

# **Education for Action: A Practical Demonstration of Reflected Action on the Urban Environment**

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Concern about the quality of our environment has been given increasing prominence by public, private and voluntary bodies alike. We are advised through newspapers and the media on such matters as lead in petrol, the waste on non-renewable resources, the greenhouse effect, extinction of wild flora and fauna, the dumping of nuclear waste, which are all threatening the future of our planet. There is a strong emphasis on checking and reversing the deterioration and destruction of many aspects of our world.

The word "environment", however, has come to mean to many the natural or rural, not the human or urban. Little attention is paid to the urban environment, yet in Britain most people live in towns or cities where vast changes are taking place with dramatic effect on those who live there. We are faced with poverty, unemployment and disadvantage, as well as derelict, degraded and inhuman environments. The scale of change and complexity of issues in the urban environment demands a deeper understanding and more positive action. (Kean, 1991)

Much emphasis has been placed on the need for environmental education and information, aimed at raising awareness and developing an appreciation of the environment, leading to concern and a caring attitude towards it. But to care about the environment, however passionately, is simply not enough. What is required is education for effective participation, where young and old can contribute towards environmental decision making, action and change. An educational process which begins with raised awareness, increases knowledge and understanding and which helps develop critical skills, formulate values and attitudes and leads on to participation in decision making and ultimately action. (Kean, 1989). There is an alternative argument of starting with action leading to increased knowledge. However, our concern is as much with the quality of the environmental change and with informed action for which the development of skills and increased knowledge and understanding is a necessary part of the process.

It is at the stage of participating in environmental decision making, influencing changes and becoming involved in change locally, that teachers have failed to engage pupils. This may be because of lack of knowledge and resources, including time, or lack of experience or confidence. Teachers' professional training may not have equipped them to tackle some of the

problems and opportunities which present themselves in such activities.

The notion of 'active citizenship' has also been given much attention in Britain. It is hoped that people will be encouraged to play a full role in their local community. Helping them to make a substantial contribution to the decisions which affect their environment, and providing technical support for these initiatives has been the rationale behind the current "Community Architecture" (Knevitt and Wates, 1987) and "community technical aid" movement.

These ideas are, however, not a new phenomenon. (Blackett, 1965). The virtues of participation and the concern for involvement in decision making became fashionable in the 1960's. (Report of the Committee on Public Participation and Planning, 1969). However, the failure of various participation exercises and more particularly the 'tokenism' of some attempts to involve people have led many to believe that education is a prerequisite to participation. It is the process whereby people can learn about the forces that determine the form and function of the urban environment, the impact of these forces and how people themselves can influence the future development, and bring about change.

### **Newcastle Architecture Workshop (the Workshop)**

It is from this background that Newcastle Architecture Workshop has developed. The Workshop was set up in 1977 as an independent, charitable company. It combines both an Urban Studies Centre and a Community Technical Aid Centre. The staff of teachers, planners, architects and landscape architect are involved with both children and adults in environmental education, in educating for change and helping achieve those changes. Work in the formal education sector has involved them in curriculum planning at both national and local levels, in collaborating with teachers, devising and developing teaching and learning strategies, team teaching in schools and in the In Service Training (INSET) of teachers.

Their work in the community has the same broad educational base, they are as much concerned with the process of planning change as with the product. Much of the work is community development through environmental action. (Kean, 1990) Community groups are involved in surveys, analysis, putting forward options and priorities, as well as learning to cooperate and to organise themselves. This has involved working on such diverse projects as 'tenants' plans' for housing estates, neighbourhood regeneration strategies, playground designs, community buildings and gardens. The local groups use the reports and feasibility studies prepared with the Workshop to promote their schemes, raise their credibility and find financial backing. The lengthy process of physical development enables local skills and stable management structures to evolve, supportive relationships to be created and active collaboration with local authorities and other bodies to be achieved. Most of those with whom the Workshop is involved are unemployed inner city residents, young and old,

who have little previous relevant experience and often suffer from poor self esteem and low aspirations. The experience of participating in regenerating their local environment and improving the quality of their lives has given them a new sense of worth and pride which has far reaching effects. (Grace, Kean, Clarke, 1990).

Although the Workshop has two distinct areas of operation the two are inter-dependent. Lessons learnt and experiences gained in one area are transferred to the other. This is particularly so in developing the skills and knowledge required for active participation in the environment. It is common for the Workshop to work simultaneously with schools and community groups for mutual benefit, using school projects to focus research and proposals to which local people can respond or using live community projects for studies by the pupils.

### **The theory and the practice**

The Workshop does not offer one particular agreed ethic nor is one particular form or type of environmental action prescribed. (Council for Urban Studies Centres, 1981). There is not an imposed content. Study is rooted in the local environment, specific issues related to it stimulate learning and provide a common link between pupils, parents, teachers and the wider community. Pupils work outwards from their own experience and perception. This allows them to define and explore the critical needs of the day and what is important for them and the local community, whether it be inner city, town centre or suburbs. Whilst at the same time their experiences are extended and enriched and their understanding illuminated and deepened. The pupils' own experience is valued and it is recognised that local lay experience and opinion is as important as the knowledge of the "expert".

Pupils go from merely observing and recording the local environment to assessing what needs to be replaced or what should be preserved, identifying the various options and indicating the priorities. From such insights and experiences they themselves can become the agents of change by direct and practical involvement. This work reflects Peter Posch's view that "direct involvement of schools in reflected action on the environment." In that same article he discussed the dual actions of "promotion of environmental awareness" and the promotion of "dynamic qualities" the former being concerned with conservation the latter being concerned with stimulating change and a positive attitude towards economic and technological development. (Posch, 1990).

Proposals for change cannot be separated from the economic and social consequences and the political context in which they are set. In environmental issues there is often no one right answer: some gain, some lose. This brings into sharp focus the questions of power and wealth, welfare and social justice, community versus the individual's rights, as well as the functions and responsibilities of national and local governments. Therefore studies must also

involve controversial issues. But these issues are opened up and pupils encouraged in a rational process of enquiry using a variety of sources, critically assessing not only the data but differing viewpoints and recognising the motivation of interest groups. A balance is provided, help is given to develop basic values such as tolerance towards others and respect for evidence, whilst leaving pupils to develop their own attitudes to the issues. It is not 'Think, what I think, value, what I value.' (Barnes, 1988)

Through this way of working, pupils become active learners, not passive recipients of processed knowledge, the teacher becomes the enabler or facilitator to learning and the promoter of reflection. Pupils are involved in practical first hand experiences and in developing skills in negotiation, cooperation, raising questions, speculating, defining and solving problems, decision making and justifying as well as the creative skills of environmental design. Teachers and pupils are often in a mutual learning situation. They are involved with professionals directly concerned with shaping the environment such as planners and architects. Learning situations are created where pupils collaborate with all these adults directly responsible for changing their environment. Relationships are developed between the school and the community, not only the residents but the business community, the developers, the industrialists, the administrators and the politicians. All of whom can help to deepen and enrich the pupils environmental understanding and experience. (Newcastle Architecture Workshop Ltd, 1986)

One example of this was the issue of a semi derelict railway line running for several miles along Newcastle's riverside. A number of community improvement projects developed, as well as long term, in depth, environmental studies projects in three primary feeder schools and one secondary school. The state of the line was raised as an issue by pupils at Raby Street Primary School, Byker. For them it was a problem, being both dangerous and out of bounds, but also a natural playground. It was also a live issue, because for some members of the local community the line was an eyesore, a tip and a hazard. For the planners it was a unique opportunity to link housing areas to a newly developed open spaces. The primary school studies involved examining changes in modes of transport over the past century, this included the changing role of the railway. Ideas were drawn up for future uses of the line and the work culminated in the production of a community newspaper circulated to all residents inviting comments. From this a number of projects developed. One involved proposals and designs for the development of a community pigeon loft on a derelict part of the embankment, where local young people and pupils could become involved in breeding and racing pigeons, a favourite pastime in the North East of England. (Newcastle Architecture Workshop Ltd, 1986)

At another school, West Walker Primary School, pupils, parents, staff and governors were involved in a major redevelopment of their school grounds adjacent to the railway line. The proposal was to develop the grounds for dual

use linked to the Riverside Park. The class work included a project on attitudes to and value of play culminating in designs for play areas and equipment. Another project involved the design, implementation and maintenance of a 'nature garden'. The school became a focus for the community and with the help of the Workshop architect spare classrooms have been converted for community use with teaching spaces for adults, a computer room, a parent's library, a community cafeteria and a field studies centre. A warden for the Riverside Park is now based at the field studies centre in the school

The organisation and community action started at this school is now stimulating work in the surrounding areas. A proposal has been put forward by the community group for use of a derelict site on the south west boundary of the school, as a horticultural training, employment and community business with strong links to the local schools. Opposite the school, another area of derelict land has been identified by the group as being suitable for low-cost/social housing. A report has been produced by the group and they have persuaded officials and councillors to re-zone the industrial land for housing. They have formed themselves into the Church Street Development Association and they are now in the process of selecting, for themselves, an architect and Housing Association who will carry out the development. It is proposed that with the help of the Workshop the community will work closely with the architect to determine the shape and type of development. Pupils in the three feeder primary schools and secondary school will also be involved in the designing and decision making as part of their Design Technology and Environmental Education curriculum.

### **Implications for teacher education**

This reflective and dynamic way of working requires different teaching and learning approaches, particularly when involving real issues in the urban environment. Both pupils and teachers need support in this (Posch, 1990). As part of its work, the Workshop has been developing innovative approaches by undertaking longterm projects in schools; these are evaluated at the end of each project with the production of a report for the schools and for publication. The report documents the aims and objectives, teaching strategies, procedures followed, resources used and includes teachers, pupils and the Workshop staff evaluations. Thus I would argue that this holistic approach qualifies as INSET. Teachers are supported in their planning and evaluation of the projects as well as team teaching with Workshop staff. They are encouraged to view the environment as a totality, to explore the full potential of environmental education within the curriculum to reflect on the teaching and learning activities (Altrichter and Posch, 1990) and to use adults other than teachers, particularly those from the environmental professions. The role of Newcastle Architecture Workshop in INSET was recognised by Newcastle upon Tyne Local Education Authority. For two years they funded a unit with

the Workshop designing and developing active learning techniques within schools. The aim of the unit was to enthuse, stimulate and give practical help to teachers in developing new approaches in teaching which help students take more responsibility for their learning.

The Workshop recognised that in order for such teaching approaches to work, the commitment and enthusiasm of all school staff, heads, departmental heads and class/subject teachers was required. Individual schools and departments and teachers needs are different and therefore a uniform approach could not be applied. It was agreed, however, that teachers should participate and negotiate in their own INSET, thus encouraging them to develop similar strategies with their pupils. As the type of teaching approaches being explored were experimental and reflective the teachers were encouraged to learn 'by and from doing' working alongside the workshop.

This implied a range of different approaches, and the following were developed.

- i. Multi professional/interdisciplinary conferences
- ii. Class based school projects, the Workshop, was involved in individual schools with one class teacher at his/her request, helping plan, teach and evaluate projects. This was then disseminated to the remaining school, and other subject teachers or other schools within the cluster group through seminars, reports etc.
- iii. Locality/issue based INSET short cross-curricular courses involving all departments/faculties in one school or several schools in one area. A local environmental issue was identified, either externally or by the teachers and during the course teachers developed their curriculum modules around this issue. The modules were then taught in the schools and the Workshop staff were available for support throughout. At regular intervals throughout the module, the Workshop, the teachers and the pupils would evaluate the work. One example of the locality/issue based INSET is the involvement of a number of schools in the "Green Wedge" project. Pupils and teachers were involved in developing a recreational strategy for their area with proposals for implementation. This was in an area of the city where many leisure and recreational activities had been lost as a result of a major by-pass road development and where compensation money was available for developing new facilities. These schools have since become involved in the "Environment and Schools Initiatives" launched by Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) OECD (Posch, 1990) and the Workshop is continuing its support.
- iv. Active learning Workshops for Teachers who were introduced to a variety of active learning techniques which were rooted in the local

environment.

These techniques were designed to heighten awareness through multi-sensory work such as acclimatisation (Van Matre, 1972). Art in the Built Environment (Adams, 1982) based on experiencing, analysing and appraising in order to develop a sense of place, and the 'Decouverte' approach of a group of French Environmentalists. (Dehan & Oberlinkels, 1977). The Decouvert approach has five stages. Decouvert - Discovery, Charniere - The Hinge, Etude - The Study, Synthèse - The Synthesis, Debat - Evaluation. The underlying principles are that education in the environment is interdisciplinary and that the best way to understand the complexities of the environment is through group work and continuous evaluation. Modification of working methods is an essential feature of the learning process. (Hawkins, 1987)

The INSET carried out by the Workshop's Active Learning Unit during the two years was used as a model for the Local Education Authority who developed their own multi-disciplinary team of seconded teachers to form the Alpha Team they were supported by the Workshop. (Newcastle Architecture Workshop, 1989) This has since ceased, however many lessons can be learned from the two initiatives. The value of a separate and independent unit rather than the use of teachers seconded part-time to the team from schools was highlighted. The lack of status of these seconded teachers with their peers and school managers also proved to be an obstacle. Research has since shown that under the mentoring system advisory teachers, conscious of their status with peer groups often deny their expertise. The seconded teachers required training not only in active learning techniques but in training other teachers and negotiating with school managements.

Although direct funding to Newcastle Architecture Workshop from the Local Education Authority has now ceased, the Workshop still continues its INSET work mainly through locality/issue-based INSET and active learning workshops. Both involve the systematic reflection on action, action research, as advocated by Professor John Elliot (Elliot, 1989). Current experience shows, however, that with the changes in funding arrangements for INSET there is a tendency for schools to concentrate on buying in INSET for discrete areas of practice. The reflective mode of INSET no longer prevails.

## **Conclusion**

Although Newcastle Architecture Workshop is an independent, charitable company and not an established part of an educational institution it has had a significant and notable effect in developing environmental awareness and action in schools and in the wider community. By involving the Workshop schools have been able to tap in to their expertise, experience, access to information and the different perspectives and perceptions of other

professionals. Issues have been opened up and the dilemma of teacher dominance or manipulation avoided. Newcastle Architecture Workshop's multi-professional team of teachers and environmental professionals have combined to provide opportunities and stimuli for developing an holistic approach to environmental education which goes beyond a knowledge based curriculum. In addition, the Workshop has provided practical assistance to individual schools without which would have been unable to sustain a high level of involvement in the whole process through to action. At the same time the Workshop has encouraged teachers in participative action research.

There is a need for independent agencies who can provide stimulus, support and act as a catalyst for action; who can provide opportunities for action research, build up experience and reinvest this in developing future work; who can provide for evaluation and dissemination both locally and nationally as well as draw in community resources not normally available to schools.

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