

Contexts and Readers for Australian and American Commentaries on Environmental Education

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It is worthwhile rereading Annette Greenall Gough's review of Bowers' and Orr's books in the September 1994 issue of the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* for the stimulation it provides in considering the Australian context for reading about environmental education and how it contrasts with the context in the USA. If we explore further the notion of the usefulness of a book in the Australian context by means of an analysis of contrasting contexts and readerships, we can identify future directions for development.

Greenall Gough issues a helpful guideline to appreciation and application of Bowers' and Orr's work when she advises readers to handle with care because:

these texts ... come from a different culture, they only draw on a limited segment of that culture for inspiration and, based on these texts and other readings, the educational possibilities in that culture are definitely different from classroom practices and opportunities here (Greenall Gough 1994 p. 117).

This is wise advice, for whenever we look at the usefulness of a book or of any text, we do so in terms of context, and we can subdivide that context by including, as well as the social and immediate professional context, aspects such as purpose and intended audience. The interesting thing is that as we use these tools to assess the text, the tools themselves become clearer and more important and offer us further insights in terms of enriched understanding of the author's context, the audience, and the integrity of what the author is offering the field. This in turn can lead us to a more elaborated view of ourselves as readers and interactionists in the wider community. With such rich trophies in sight, we shall concentrate here on the context and readership for Orr (1992).

The readership

In the section on Orr's readership, we shall consider the USA audience of funding providers for liberal arts colleges in contrast with the Australian academic audience.

Components of the context

The professional context can be analysed from perspectives such as:

- the context of the USA;
- the specific context of Oberlin College;
- the community context; and
- the tertiary academic context.

The context of the USA

To contrast the context for commentary on environmental education in the USA with the situation in Australia, we can start with Doyle and Kellow's (1994) explanation of the Australian perspective thus:

The state, not rugged individual settlers, set the early pattern of development, with public works undertaken by the military government (Doyle, T. and Kellow, A. 1994, p. 3).

Doyle and Kellow trace the effects of this historical context on the environmental movement as a whole, but here it is useful to conjecture about one possible effect of the rather government-centred Australian ethos, that of the rather government-centred discourse which characterises it. Australians who are involved in commentary on environmental matters as a whole seem often to be engaged in writing and speaking for an audience of public service and government decision-makers. The kinds of texts which emerge are Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) and management plans, discussion papers and policy documents, planned series of information papers and educational materials, and of course academic texts. It is suggested that the range of popular Australian writing on environmental matters is more restricted than the range of that writing intended for business, professional and official audiences. If we consider writing on environmental education as a subset of that, then its range is still more restricted.

With the larger USA audience, it is possible to stimulate more niching in the writing on environmental matters and there is an audience for material concerning environmental education which is not exclusively academic. Thus one way in which we might approach Orr's writing is that it is intended for an audience which is not solely business, professional official.

The specific context of Oberlin College

Orr teaches at Oberlin College in Cleveland, Ohio, a small, private, liberal arts college with a reputation for excellence and an attraction for students from privileged backgrounds. He has worked with his colleagues for practical environmental campus reform, an approach which is exemplified in Eagan and Orr (eds) 1992 and the Oberlin faculty's own practical, local publications. The physical achievements at Oberlin campus are matched

by the extension of all levels of the campus community's interest and involvement into the wider local community and its environmental reform efforts such as the contribution of the Director of Environmental Health and Safety, Ms C. Wolfe, on a series of committees for remediation of the Black River, and thus of Lake Erie. These committees are linked to the program of the US-Canada International Joint Commission on Great Lakes Water Quality and Oberlin participants contribute to the Study Team and the Education Task Group.

The community context

The involvement of the Oberlin campus community in the surrounding district of Elyria is rewarded by interest, interaction and mutual respect. Students and faculty contribute to local committees and take on specific research tasks, they assist the local recycler, BFI industries, and carry out guided tours for visitors. They contribute time in the composting facility, they provide suggestions for information and educational materials. They work out and live out the ethos of education for the environment. In order for this interaction to be initiated and to continue, effort had to be put into practical negotiation built on a previously developed solid basis of credibility.

The tertiary academic context

Credibility is dependent on respect for the tertiary institution in terms both of its academic reputation and of its ability to live up to community expectations of what a tertiary institution should be. If radical action produces too much of a gap between these expectations and the performance of the faculty and the organisation, then the carefully built relationship between the college and the local community is compromised. Further, the private support base for the college is dependent on both the local community perception and the wider community perception. The positive opinion of the stakeholders is vital to the survival of the whole enterprise. To return to our contrast, whereas in Australia the stakeholders are often public, in the USA and particularly at Oberlin, the stakeholders are private. The process of accountability, reporting and negotiation for continuing activity is thus related to a wider spectrum of community expectations than it is in Australia. For the Oberlin faculty there is a strong need to appeal to traditional expectations of the part played by tertiary institutions in the USA community (Sheppard 1994) and these are different from those in Australia. While on the one hand there seems to be an enviably widespread affection at all social levels for the USA higher education process, this has its trade-off with the restriction that the institution must continue to match those expectations. For Australian academics, any apathy, suspicion or cynicism of the Australian community towards tertiary institutions is counterbalanced by a commensurate process of initiating change ('who cares what they do—they're irrelevant

anyway'). The question we can ask here is whether or not Australian academics have taken full advantage of our flexibility to initiate practical environmental reform on Australian tertiary campuses. I suggest we have not and propose some ideas (Stephens 1993) for how those practical measures might be increased.

Characteristics of Orr's intended audience

Orr's readership is the widest group of stakeholders he can reach. He is addressing his considerations to a group who need to be convinced along different lines of argument from those of a predominantly academic audience. His argument needs to be more popular, appealing more to tradition and to firmly established popular conceptions, to manifest the ideals of the western intellectual tradition and to steer clear of any recent argumentation which might have caused alarm. He eschews the literature review in favour of demonstrating a wide ranging erudition.

Orr needs to reinvent the wheel if necessary and present it in terms acceptable to the audience he knows. It is his audience, and he knows them better than we do. He places his emphasis on citizenship rather than on schooling.

The most glaring weakness of most proposals for reform is the omission of a concept of citizenship and participation in the process for change. Reinventing politics at the ecosystem levels will require a process of civic renewal, or what Benjamin Barber calls 'strong democracy'. It is roughly equivalent to rebuilding the crumbling foundation before trying to remodel the house. Despite our rhetoric about democracy, real democratic participation in the West is in decline, while undergoing a renaissance throughout much of Eastern Europe. Whether from apathy or disgust, half of the eligible population in the United States does not vote (Orr 1992, p. 75).

He introduces new concepts in old clothes, showing the solid linkage with ideas the popular reader will feel comfortable with—democracy, East-West politics, citizenship and garnishes with quotations from popular local writers.

The argument needs beauty and inspirational features, two aspects which the academic audience often greets with suspicion and cynicism.

Ecological literacy also requires the more demanding capacity to observe nature with insight, a merger of landscape and mindscape. 'The interior landscape', in Barry Lopez's words, 'responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes'. The quality of thought is related to the ability to relate to 'where on this earth one goes, what one touches, the patterns one observes in nature- the

intricate history of one's life in the land, even a life in the city, where wind, the chirp of birds, the line of a falling leaf, are known'. The fact that this kind of intimate knowledge of our landscapes is rapidly disappearing can only impoverish our mental landscapes as well (Orr 1992, p. 86).

The academic reader may emerge from this paragraph with some serious reservations, not the least of which would be its failure to impress an Australian scientific academic audience, but the US popular reader has gained some quotable quotes, has been reassured that physical environmental activity is not compromising the study, and has had an inspirational moment.

What we are reading here is a community document rather than one addressed to the education fraternity. Orr is addressing people who might one day choose to pay for themselves or their families to study in a liberal arts college with a strong commitment to practical environmental reform and they need to be reassured that they will not thereby be educating themselves out of a job. He needs to show his readers that he understands the world that was their own educational context, the current world of employment, and the future world where environmental responsibility will mean survival.

If sustainability represents a minority tradition, it is nonetheless a long one dating back at least to Jefferson. Students should not be considered ecologically literate until they have read Thoreau, Kropotkin, Muir, Albert Howard, Alfred North Whitehead, Gandhi, Schweitzer, Aldo Leopold, Lewis Mumford, Rachel Carson, E. F. Schumacher and Wendell Berry. There are alternatives to the present patterns that have remained dormant or isolated, not because they did not work, were poorly thought out or were impractical, but because they were not tried [Orr 1992, p. 94].

This way there is no threat that the reader's own liberal arts education might be rendered obsolete. On this count the graduate parent is already 90% of the way to this new ecological literacy and ahead of her daughter, the prospective student. There is no anxiety that the baby could be discarded with the bathwater, and the validity of the graduate's own education is reinforced.

The Australian reader and writer

As readers of the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* and of Orr (1992) we wear three hats. We are:

- intradisciplinary professionals;
- interdisciplinary professionals; and

- members of the community who buy books for Christmas and birthday presents, and who engage in educated, literate conversation at dinner tables.

If we consider ourselves as readers as part of the context, then we can adopt a conceit that the text becomes a different text in our hands and naturally it will look entirely different in our surroundings. The good thing is that as Australians, we are also capable of the broad interpretation, because our minority position requires us to read as cosmopolitans.

The job of the Orr book is education of the private community. The job of our own publications is education of the public decision-makers, voters and participants, consumers of the education we work hard to provide, and voters of the politicians who will be responsible for making the decisions to support our moves. Orr's audience is accustomed to a high degree of excellence and enjoyment in the public discourse process. Our readership is not so tamed. Our readership reads for work. The USA readership has the option of reading for enjoyment and for consolidating their sense of themselves as educated individuals.

Does it have to be this way? How could we stimulate an appetite among Australians for more popular information about environmental education? Could the Australian market support an increase in popular writing about environmental education? Could Australians write popularly for the USA audience? To get to a 'yes' requires consideration of where the readership is coming from. We have just been through the exercise of considering the US readership and that was easy because it is always easier to look outside than it is to see familiar features in a new way. But if we can start from the issues which motivate Australians and tell them about tertiary education for the environment in terms which they will relate to, using popular concepts and quotations from popular works, then we shall have our popular audience.

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