

What is Education For? Four Essentials of Education for a Green Society

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There is a strong connection between the business world and the modern institution of schooling. Historians of education have explained how schools as we know them were profoundly shaped by the influence of business leaders and by educators who adopted theories and techniques from the economic realm of society. Many major turning points, new initiatives, and efforts to reform public education have come in response to demands for better trained workers or more efficient management of human resources. For example, in the 1840s Horace Mann and his peers justified their efforts to organize state school systems, in large part, on the basis of economic productivity and prosperity; they promised factory managers that educated workers would demonstrate more “docility” and “punctuality,” among other virtues. In the early 1900s, school administrators widely adopted the tools of “scientific management” to guarantee maximum “efficiency.” And after the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* by the Reagan administration, one national commission after another urgently declared that schools *must* strive to improve the performance of the American economy in the face of global competition.

The impact of such forces is so pronounced that critics often point to the “factory model” of schooling as the underlying source of many unfortunate characteristics of modern education, such as standardization, hierarchical management, competition, and treating young people as a “resource” and their learning as a “product.” Yet overall, the public and political leaders accept the role of schools in serving the needs of industry and commerce. Business leaders are powerful and respected shapers of modern society—more so than, say, poets or philosophers. Parents want their children to be well prepared for successful careers. And ultimately, our society worships at the altar of The Economy: whatever promises to increase wealth and productivity and technological innovation receives an enthusiastic welcome and little critical reflection.

Paths of Learning

This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net

Today, on the edge of an emerging “green” economy, we need to raise two essential questions about the relationship between business and education. First, are the evolving qualities of industry and commerce significantly different from what they were a century or two ago, when they shaped schools in the image of the assembly line factory? Second, is it even proper for schools to serve the goals of business above all other considerations, or is it time to envision a new mission for education? For those who understand the meaning of “green” business, these two questions are closely related. The new ways of doing business mean that the bottom line includes human, social and ecological concerns and not merely a single minded focus on corporate profit or efficiency. If green business aims to make a more holistic contribution to human welfare than material wealth alone, then the kind of schooling—more broadly, the kind of learning—that would be aligned with such a mission should look substantially different from schooling driven by the factory model.

The industrial economy required the training of workers who would efficiently perform their assigned tasks; in the green economy, individuals are not considered in such a robotic image, but are generally treated as whole human beings capable of creativity, imagination, and a lifelong search for meaning. An education designed to train people for their narrow roles in the workplace is vastly different from an education whose purpose is to enable individuals to become all they are capable of being. The great essayist Wendell Berry went to the heart of the matter in the title of his 1990 book, *What Are People For?* If people are viewed as merely employees in a mechanistic economic system, then they need, above all, to be managed, evaluated, graded and disciplined. If, on the contrary, society views the human being as an active, creative, aspiring organism, then it must educate children in ways that honor such qualities rather than suppress them.

What are some of the characteristics of this human-centered, “green” education? There are many models of alternative, progressive, democratic, and holistic schools, but they share four essential qualities:

- 1). *Experiential Learning*. Learning is more experiential, emergent, organic, cooperative and personal than in standardized school settings. Tests, grades, ranking, honors and other trappings of competitive learning are greatly reduced or completely absent. There is more open discussion and

critical questioning in the classroom. Students are more free to pursue personal interests and passions, or a creative effort is made to present an established curriculum in ways that makes it more relevant, meaningful and exciting to students. Indeed, to the extent curriculum is pre-planned, its content is less driven by what corporate leaders and politicians determine “every child needs to know” and more by educators with a philosophical commitment to well rounded personal development and their own personal and professional sensitivity to the learning rhythms of their students.

2). *Community Development.* There is a genuine sense of community among students, teachers, and the parents involved in the school. People care about each other and take care of each other. There is little authority exercised solely for the sake of control or impersonal enforcement of rules, although teachers and school administrators take their responsibilities for community functioning seriously. In the terms used by feminist cultural historian Riane Eisler, a school oriented to “partnership” values would exhibit a “hierarchy of actualization” (a management structure that empowers each individual to realize one’s potentials) rather than the more traditional “hierarchy of domination.”

3). *Concern for the inner life.* There is respect for students’ interior life and for ultimate questions. At the very least, a holistic learning environment offers periods of time or physical spaces of respite from the competitive materialism, constant noise, distraction, and titillation of modern civilization. Many holistic educators use various practices such as yoga, meditation, journaling, expressive arts, or simply times of quiet to help their students find calm and centering. Moreover, students are encouraged to wonder about deeper questions, about the meaning of life; their existential concerns are taken seriously. This open-ended, student-centered approach encourages a diversity of personal paths and need not involve the explicit teaching of religion or religious values.

4). *Ecological literacy.* A holistic learning environment has meaningful connections to the world of nature. The principles of ecology and sustainability are implicit in the structure and content of a holistic education, if not explicitly addressed; there is a deliberate cultivation of what David Orr has called “ecological literacy.” The physical design of holistic schools and classrooms brings nature indoors, or invites students into the surrounding ecosystem. In these spaces, beauty is as important a concern as functionality. We would commonly find gardens, field trips, or other opportunities for contact with nature in the curriculum even in an urban setting.

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These four general principles are practiced in distinctive ways by the various alternative schools. Because of the diverse origins and histories of these educational subcultures, they have had little interaction or communication with each other. Each group has its own publications, conferences, internet discussion groups, and particular concerns. But there is a growing awareness that these educational alternatives reflect an emerging new culture—a more ecologically literate, life-affirming culture based on principles of self-development, partnership, democracy, and sustainability. When we look beneath the surface, the everyday practices, of various kinds of alternative schools, we find a common vision of the human being, a sense of awe and reverence for the creative spirit that animates the unfolding of a human personality. When education begins with this reverence, with this respect for the individual personhood of every learner, it cannot be standardized. It cannot be managed in undemocratic, authoritarian ways. It does not become obsessed with measuring “outcomes” or bureaucratically mandating what every child must “know and be able to do.” By sloughing off these deadening constraints on imagination, creativity and authentic growth, a holistic education enables young people as well as their teachers to pursue their deepest and highest possibilities. This is what education would look like in a green society, because these are the kinds of people who are valued in a green economy.