

What is Education for? Educating for a Dead Planet Joey Moncarz

We've now had 150 years of “education.” Several generations of it, all over the world. We live in the most educated world in human history – what an accomplishment! This education we've been so generously given by the State has come in the form of *compulsory schooling* – which means that it's so good for us, we have to be legally forced to have it (and physically beaten to accept it.) Now, during that same 150 years of glorious Western education, *global ecological destruction has increased exponentially*. Is this just a coincidence? Unfortunately, no. With all that education we're not getting smarter, we're not living more sustainably, we're not living within the Earth's limits, we're not living more peacefully, we're not living more meaningfully, and now we find ourselves with thousands of nuclear bombs, hundreds of nuclear reactors, a world drenched in toxic chemicals, mass extinction, and to make a bad situation even worse, climate change threatens to wipe most life off the planet.

How has education helped us? It hasn't. It's made us ecologically ignorant and worse, ecologically *hostile*. Our culture is characterized by a *hatred of nature*. That's what all our actions declare: “We hate nature!” What else is a car or pavement or a city or a computer or a piece of plastic but a declaration of hatred of nature? Education has turned us all into *nature-haters* and *life-destroyers*.

Still, maybe we care about the state of the world.

If we do care, and if we're seriously interested in doing things *differently* so that our children have a chance to avoid miserable lives, then it would help us to know how exactly education keeps us destroying and prevents us from knowing how to live in a healthy way. That way we can scrap it and replace it with an actually healthy education.

Some History

Let's start with a broad historical perspective, which is always a good place to begin. Humans have been on the planet for two million years. That's right, *two million*. For nearly that entire time, we lived as hunters and gatherers. Genetically, we're still hunters and gatherers. “Education” for all that time consisted of giving children freedom. Children would play in mixed-age groups, observe and imitate the adults around them, and keep playing. That's how they learned everything they needed to know to become a mature, responsible adult who could thrive within the natural world (Gray 2011, 2013, 2015; Hewlett and Lamb 2005; Narvaez 2013, 2014). These were all oral cultures, requiring a high degree of social and emotional intelligence. That way of life was “high skill” - but low labor. It didn't take much effort to acquire food and shelter, leaving enormous amounts of leisure time. It has been described as the most sustainable way of living that humans have ever known – after all, it worked remarkably well for two million years, through all of the Earth's climate changes in that time.

Roughly 10,000 years ago, agriculture arose. Agriculture is low-skill but high labor, and then even with all that labor it's a precarious existence: one dry season or one visit by locusts, and starvation follows. More than one dry season and a civilization likely collapses. The very essence of agriculture makes it unsustainable because it's based on the idiotic attempt to dominate and control nature (Diamond 1987; Hemenway 2011; Jensen 2006). With agriculture as a foundation, 6,000 years ago the first civilizations appeared, and ecological destruction was the direct consequence. With each passing civilization, whether Mesopotamian, Indus River, Chinese, Greek, Roman,

Mayan, Incan, Aztec, Anasazi, Easter Islander, or modern Western civilization, ecological destruction followed as a result of deforestation, irrigation, salinization and other essential activities of civilizations (Diamond 2005; Ponting 2007; Redman 1999; Tainter 2017). That destruction was commanded by the elite, but the actual hard work was through the slavery of humans (including women and children) and animals and other forms of forced labor. In fact, the primary activities of civilizations through all this time were taxation, constant war, deforestation and slavery (Jensen 2006; Ponting 2007; Scott 2017; Zerzan 2005, 2018). Written language, literacy and mathematics arose with the first civilizations as a way to record and keep track of slaves, soldiers, land, and taxes owed. Reading, writing and math – the basics of today's “good education” - were invented as tools of control, domination and exploitation (Scott 2009, 2017; Zerzan 1999). It should be no surprise, then, that *child abuse* is also a defining characteristic of civilization (deMause 1988).

Global ecological destruction, however, took a dramatic upturn over the last 200 years. The reason is that the elite discovered fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are the cheapest and most dense form of energy humans have ever used, and the civilized elite used it to intensify and globalize what all civilizations are good at: enslaving and destroying (Nikiforuk 2014). They used that energy to cut down more trees – the majority of all deforestation over the last 10,000 years has happened in just the last 200 years. The elite used fossil fuels to turn nature into products to be sold, to generate a profit, to increase their wealth and power. This all happened in factories, with managers and bureaucrats overseeing it all, sitting in their offices.

But humans generally don't like factory or office work. They would rather their traditional ways of living. In the early 1800s the Luddites fought back, destroying factory machines which represented the end of their traditional way of living. The reaction of the British government tells us all we need to know. They re-directed much of their military away from fighting Napoleon on the continent to come back and help squash the Luddite rebellion. And they made destroying machines a crime punishable by death (Sale 1996). The state would not allow people to live traditional, meaningful lives. Nothing's changed. Today, destroying an oil pipeline – something we should all be doing or at least supporting – will get you life in prison, while the Wall Street executives who oversaw the fraud and theft of trillions of dollars, resulting in millions of people losing their savings, their jobs, and their houses, all got away with it – in fact, they were rewarded with big bonuses. The lesson? No one messes with the elite and their profit-making.

Because of that initial resistance by the Luddites to an industrial way of life, the state and industrialists needed a better way to manage their populations so that they would just shut up, do what they're told and not cause trouble. This is where schools come in. Schools had already been a tool of Christian religious leaders as a brilliant way to make sure all students think exactly the same and are blindly obedient. They were explicit that the purpose of school was *to break the will of children* (Gatto 2002, 2010). And so government after government, starting in Europe, began forcing compulsory schooling upon its population. Once Europe and the neo-Europes had schools, they then forced it upon the rest of the world, selling it as a ticket to “progress” - just as missionaries forced their religions on others as a “ticket to heaven.”

That's where schools and our idea of “education” come from.

Western Education

Now that all the world loves Western education and thinks it's a ticket to a better world, let's briefly look at the specific characteristics and mechanisms of modern education that result in ecological ignorance and worse, ecological hostility.

Walls. Let's start with walls. The walls of a school, like the walls of civilizations, are there as much to trap us inside as to keep the “outside” - wild nature – out and unable to touch us. Walls alienate us from the natural world, so we become used to non-nature. Nature becomes something unfamiliar, to be feared, which of course make it easy to then destroy nature. 13 years of spending days behind walls (and then nights at home) results in total alienation from the natural world and therefore, complete ecological ignorance. Since we're so used to walls by the time we're adults, we then spend our adulthood behind walls as well, in offices, factories, cars, airplanes, and so on.

Sterility. Of course, a school is far from sterile, as they're actually breeding grounds for infectious disease, parasites and rats. If you want your child to get chicken pox, measles, the flu and lice, send them to school! But they're sterile in the sense that animals, forests and healthy ecological communities are absent. The school is surrounded by walls, mowed grass, and usually roads and a city. A few trees (with lower limbs removed to prevent students climbing them) may be left for “flavor”. It's an environment of concrete and pavement. This again leads to alienation from nature and ecological ignorance, making it easy for youth to accept the urban environment, accept the industrial culture, and accept the unceasing destruction of nature. They now believe they don't even need nature.

Abstractions. As C.A. Bowers (1993, 2000, 2001) has written extensively about, education favors certain knowledge over others. Schools favor written language and mathematics above all else. These are “high status” subjects, whereas practical subjects are “low status”. These are the criteria by which we're judged to be either intelligent or not. All the accumulated knowledge of two million years of hunting and gathering are low status, unimportant, beneath us and “primitive”. We're not tested on whether we know how to live on the Earth in a way which supports biodiversity, or whether we can identify 100 edible plants in our bioregion, or on whether we can find and effectively use medicinal herbs, or whether we can retell to others, face-to-face, the stories of our culture from the beginning of existence. Rather, the focus of schools is on symbols – alphabet and numbers – the essential elements of alienation and control. The focus is NOT on the real world, which is the world that keeps us alive. The focus is not on ecology. The focus is not on the wild. Yet it is this wild, natural world - the real world – which feeds us and keeps us healthy. The more we surround ourselves with books and numbers, the more we alienate ourselves even further from the natural world. These are an additional layer of walls we build around ourselves, besides the physical walls. The more “intellectual” we become, the less we are able to relate to the natural world, understand the natural world, care about the natural world, or do anything *practical* to stop this globalized culture from destroying the natural world. You can see this in how so many people who “care” about what's going on in the world write books (or essays like this one) or make movies or art or engage in other symbolic activities as a way of “expressing ourselves” which generally accomplish nothing of material consequence.

Screens. Books are now becoming a thing of the past. Education has been reduced to staring at screens. In fact, schools pride themselves in their surplus of modern technology – the more expensive their gadgets, the “better” the school! The irony is that screens dumb us down, reduce our ability to focus and concentrate, make our thinking shallow, prevent critical thinking, increase narcissism, reduce empathy, inhibit social and emotional intelligence, prevent physical health, and of course, reinforce alienation from the natural world – since staring at a screen is something that happens inside. That's why they purposely call these gadgets “*Smartphone*” and “*Smartboard*” - to distract us from the fact that they actually turn us into idiots. Furthermore, none of these gadgets are possible without mining, fossil fuels, countless toxic chemicals, factories, deforestation, roads and airplanes – in short, the entire industrial infrastructure that is based on *destroying the natural*

world. Screens reinforce and perpetuate ecological ignorance and ecological hostility.

History. When education includes “history”, what that means is a justification for the rule of the elite. That's the only acceptable history. Thus, history ignores two million years of living as hunters and gatherers. History ignores the genocide of American Indians by the greedy, bloodthirsty Europeans who did it all in the name of God. Instead, history is the sequence of kings and queens and their unending wars (also always in the name of God.) That way we accept that life is just an unending sequence of wars between kings and queens, and there's no other way to live!

Progress. Closely aligned with historical mis-education, is the concept of progress. Everything that happened in the past was the result of humans getting better and better. The further back in time we go, the more primitive, savage, barbaric and backwards we were. So even if we recognise that we used to be hunters and gatherers, it's assumed that we're superior, smarter and better off now. Besides, all change equals progress. All change is good. New things are good, old is bad. Of course, this contradicts two million years of evolution in which humans learned what was healthy and right from the intergenerational knowledge passed on through elders. Change and new things were looked on with suspicion, since there would be no way to know if it would contribute to the health and vitality of the people and land, or not. But the past was a good guide – people stuck with what was proven to work. Not anymore. And thus, when forests get chopped down and replaced with shopping malls and highways, that's progress, so that's good. If hunters and gatherers are disappearing that's because we're more intelligent and superior now – never mind that they disappear through murder and genocide. This is what we learn from our education, as well as our consumerist society. The point is to erase any recognition of a healthy way of living.

Psychopathic Values. Education reflects the needs and values of the elite, with their latest system of domination and exploitation being called “capitalism”. (But don't think that you can get rid of capitalism, keep civilization, and still have a healthy society. It's not possible.) The elite, of course, are a psychopathic bunch, and their values reflect that, as well as all the institutions they create. Take **success**. Success means fame and fortune, no matter how it's attained. Success is not how well you can live within the Earth's limits. What definition of success does our education teach us? Obviously, we succeed when we have fame and/or fortune. A corporate executive is a success. The CEO of Shell Oil is a success. The CEO of Monsanto is a success. The lawyers who work for these corporations are successes. Our education is not concerned with the natural world or how well we live within it. That should be damn obvious.

Another psychopathic value reinforced by education is **competition**. This was further reinforced by Charles Darwin's Victorian Age interpretation of ecological relationships and the Social Darwinism that resulted, and education, always in service to the needs of the elite, has further promoted competition as the basis of human and all other relationships. Of course this is psychopathic and reflects a complete lack of any ecological intelligence (Livingston 1994). It's an interpretation useful for making sure people are further alienated from each other by viewing everyone else as a competitor, an enemy. It also served as justification for all the genocide committed by England, the United States and all the other Western nations, since all life is a fight for survival and, well, Western civilization won.

Obedience and Dependency. Our form of education is based on the idea that youth know nothing and will never learn anything unless an adult fills them with knowledge. This not only contradicts evolution, it's also the way to create and promote dependency. Within schools, obedience is required, and youth must do whatever the teacher tells them. In fact, for most of the history of schooling, teachers would regularly *physically beat* students to force them to obey. They would

beat them to stop talking, beat them to sit still, beat them to not speak their native language, and beat them so they give up on their traditional, non-Western cultures (Churchill 2004; Selby 1999). These days, shame, humiliation, threats, detentions, punishments, psychological torture, medicating with pharmaceutical drugs, and indoctrination via screens are generally considered enough to induce the required level of obedience (CCHR 200; Levine 2008, 2018; Szasz 2007, 2010).

In such a way, over the years, youth lose all their intrinsic motivation. They lose the ability to know what *they* want to do or what *they* are interested in, or even how to think without being told what to think. Life is about obeying others higher in authority. This clearly continues into adulthood in the working world, where they do what they're told, even if their job directly destroys the natural world and even if it directly leads to the poisoning or deaths of others – which of course, all modern jobs do.

Obedience and dependency are to be expected – it's a quality of domestication. All our domesticated animals and plants have become dependent on us. But we usually forget that in domesticating other forms of life, we also domesticated ourselves (Livingston 1994; Scott 2017). We made them dependent, and we made ourselves dependent. The last thing the elite want are youth with *independent minds* who might question and challenge this diseased way of life, and education has served this requirement of theirs perfectly.

Immaturity. Another way to keep youth dependent is to keep them immature. This is accomplished not only by treating them as if they are incapable and need an adult to “manage them” and “fill them with knowledge”, but also through the taken-for-granted separation of students by ages. For two million years, children grew up in mixed-age groups (Gray 2011, 2013, 2015). The older youth looked after the younger, the younger looked up to the older, and the older gained maturity and a sense of responsibility by recognizing their influence on the younger ones. No more. In a school, the only role models for kids are other kids of exactly their same age and same level of immaturity – they have no one more mature to learn from, and no one younger to look after. Schools make sure that youth stay as immature as possible, for as long as possible, because that makes them easiest to manipulate, control, exploit and dominate – all for the purpose of the elite getting richer and richer, at the expense of life on the planet.

Consumerism. All that alienation from nature, immaturity, and dependency is also required to make us *consumers*. That's how the elite become the elite, and how they keep everyone else in check. One of the key qualities of our lives is that we feel the need to keep on buying things – things we don't need. But advertising is there to make us insecure, and without any grounding in nature or sense of maturity and responsibility, we believe it. We spend our lives thinking that buying will solve our problems. Even today, the majority of people who want to do something about the environment or climate change think that by shopping differently or buying solar panels they can make a difference! Education reinforces consumerism because schools are some of the biggest consumers around – they have to have every latest gadget. They have to buy “resources” and more “resources” - or else the children won't learn! There is a vast industry of selling completely idiotic and unnecessary things to schools, and schools spend *hundreds of billions of dollars every year* to make sure they keep up with the latest, because to have the latest means “a good education”. Of course, “the latest” can only be made by destroying the natural world.

But again, education is not concerned with the natural world. It was never meant to be concerned. The natural world is a commodity and a resource to be exploited by civilization. Nothing has changed in six thousand years.

Healthy Education

To know what a healthy education would look like depends on the crucial question: Do we want to live within the Earth's limits?

If we want to live within the Earth's limits, in a way which promotes biodiversity and the human ability to live meaningful lives, then there is only one place to look: how did we educate ourselves for two million years? Clearly, if it lasted two million years, it's far, far better than the complete disaster of the last 150 years of education - unless your idea of life is chasing money, staring at screens, and exploitation of whatever the hell you can exploit.

That proven method of education meant:

- freedom in nature
- mixed ages
- free play
- healthy adult role models
- the oral tradition
- no coercion
- no screens

And that way of education requires a different way of life. It means understanding that the social arrangement known as *civilization* is a disease and will always be pathological, and that the only way of living that was ecologically and socially healthy would be one resembling the hunter-gatherer way of life. It's not too late to learn, though it will take effort.

That may be too much for most people to accept, of course, but humans are now wiping life off the planet. Humans are ensuring painful, miserable lives for their children. That's happening *now*. If the current state of the world is too much for you to face and do something about, then why are you alive?

The only worthwhile education is one that helps us become socially and emotionally intelligent adults who can live lightly on the Earth, and *stop* the destruction.

And unfortunately, that can never be learned inside a classroom. The proof is all around you.

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