ENVIRONMENTAL ADULT EDUCATION

When an impetuous student told Dr. Johnson, “I don’t understand you,” he replied, “Sir, I have found you an argument but I am not obliged to find you an understanding” (Boswell, 1952/1784). And so it goes with the environment and adult education. That we have a problem was established by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 and it is up to us to find an understanding and hopefully a solution. As a field that has long taken up issues of the community and its development, we are arguably in the area of education that ought to pay particular attention to how to address environmental adult education and to find ways and means to solve it. Leadership on environmental adult education has come from the highest levels; both UNESCO and the United Nations itself have lent it credibility and clout, a not insignificant thing as many issues vie for prominence on the international stage. This level of concern indicates that environmental issues are huge and there is an understanding that these affect all other areas of concern including race, class, gender and ability. The intersectoral nature of the effects is underscored in the diverse areas that are giving attention to it.

Within the field of adult education, the greatest concentration of effort and attention has come from Canadian adult educators, especially Darlene Clover (2006a), Elizabeth Lange (2004), and Edmund O’Sullivan (O’Sullivan & Taylor, 2004). Interest from countries such as Canada are not surprising since it has a resource economy based on mining, fishing, and logging, which renders it especially vulnerable. Some of Canada’s environmental issues are being addressed through social movement learning projects at Clayoquot Sound (Walter, 2007) which in its heyday had 10,000 citizens mobilised against industry. This movement was predominantly led by women in a peaceful non-violent protest (Wine, 1997). Others with a concerted interest in environmental adult education include: Francisco Gutierrez and Cruz Prado (1999) who are located in Costa Rica; Brazilian environmentalist educator Walter Leal Filho (2006) who is based at Bradford University in the United Kingdom; his former doctoral student at Bradford, Paul J. Pace, who now directs the University of Malta’s Centre for Environmental Education & Research (Mayo, Pace & Zammit, 2008); Pace’s colleague Vince Caruana (Caruana, interviewed in Borg & Mayo, 2007); Richard Kahn (2008) at Antioch University, Los Angeles; German-born Mechthild Hart (1992) who teaches at DePaul University in Chicago, and who provides a strong feminist perspective to the discussion. All of them have worked assiduously to bring people to an understanding of environmental adult
education as a new social movement, observing that it must be addressed through social movement learning. It is the latter emphasis on learning that distinguishes adult educators’ work from that of sociologists and political scientists, although there is often a politics of knowledge and learning dimension in the latter’s work.

MINDING OUR LANGUAGE

Learning about environmental adult education requires the acquisition of a new vocabulary. Perhaps the greatest struggle comes with defining or naming what the enterprise of educating people about the environment is all about. Within adult education there has been an effort not to talk of environmental education but rather to place the emphasis on environmental adult education. The terms, though seemingly synonymous, are actually very different. Let’s look.

Darlene Clover (2006b) points out that environmental adult education (EAE) is not environmental education. In her view, EAE is distinguished by its attempts to link the environment to education and its stress on participatory and engaged processes. Environmental education focused often on school age children and was provided in schools, as well as non-formal venues like Girl Guides, 4-H and museums. This EE was the predominant mode of education until the 1990s when adults really became leaders in this area. Clover notes that EAE is a critical foray into an important area of living and practice. It is critical in that it asks questions of knowledge and power, and explores the interstices of race, class and gender and how these affect and are affected by the degradation of the environment. In Asia, environmental popular education is used synonymously with EAE. Environmental education sits in contrast to the term used to refer to a banking-like education system where people are told about the problems and are given little time to engage them or work toward a solution. EAE asks that we move from individual action such as a focus on recycling paper to large scale action that involves critical social change.

Central to EAE is an understanding of how race, class and gender figure into the mix. Gender, for instance, is most clearly seen in the ways that women in the Global South are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. In places where there is clear cutting of wood, for instance, women have to go further to get wood, food and water, and they have to care for the sick who are affected by the environment (Tabiedi, 2003, p. 75). An understanding of race comes into play in the work of Inuit leader Sheila Watt-Clouthier. Speaking about the melting of the Arctic ice, she reminds us that the environment is a critical human rights issue and that the interconnectedness of the issue with all others is crucial. Watt-Clouthier sees the loss of sea ice as killing the Inuit hunting culture.

A related term is eco-justice, which focuses on the justice side of environmental issues. This term signals that its proponents are not just interested in letting people know about environmental concerns, but are focused on moving to action with their concerns. Proponents see the time for raising awareness as behind us, and they are readying themselves for action. What is less apparent in this term, from an adult