

BOOK REVIEWS

Restorying environmental education: figurations, fictions and feral subjectivities

Chessa Adsit-Morris, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

Reviewed by Birut Zemits, School of Education, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia

Chessa Adsit-Morris explores the role of narrative in environmental education, drawing on some extensive researchers and theorists in the field of storytelling. She interprets their ideas to apply to education for sustainability in a classroom setting. There is a consistency in style throughout, with each chapter starting with an abstract, an epigraph, and a colourful visual image that helps the visual learner (like myself) orientate to the ideas that follow. There is a reference list at the end of each chapter to make it more a collection of articles than a book. At the beginning of the book the author quotes a playwright, and this sets the tone for some of her later critique of how environmental education is currently taught in schools in a way that lacks opportunities for children to own the environmental stories of the places in which they live:

I refuse to be intimidated by reality anymore . . .

I can take it in small doses, but as a lifestyle I found it too confining. Jane Wagner (2012)

The first chapter, ‘How to create human humus instead of human hubris’, helps to define the topics, discussions and research purpose of this text. The author clearly highlights her guidance in philosophical perspectives from the feminist social scientists to whom she refers regularly. Donna Haraway, Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti are introduced as central influencers, quoted and referenced extensively to build a familiarity with their perspectives throughout the book. The second chapter, ‘A cartographic mapping practice’, enters the analysis of the role of storytelling and narrative in the environmental education domain within the greater ‘map’ of social structures. Adsit-Morris highlights how narratives should be personalised and close to the lived experience to be meaningful. There is the familiar critique of (mostly American-based) historical practices in environmental education that teach only ‘about’ nature, and she considers strategies for teaching ‘in’ and ‘for’, with special consideration for engaging young people. Through a lovely personal narrative and some other reflections, she does capture the vivacity of childhood relationships with the more-than-human world. Recognising the overarching conflicts of capitalism and environmental protection, Adsit-Morris draws on new materialist theories (Braidotti, 2006), questioning some aspects of rhizomic metaphors presented through Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) foundational work in this space. The author is seeking ways to teach that encourage active engagement for students’ learning. She presents some convincing arguments for why educators should consider these alternative strategies.

Chapter 3, ‘Bag-lady storytelling: The carrier-bag theory of fiction as research praxis’, reflects on Le Guin’s (1989) metaphors for narrative writing and how these can be applied to modern-day environmental education practices. The author notes the collecting of ideas and stories as a nomadic experience building for effective environmental education in schools. As a teacher, one can identify with this approach as one gathers many items in the carry bag of skills to engage young people in their learning journey. The critique of traditional research methods that rely on scientific method and dismiss an individual’s story-telling does come through. Adsit-Morris

suggests that the importance of the individual's role in 'sharing, composing and decomposing, experimenting and crafting (p49)' needs greater highlighting in environmental education practices. These critiques may be valid, but there could have been more explorations of practices in research that do recognise these creative elements in environmental education.

Chapter 4 is where Adsit-Morris's own narrative capacity shines. She explains her research project as 'Doing: Exploring the lost streams of Vancouver through eco-art'. With a stunning illustration at the beginning of the chapter, she details the case study where she applied her action research project in an independent Montessori school with a Grade 4/5/6 class and a supportive teacher. She describes how students were encouraged to direct and define the way they explored the lost rivers and how they came up with innovative ideas about how the now disappeared salmon might be reconsidered as part of the Vancouver landscape. Some of the illustrations of eco-art that were developed by the children reinvigorate hope in the capacity of education to be creative and build knowledge. The author's excitement and enthusiasm for her narrative was inspiring, but I did wonder how far this process could be applied in a system where government tests define the agenda for classroom activities and can limit opportunities for experimentation and creative agency.

This 'Doing' is followed by 'Thinking: A narrative inquiry into possible figurations and multiple modes of ecological thought'. The photographic metaphor of the mossy tree-stump that looks like a dog from a certain angle is used in the first pages. This draws from Donna Haraway's (2013) work to effectively explain the multiple viewings one may have of an issue. The strongest argument here is the section of discussion about 'hyphenated' ways of thinking. Adsit-Morris explores environmental attitudes through language attributes as part of an emergent gestalt. While the author claims to 'push, drag, coax, trick, or pull ecological thought outside the boundaries of western metaphysics, outside the territories of systems theory, into the muddy and mucky world of everyday creatures' (p. 80), I do think this claim falls a little flat. This is mostly because with the intense levels of referencing other people's ideas and arguments, somehow her own voice is lost in complex theories of others. The 'doing' was active and enervating, while the thinking seems to be imposed and unclear in many places. While the summaries of Karen Barad's (2012) and other authors' ideas on diffraction and relational disruptions serve as useful reference points for reading, I would have liked to see a clearer analysis of this in the author's own voice. Again, the personal narratives as semi-autobiography shine through when they are present.

The final chapter returns to discuss how people in societies can 'Keep the story going for those who come after', as an urgent call to think and act differently to the established ways. Threading together the feminist and narrative theories previously described, she returns to the analogy of salmon as farmed and free, as controlled or messy in their natural state, as 'ghosts' entangled with trees through nitrogen links (p. 129). It is indeed a cobbled, trying to be feral chapter, which takes the reader outside the expected norms of sequenced narrative but (again) draws too heavily on her favourite and multiple other references.

In conclusion, *Restorying Environmental Education: Figurations, Fictions and Feral Subjectivities* emphasises the importance of putting a filter of narrative over activities in environmental education. My one critique of this book would be that the author relied too much on other people's words in too many places, so the text appeared like a literature review instead of a strong thesis in the author's own right. Overall, however, the summaries of work by important authors and theorists in the field of narrative-based research provide a good basis for further reading. Also, the author's passion and understanding of the field, especially when she moves into her own narration of experiences, is an inspiration for creative teaching with a firm philosophical basis.

References

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International perspectives on the theory and practice of environmental education: A reader

Edited by Giuliano Reis and Jeff Scott, Stringer, 2018

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Education should be about cultivating worthwhile values that a society needs for its citizens to move forward. Environmental Education (EE) is about instilling those values that global citizens require in order to develop and maintain a deep respect for and understanding of our life-giving planet. During these times when the effects of environmental disrespect are ravaging every corner of the globe, we need more and more educators to ambitiously research how effective EE should be practised. *International Perspectives on the Theory and Practice of Environmental Education: A Reader* is a must-read for anyone who cares about EE and research. Unlike many other EE books that are written about specific places or for a particular readership, this edited collection is a text written by environmental educators for environmental educators from all walks of life.

International Perspectives on the Theory and Practice of Environmental Education is effectively divided into four sections that inform the different ways of practising EE in different regions of the world. The first part, entitled 'Environmental Education and Teacher Education', explores the varied ways that EE is practised. There is a range of exciting as well as challenging ways of teaching and learning about the environment that are presented in this section. Preservice teachers integrating reconciliation and EE display the dynamics of teachers as learners in Indigenous communities where they learn a lot about themselves as well as their places. We also encounter teachers of art using their creativity in not only teaching about the environment, but also practising sustainability in recycling their teaching materials. This practice challenges educators to constantly think of ways of not only talking about healing our planet, but also walking the talk. In this same section, teachers critique the use of language in perpetuating an environmental disconnect in their cultures; for example, the teachers help learners identify sets of words that project the male as the dominant trait of 'man-as-mind-as-reason' over the female as the subordinate trait of 'nature-as-woman-as-emotions' (p. 51). We also encounter the practice of EE in new innovative pedagogical practices, such as online teaching. In this section, the authors demonstrate new and innovative ways of practising EE that can be relevant to different parts of the world.