Postmodernism, Education, Environmental Education

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ABSTRACT
Postmodernism rejects rationality, science and the concept of the inevitable progress which would continue to happen in order for humans to dominate over Nature. The notion of value-free, therefore "true" knowledge, produced by the scientific method is also criticized on the ground that knowledge claims are entangled with power interests, a fact that modernism tries to conceal. Therefore Truth becomes meaningless, and even dangerous. Development of EE in Greece during the recent thirty years seems to strongly dispute the idea of progress and brings EE in touch with the postmodern condition by promoting experiential learning. In agreement with the postmodernist agenda dismissing knowledge and truth as narratives connected to the elite establishment working to maintain its power, experiential learning educators accept no global, universal knowledge but only local, particular "knowledge". They prefer voluntarily run EE projects without examinations, tests or externally imposed curricula and pupils that would select their own version of highly individualized or group chosen educational activities in the course of their effort to become citizens who are able to exercise power over their lives.

POSTMODERNISM
Among key features of postmodernism is a deep mistrust about progressivism and its consequent teleologies. Rationality and science are central concepts of the modern project. Their spread and concomitant influence on human conduct was perceived as a procedure through which control would become tighter over developments, inevitable progress would continue to happen from the past, through to the present and on into the future and people would - in a Cartesian way - dominate over Nature(Smart,1992).

Unfortunately - postmodernists argue - those claims are deeply doubted simply because the so called rational civilization cannot erase want, disease, famine, racism, war and the ecological costs of "development". Holocaust was only the proof of modernity's bankruptcy(Lyotard,1992 ;Bauman,1992).

The once uncontested epistemological dogma that scientific method produces value-free, therefore "true" knowledge doesn't seem valid any more. That previous stance is gradually replaced by a new one rejecting universal and ahistorical knowledge-claims in favor of partial, local and specific ones. Furthermore, those knowledge claims are permeated by power interests, which is a fact always tried to be concealed by modernity. Today's world should be experienced (according to postmodernists) without any illusion concerning "legitimate" anchoring points, fixed referents or indisputably grounded beliefs. Moreover, that uncertainty is to be celebrated rather than regretted(Couzens-Hoy,1988). The complexity of myriad postmodern meanings replace the profundity of one deep modernist meaning.

Therefore search for the Absolute Truth which would render the world meaningful and unify experiences, events, meanings into a coherent whole
providing explanations for everything is useless, meaningless, even dangerous. Postmodern world is "pluralistic, split into a multitude of sovereign units and sites of authority, with no horizontal or vertical order" (Bauman, 1992).

That decentring knowledge goes along with decentring individuals. The "homogeneous", unified subject of modernity with a more or less "hard core" consisting of its identity is replaced by a multiple subjectivity constituted through the acquisition of multiple meanings and identities, self is perceived as onion¹ whose layers correspond to "glimpses of past selves" and "whose heart (i.e. identity) will never come to light", simply because the postmodern onion-self cannot have a center of gravity, be it identity, conscious ego or any other permanent and stable anchoring point (Roper and Davis, 1992).

One significant postmodernist feature is arguably the abolition of any type of hierarchy among cultural products, forms and especially of the much cherished distinction between high and popular culture, art and every day life. A "promiscuous eclecticism and mixing of codes" is what comes to replace it (Featherstone, 1991). A "blurring" of boundaries between "high" and "low" (or popular) culture.

Cultivation of desire is the main aim postmodern thinkers put forward as an axis along which sensibilities are (or should be) increasingly attuned to. Pleasure is what it should be pursued through constant and new experiencing, a procedure self justified and intrinsically "right". The modern dictum "search for the rational, argue and cultivate reason" seems to not be able any more to subordinate and constrain that explosion of desire which is perceived as self-

¹ The onion - self metaphor is used in Ibsen's Peer Gynt (1867)
fueled march toward satisfaction.

The ludic element is one of the most controversial postmodern ingredients. The traditional "serious" way of seeing the world, offered by modern science and culture aims to design a "truthful" reality and at the very end to educate (or condition) people into accepting the permanent, unstoppable, uncontested progress world view. Instead of that seriousness, purity, objectivity and progressivism, postmodern approaches adopt insouciance, playfulness, subjectivity (Best and Kellner, 1991). Their doubts of the modern project are expressed sometimes through parody, irony, fun. This ludic element should not be dismissed as a mere capricious or frivolous postmodern attitude. It is a means of challenging the power of totalising discourses (i.e. discourses that present themselves as the final "truth" which explain everything, closed, self referring and self legalizing systems of thought) without falling into another, equally oppressive power discourse (Usher and Edwards, 1996).

Reflexivity is an important postmodern notion not only making one "aware of one's prejudices and standpoints but of recognizing that through language, discourse and text, worlds are created and re-created in ways of which we are rarely aware" (Usher and Edwards, 1996).

Consequently one cannot ignore the fact that we are always subjects within language and within particular historical, cultural and social frameworks. Apart from the problem that we cannot always recognize and take it into account, there is probably a disturbing conclusion coming out of that last notion of reflexivity.

The fact that our subjectivity consists of blocks of culture, history and society,
mediated through language and discourse constructed (but not necessarily
determined) together, implies the end of the modern Myth about the
autonomous and sovereign individual who controls meaning. In fact what
happens is also the opposite. Meaning, to an important degree limits, confines
and defines us.

EDUCATION

Traditionally modernist approaches to education claim that critical
thinking, individual freedom and progress in general would be substantiated
through only thoroughly using the educational vehicle. Modernity deeply
believes that progress in all areas will emancipate "the whole of humanity from
ignorance, poverty, backwardness, despotism... thanks to education in
particular, it will also produce enlightened citizens, masters of their own destiny"
(Lyotard ,1992). The fact is that the project of modernity is interwoven with
education to such a degree that once postmodern aspect is taken into account,
that new perspective calls for a radical reorientation of educational contexts,
methods, aims, strategies.

To the degree that the educational process is directed toward creating
self-motivated, self directing rational subjects, fully autonomous and capable of
realizing their individual potential belongs to the modern perspective.
Nevertheless postmodern emphasis on the subject constructed by discourses
and systems of signs and "decentered" through language, society and the
unconscious critically disputes the existence of the previously described
autonomous subject, intrinsically motivated and willing to follow personal aims
(Lovlie ,1992).
ENvironmental Education

Can the Greek version of EE be considered as part of the postmodern condition? Although that claim cannot be defended easily, there are nevertheless a number of arguments pointing to that direction, therefore this very text should be viewed as an attempt to establish an initial relation between the two.

First, development of EE in recent thirty years seems to dispute at the same time all previous deeply entrenched belief in the idea of progress. Big industrial accidents, major ecological disasters and increasing levels of pollution in cities, seem to suggest for many environmental educators that technical rationality has ultimate limits which cannot be surpassed. Most of the times the deep down final suggestion is that the central axiom of the modern project i.e. "Mastery over Nature" should be abolished. Those arguments match with mainstream postmodern texts challenging the prevailing view of history as progress towards emancipation of human race through the development of reason and scientific knowledge.

Second parameter bringing EE in touch with the postmodern condition is arguably experiential learning. The latter is increasingly the point of focus in many educational settings. At least in Greece is very strongly connected to EE projects to the point that the average EE teacher tends to conflate project method (the Dewey "learning by doing" experiential educational strategy) with EE itself.

Experience is most of the time accorded significance as the really "authentic" part of an individual's relation to life. Experiential learning has been

2 Mean always project method unless otherwise stated.
proposed as a progressive and emancipatory movement within education. It was developed in contrast to the imposition of knowledge from above, into a teacher-centered environment, which it is argued, marginalise the majority of learners by not giving value to their voices and thereby disempower and demotivate them. In this sense experiential learning provides a nexus to understand the shift from cultivating teleological and grounded reason to the cultivation of open ended desire, therefore it can readily be accommodated within the postmodern condition. In agreement with postmodernist denouncing of universal rationality, knowledge and truth as the property of the elite establishment working to maintain its power, experiential learning educators accept no global, universal knowledge but only local, particular "knowledge". Those "knowledges" are all legitimate, generated from a wide number of sources (of equal status though). We all produce those local "knowledges" given the fact that "disinterested" and impartial producers of knowledge do not exist within the postmodern paradigm. In agreement with the above, EE projects in Greece stress the "subjective" element of pupils, encourage them to construct their own images of Greek environmental reality, to film their own versions of ecological abuses, to produce their own "knowledge" through interviewing their grand fathers and grand mothers and advance their restoration skills. Respected by all, scientific books are only one of that myriad of sources making up the mosaic of a reality. The latter cannot claim its superiority over any other - the same way constructed - reality produced by pupils interaction with a field trip, study of old photographs, discussions with specialists or reading literature. The attack launched on high culture and its
privileged position within education is more than obvious. Furthermore there is a valuation of learning from everyday life which becomes the primary source of experiential learning. At the end, the importance of the experiential and even its primacy at the expense of the rational seems to propagate the view that in essence there is no single point of judgement for what is "right" or "wrong" learning. There are simply multiple "realities". Those "realities" are constructed by the consumer of the education/ commodity (learner) rather than the producer (teacher), consequently the latter is given less importance. The concomitant fluidity of the world around us shouldn't be perceived as a threat but as a rather pleasurable situation. The cultivation of desire is to be targeted at all times without a sense of guilt.

The project comes to an end only when participants to it get fed up. The usual ceremony accompanying the end of EE pupil-centered projects, is overloaded with children's highly subjective narratives articulated by means of texts, photographs, maps, videos etc.

Cultivation of desire, pleasure springing out of group-centered constructions of realities, go along with the ludic element (fun) catalysing individual or small group produced "knowledge", at the expense of rational, severe and austere, sober atmosphere prevailing in traditional classrooms. That last but not least postmodern element of Greek EE projects might be the explanation for the overwhelming pressure put upon teachers from students who express their demand as follows: let's do it again!

Postmodernists focus on the local, the specific, the contingent, the micro-level, the small scale. This is indeed the central preoccupation of Greek
educators running EE projects. Local history, specific aspects of the natural or built environment, community work, research work at the grass roots of local communities and a distrust toward mega-projects seem to be inextricably intertwined with EE small scale attempts to construct its "realities". Students then-running their projects- will make inquiries about pollution of the local river, building materials of a small church nearby, sustainable management of a park or forest, recycling in their neighbourhood (Thessaloniki Environmental Education Office, 1997-2000) but will rarely launch a national campaign for the conservation of a wild species or embark on argumentation concerning the European energy policy and subsidies toward renewable energy sources development.

Some postmodernists insist on the micro-level and the local element so fiercely as to make it seem marginal. The same arguments Szatkowski (1992) exposes about drama education seem equally valid about EE. Position in the curriculum, on the timetable, on the agenda of the basic teacher training, in the consciousness of other teachers or pupils and their parents, in all these aspects EE is marginalized. Consequently prestige is low, resources are meagre, teacher's initial enthusiasm is burnt out. The situation of EE in Greece is peculiarly schizoid: the Ministry of Education institutionalized EE as part of primary and secondary school curriculum since 1990. Nevertheless the overwhelming majority of EE projects (more than 2000 all over Greece) cannot be accomodated within school timetable and are still run during afternoons and weekends which are deprived from spare time of both teachers and their pupils (Flogaitis and Alexopoulou, 1991).
The postmodernist argument is carried a step further: Its supporters not only accept this marginalization but find advantages while on the fringes of the timetable. Being out there on the margin of the system doesn't have only negative consequences. In this way we are not identified with some of the central mechanisms of the school system, "we can present the flamboyant-bohemian quality, with no strict parental gaze at our meanderings, closely inspecting the children's so called progress" (Szatkowski, 1992). Periphery of the school system looks more liberal than the center of the curriculum. Teachers working in sometimes awkward situations nevertheless gained very deep insights in setting alternative educational goals. Twenty years of EE projects all over Greece seem to have convinced EE teachers that the above argument is right. If consulted, they would fiercely negate a high status EE traditional lesson, included in the official school timetable and being one of the many compartmentalized aspects of purely rational and "objective" knowledge. They prefer voluntarily run EE projects where examinations and tests are never thought of, externally imposed curricula are perceived as arbitrary and pupils acting as educational consumers would select their own version of highly individualized or group chosen educational activities (Siraj-Blachford, 1997). They obviously feel that despite their mischiefs, they are in a privileged position: they can play - in a relatively safe way - with the school system fundamental values. Play, experiment, transform. There is much potential into that kind of activities.

Postmodern critical pedagogy, according to Giroux (1991) aims at "new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on breaking down disciplinary
boundaries and creating new spaces where knowledge can be produced". That seems to be an issue entangled with power and politics. It is also related to what we call "critical knowledge" (i.e. created by pieces of knowledge collected from different scientific or empirical fields, elaborated further and organized into a personal body of data).

For postmodern educators it is more than clear that both disciplinary boundaries and the critical knowledge creation procedure, are very important ingredients of the struggle to produce knowledge. Furthermore they claim that this very struggle is (or it should be) part of "a broader attempt to create a public sphere of citizens who are able to exercise power over their lives and the social and political forms through which society is governed" (Giroux, 1991).

Thus, pupils inquiries about pollution created by the local industry, use that particular and everyday (of their life) element, as a basis for their learning. They help to legitimatize the voices of those who have been silenced under the until now uncontested narrative of inescapable and divine Myth of Progress. And finally provide the epistemological and empirical means for the citizens to (up to a point) design their own community according to their own partial version of truth.

REFERENCES


Thessaloniki Environmental Education Office, various publications between 1997 and 2000