TEACHING ABOUT WICKED SUSTAINABILITY PROBLEMS: ETHICAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES

Leif Östman & Katrien Van Poeck – Quito, Ecuador – 13 December 2017
WICKED SUSTAINABILITY PROBLEMS
DIFFICULT ISSUES...
UNSTRUCTURED (HISSCHEMÖLLER & HOPPE 2001)

- Close to certainty on required and available knowledge
- Close to agreement on norms and values at stake
- Far from certainty on required and available knowledge
- Far from agreement on norms and values at stake

- Moderately structured problems: discussion about suitable means
- Unstructured wicked problems
- Structured problems
- Moderately structured problems: discussion ethical acceptability of goals
POST-NORMAL (FUNTOWICZ & RAVETZ 1993)
TEACHING CHALLENGE

- Expert knowledge = incomplete, fragmented, and uncertain → ‘science as an unreliable friend’ (Ashley), no clear-cut solutions
- Lack of agreement on problem definitions and desirable solutions
- Conflicting values, opinions, interests, worldviews…

→ Ethical and political challenges: How to deal with such issues in education?
DIFFERENT WAYS OF HANDLING THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION
TYPOLOGY: THE ETHICAL TENDENCY

- Different types of situations that involve moral and ethical judgements in educational practice
- Different ways in which we communicate certain actions as being right or wrong

Clarifying the Ethical Tendency in Education for Sustainable Development Practice: A Wittgenstein-Inspired Approach
Johan Öhman, Orebro University, Sweden & Leif Östman, Uppsala University, Sweden

Abstract
This article aims to contribute to the debate about the moral and ethical aspects of education for sustainable development by suggesting a clarification of ethics and morals through an investigation of how these aspects appear in educational practice. The ambition is both to point to the normative dangers of education for sustainable development and the possibilities to enhance pluralism. The Wittgenstein-inspired approach used means that ethics and morals are regarded as expressions of a particular human tendency—the ethical tendency—that is observable in communication. The findings suggest that the ethical tendency appears in three different kinds of situations: personal moral reactions, norms for correct behaviour, and ethical reflections. We discuss the diverse learning conditions of these situations and take specific notice of the risk of indoctrination.
MORAL REACTION

Example: ecology class, students collect animals on the shore in order to put them in an aquarium for further studies:

- Karin: Hell, for crying out loud. It feels awful when you pull them loose.
- Ellen: So what is it?
- Karin: A sea urchin.
- Ellen: It’s stuck.
- Karin: I don’t know. It seems weird. We’ve got to learn to pick them off with our hands.
MORAL REACTION

- Spontaneous, unpremeditated reaction
- Personal experience
- Goes deep, often bodily
- Take an absolute responsibility for someone or something
- Not consciously forced or evoked by rational argument
- Explained in emotional terms: care, shame, agony, gratitude, guilt…
- Non-intentional: not in the control of will
Example: Imagine a situation where a pre-school class takes an excursion to a nearby forest. Some of the boys become separated from the main group and suddenly find an anthill. They pick up sticks and start to poke the anthill and throw stones at the ants. When the teacher sees them, she gets upset and comes running towards them shouting: ‘Don’t do that! That’s a mean thing to do!’ After experiencing a few similar situations, the boys change their behaviour and never again treat animals in a cruel way during excursions.
NORMS FOR CORRECT BEHAVIOUR

- Relating our actions to social conventions
- Common attitudes to the correct way of acting in certain kinds of situations
- The following of norms has to do with what we know we should do to fulfil the expectations of our fellow beings
- Generally connected to a particular social activity, to the doings of a particular group of people
- Norms form a habit – taken for granted
ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

Example: lesson in a Swedish upper-secondary school: exercise in which the teacher made statements of environmentally ethical significance → students take stands in relation to each statement and defend their individual standpoints:

– ‘Man and animals are of equal value; it is always wrong to kill an animal!’
– ‘No life must be sacrificed as a result of environmental pollution!’
– ‘Everybody has the right not to sort their garbage!’
ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

– Making rational and systematic reflections about the reasons for our moral actions

– Making a general enquiry into what is ‘good’ and ‘right’

– Rational insight into moral issues

– Usually made at a distance from situations where human beings actually perform actions that can be viewed as correct or incorrect

– Obvious in academic discipline of ethics: find general, and often universal, ethical principles
RELEVANCE FOR TEACHING PRACTICE

- Offer various kinds of situations where students can display, and experience others displaying, what they regard to be the correct way of acting and the values they believe in.

- Make it possible for students to express and share experiences of moral reactions, but without moralizing or attempting to convince.

- By sharing narratives of situations with moral reactions, the students are offered opportunities to expand their awareness of different moral reactions and their ability to understand the varieties and complexities of deep, existential questions.
RELEVANCE FOR TEACHING PRACTICE

– Mere transfer of norms is a form of the indoctrination → essential that the norms are discussed, motives for the norms presented, and that students are given an opportunity to critically reflect upon and influence norms.

– Participation in ethical discussions contributes to students’ awareness of different ethical standpoints and increased abilities to develop a critical attitude to norms for correct behaviour.
DIFFERENT WAYS OF HANDLING THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION
The political tendency in environmental and sustainability education

Michael Håkansson
Department of Education, University of Uppsala, Sweden

Leif Östman
Department of Education, University of Uppsala, Sweden

Katrien Van Poeck
Department of Political Sciences, University of Ghent, Belgium
TYPOLGY: THE POLITICAL TENDENCY

- Democratic participation
- Political reflections
- Political deliberation
  - Normative
  - Consensus-oriented
  - Conflict-oriented
- Political moment
## TYPOLOGY: THE POLITICAL TENDENCY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratic participation</th>
<th>Political reflection</th>
<th>Political deliberation</th>
<th>Political moment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Normative deliberation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consensus-oriented deliberation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict-oriented deliberation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Similarities
- Shared focus on how to organise social life recognising that this inevitably requires decision-making about different and competing alternatives

- Cognitive and rational reflections on issues that concern different alternatives of how to organise social life

- Reflections in the form of an argumentation (defending an opinion, a standpoint, or an alternative)

### Differences
- Exclusive focus on the form and process of organising social life

- Cognitive and rational reflections on conflicting alternatives of how to organise social life, thereby using prior knowledge and understandings in order to create new or refined knowledge and understandings

- Political deliberation oriented towards an a priori specified result put forward by the teacher as the only correct one

- Political deliberation oriented towards coming to a consensus, to resolve all divergence into one standpoint or decision

- Political deliberation oriented towards opening up for the conflictual, for raising and defending opposite and contesting perspectives

- Unplanned, unexpected strong emotional experience of conflictual commitments and relations related to the way of organising social life
Katrien Van Poeck  
CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
E  katrien.vanpoeck@ugent.be  
T  +32 9 264 82 07  
M  +32 475 59 05 54  
www.ugent.be  
www.cdo.ugent.be

Leif Östman  
UPPSALA UNIVERSITY, DEPT. OF EDUCATION  
E  leif.ostman@edu.uu.se