A local currency, however, keeps circulation totally within the local economy, as that tender is only accepted within the boundaries set by the community.

An argument is made for a link between the practice of a cultural commons, such as the Pittsboro Plenty, and “communities of practice” as described by Jean Lave in her theory of Situated Learning. A community currency not only provides a practical alternative to value regimes and capitalistic logic, but also builds a supportive social network of people who share values and ideals, defining how they see themselves as a community, and how they engage with one another.

### **iMentor: Adults' experiences on mentoring inner city to succeed**

iMentor is a school-based mentoring program that matches high school students from low-income communities with highly educated mentors from Wall Street to guide them through high school and first year in college. The mentors keep in touch with their mentees through weekly emails and meet in person once a month. They guide the students to graduate from high school and succeed in college to improve their lives and that of their families. John Griffin, the founder of Blue Ridge Capital and two friends, founded iMentor in 1999. Since its inception the organization has connected over ten thousand high school students from underserved communities to mentors who have supported and guided them to succeed. iMentor partners with

schools in all five New York City boroughs and currently serves about 3000 students in about 30 schools.

Theories of personal growth and development undergird this project. Adults learn and develop personally through motivation. People learn when they are engaged in things of interest to them and when they are situated in a positive space with a positive attitude. The emphasis is on utilizing learning experiences and knowledge and acknowledging that experience (Clover, Follen and Hall, 2000).

### **New Hampshire's Three Mile Island Camp**

Over one hundred years ago the Appalachian Mountain Club built a camp on Three Mile Island on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. Its mission is to maintain an environment of simple and sustainable living. Traditions of the past are observed without electronic interruptions and a balance is struck between only the most necessary modern conveniences such as powered motor crafts and Health Department certified kitchen facilities and conservation efforts such as composting outhouses and locally-sourced food. Everything on the island has been designed and maintained to work in harmony with the natural environment, and there is a concerted effort to extend this mentality of conservation and preservation beyond a camper's time on island through eco-justice education programs held at the camp. A vacation at Three Mile Island is more than just a time to get away with your family and meet old friends who have been coming to the island for generations; it is an introduction to a simpler, sustainable way of living that campers bring back with them when it is time to return home.

The experience of campers at Three Mile Island draws from experiential and active learning theories in adult education. This view of environmental education is based on taking action related to the principles of environmentalism. Organizers at the Three Mile Island Project think that action is intrinsically linked to the educational process. Knowledge is emergent and produced by participants through experiences with nature. Their organizing events are environmental issues at hand and environmental education is seen as collaborative, arranged through opportunities for a wide variety of people to engage in experiential learning (Malone, 2004).

### **The November Project**

The November Project is a Boston-based grassroots organization that focuses on fitness and building community, <http://november-project.com/>. The co-founders are Northeastern University graduates who were members of the rowing team during their college career, and they use that team experience and energy to lead the November Project. The mission of the organization is to provide motivation and a place to exercise while building a sense community before, during, and after workouts. Members of the Boston community are motivated through friends, word of mouth, and social media to participate in fitness programming for free held at different locations in the city. The Project meets throughout the year on Mondays to run a hill in Brookline, Massachusetts; Wednesdays to run the steps in Harvard Stadium; and on Fridays in a location disclosed on social media on Thursday evening.

Theories of situated experiential learning undergird the work of the November project. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007, p. 185) explain the situated approach to experiential learning as that which "focuses on getting learners involved in a community of practice because in this view learning is intertwined with doing". Interaction between participants and the immediate community is at the heart of the November Project activities, and

the learning process occurs through verbal and physical interactions. Participants range from novice to semi-professional athletes, and they have conversations with each other explaining their interest in the Project and give each other words of encouragement during workouts. Hugs and high-fives are common practice. The environment is a community of inclusive, helpful, and encouraging people who guide each other through a rigorous fitness program. Through observation, new participants learn from seasoned participants how to tackle a workout and learn how to teach and encourage future newcomers. All of these interactions and observations build the positive community of practice that is the November Project.

### **The Robeson Center Community Supported Agriculture Program**

The Robeson County (North Carolina) Center Community Supported Agriculture program is a vibrant community garden project. For a nominal fee, consumers can buy seasonal food directly from local farmers. During a five week cycle, participants pick up their weekly share of available produce, eggs, and/or meat most abundant that week. Offerings can include fruits, vegetables, herbs, plants, meat, eggs, and local honey. Recipes from previous cycles come with the food and participants are encouraged to share new recipes after using the items. This encourages participants to buy local, eat fresh foods, and develop ways to incorporate new food choices into their present diet.

When participants pick up their share boxes, they complete a survey sharing data about how they used the contents of the box from the week before. The survey from the first week inquires the present diet of the participant and his or her family as well as his or her food purchasing habits.

David Boud builds on the work of Kolb, Jarvis, and Heron by illustrating a three-part model of experiential learning that documents the process of learning before, during, and following the learning event (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). The Robeson Center Community Supported Agriculture Program participants encounter each step through completing pre-program surveys, noting how they used the items while in the process, and reflecting how or if they incorporated the items into their diet. The post reflections that may come in the form of recipes or a list of serving ideas provide a springboard for the next cycle's participants.

### **Transition Framingham**

Transition Framingham, Massachusetts, is a Transition Town founded from the Transition movement. The Transition philosophy adopts grassroots community initiatives that seek to build community resilience in the face of such challenges as peak oil, climate change and the economic crisis. Transition Initiatives differentiate themselves from other sustainability and environmental groups by seeking to mitigate these converging global crises through engaging their communities in home-grown, citizen-led education, action, and multi-stakeholder planning to increase local self reliance and resilience. They succeed by regeneratively using their local assets, innovating, networking, collaborating, replicating proven strategies, while respecting the deep patterns of nature and diverse cultures in their place. Transition Initiatives work with deliberation to create a fulfilling and inspiring local way of life that can withstand the shocks of rapidly shifting global systems" (<http://transitionus.org/transition-town-movement>).

The Transition movement is international, with groups in Australia, Canada, and many other countries. The United States faction is called Transition US. Transition Framingham in Massachusetts is focused on community gardens, plant based cooking classes, home energy



efficiency, environmental education, public fruit and nut tree planting, disaster preparedness, bee keeping, cycling advocacy, and other projects centralized in this town.

Social transformation theories of learning undergird the transition movement. Learning is a life-long process. Action is intrinsically linked to the educational process. Knowledge is emergent and produced by participants in a variety of settings. Learners have theoretical views, lived experiences and knowledge about the nature of social and cultural life and these views and experiences actively shape the possibilities for change. Education is based on critique and demands that community members develop alliances and construct understandings for action with one another. The community is at the center rather than at the periphery of the educational process (Malone, 2004).

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