

Building the little green schoolhouse

Environmental education has the power to change the world, if we could just trust the youth to use their brains.

The Coast – July 9, 2009

(<http://www.thecoast.ca/halifax/bulding-the-little-green-schoolhouse/Content?oid=1162868>)

by [Chris Benjamin](#)

Last century I studied some environmental education at York. My professors walked the walk, and inspired us the way they would have us inspire our students. You need inspiration to make change.

A decade later, I sometimes lose hope that we'll change, and I have to think a long way back to find that inspiration. Sometimes I think of my environmental education prof, Leesa Fawcett, who says "hopelessness hasn't solved many problems."

From the educator's perspective, the question is: how to show young students the real crisis we are in without fostering hopelessness? How to inspire positive action? From my recollection, public schools and inspiration don't often mix.

The best environmental education in this province happens outside the schools, judging from a recent workshop in Halifax by the Environmental Education Caucus. There were very few teachers in attendance. Most participants worked for government or non-profit organizations. Most had more than one job, and conducted environmental education with youth and the general population as part of their multifaceted workloads.

"Teacher training in environmental education is still basically non-existent," Fawcett says. "No Additional Qualification courses, and very few EE summer institutes."

Nova Scotia's environmental education guru, Alan Warner of Acadia University, adds that institutional pressures limit what teachers and visiting environmentalists can do in schools. Warner is the star attraction at the Environmental Education Caucus's workshop. "Our challenge as environmental educators is the way we fit into systems and what people want from us," he tells participants.

The classroom setting, designed so that students can absorb information from teacher and chalkboard, doesn't help. Warner has spent decades talking to young Nova Scotians about how they learn to care for the environment. They don't describe classrooms and they don't describe books.

As Fawcett puts it: "To be ecologically literate is overrated. It's often touted as the most important goal yet many oral cultures have lived sustainably and ecologically."

Young people emphasize the chance to actually participate in an experience, to have real input into the discussion, to play games and laugh, and to be given the time and space to reflect on both the present and future of our planet.

Warner compares young students' desires for input to rural nomads he met in India.

"They had no adolescence; the kids make a meaningful contribution at age 10, and they were engaged. If you ask young people to contribute they will get engaged, instead of, as one student put it, 'Learning and learning and learning and never using it.'"

Such meaningful contribution is possible in our schools, as another workshop participant showed with an anecdote. Her high school science teacher saw her interest in the environment and helped her set up an experiment to measure the effects of acid rain on shrimp. She ran the experiment herself and gained an invaluable learning experience that allowed her to contribute to the creation of new knowledge at a young age.

This kind of inspired teaching, or facilitating, about environmental issues is what Warner is getting at when he says educators have to fit into systems, creatively. It is crucial they do this because, if environmental education is adventurous, active, and gives youth the space and respect they need to build their own communities (with each other and with adults), it could transform the world we know into something sustainable.

"Where students trust each other," Warner says, "they can create a new kind of cool. We had a group who gave themselves earthy names, like Peace Lily, which became part of that group's culture."

This ability to reshape what cool is must come as a relief to the environmental educators at Warner's workshop, who identify overcoming the coolness factor and peer pressure---that tendency of high school students to be too cool for school---as one of their most daunting challenges. Coincidentally, last week Michigan State University published a study showing how peer pressure plays a large role in fostering positive environmental behaviour in all age groups. If your neighbours recycle, you are more likely to do the same.

Nicknames like Peace Lily are not cool in the public schools, I know. It seems a new cool can emerge when students are allowed to put their hyper-creative minds in action, not just to understand our ecological crisis but to resolve it.

We need that to happen. As best-selling author and superstar environmentalist Paul Hawken told this year's graduating class at the University of Portland, "Civilization needs a new operating system, you are the programmers, and we need it within a few decades."

Send Chris Benjamin your realistic, but hopeful, ideas on green education at chrisb@thecoast.ca.