

# Walking the Path Less Travelled

Collective Steps Towards a Culturally Sensitive Education  
in the Context of Socio-Ecological Transformation



## Why this book?

Following the path we are on as a global society is fairly daunting. Scientific estimations range from a temperature increase of 1.1 to 5.4°C from 2022 to 2100, with fatal consequences you are probably aware of. People need to take their hands off the steering wheel, get out of the car, off the motorway and take a path less travelled, even if the destination is somewhat uncertain. This guide is the result of a cooperation between non-formal educators from the Czech Republic, Germany and Poland, who have already left or are preparing to leave this highway and explore ways to secure a good life for everyone. We collaborated within the Erasmus+ Key Action 2 Project “Partnership for transnational Education for Sustainable Development and Degrowth Education”. The impetus for the project was the idea that culture and the cultural contexts of both learners and educators are important for the implementation of the necessary **socio-ecological transformation (SET)**. This started a search process of about two years, during which we localised and translated educational methods from the degrowth movement for the Czech context, thereby making the methods and theory more accessible for a wider audience. In addition to disseminating knowledge and methods, education in the context of SET aims to empower, motivate and enable people to co-create the society they live in. Those contexts are diverse and have different effects on us. A single method and a single perspective will not help everyone to participate in the co-creation of their surroundings. The methods and perspectives need to be adapted to the respective contexts.

With this anthology we wish to provide a glimpse of a small fraction of different perspectives from people who are working in the field of education for SET. It will be published in four languages: Czech, English,

German and Polish. It is our goal to inspire a broad range of educators to reflect upon their own educational practices in a culturally sensitive way. We hope to stimulate the individual participants and educators to pursue an inclusive path, so that they can walk together towards a just and sustainable future for all.

## How to read this book?

This book is written by a number of different authors, with different perspectives on an education for SET. It aims to be a source of inspiration for educational work. In some parts **we** take a look at certain aspects of educational practice. Elsewhere we take in the bigger picture and present you with a concept. As we change perspectives, readers are encouraged to engage in a similar process. The handbook is divided into three chapters, focusing on different parts of educational practice. The first two chapters will be more theoretical, the third more practical. In the introduction, we want to show readers the relevance and connection of cultural perspectives for education within the context of SET. Afterwards we take a step back and look at the context from another angle, present concepts and raise philosophical questions that can help readers to reflect upon education and its different goals. The educational practice part is about perspectives from practitioners already working in the field, who want to share their knowledge, give tips and guide the reader with reflective questions towards a culturally sensitive education for SET.

Most links were shortened for usability, if people would like to print the publication and still easily access the provided additional information. Please note the upper and lower case.

In this way, depending on each individual's own interest and prior experience, the book can be read selectively, article by article, taking in everything that feels interesting and leaving aside what doesn't fit. Some basic concepts and ideas come up several times –

this shows, that they are important, and relevant also if the topic is being approached from different angles. Repetitions in that sense are ok, as some people might choose to read only selected articles.



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# Connecting Culture, Education and Socio-Ecological Transformation

*Johannes Huth*



**W**hat is the connection between culture and socio-ecological transformation (SET)? And what happens when we look at our educational work through a culturally sensitive lens? What new perspectives emerge and what insights can be drawn from this for our practice as educators in the SET context? These questions were the focus of the project “Partnership for transnational ESD and Degrowth Education”, aiming to reflect upon them together with people from the field, and to combine our perspectives in an anthology. Through the project we hope to offer readers a small handbook that stimulates reflection and can provide inspiration for their own practice. To this end, we look at concrete examples from practitioners, interview people active in the fields, and present methods and considerations for educational work. First, however, it is necessary for us to contextualise: Why is it profitable for educators to don culturally sensitive glasses in order to reflect upon their own educational work?

## Where we are

We are living in an ecosystem which is out of balance. We are in the midst of climate change that threatens the lives of many creatures on the planet. Earth is currently experiencing the largest mass extinction of species in human history. Some scientists describe this era as the Anthropocene, some as the Capitalocene. This means that humans and their actions (within a capitalist system) now have the greatest influence on Earth as a global ecosystem. This impact on the ecosystem has been brought by two intertwined factors: Firstly, the establishment of a global economic system in which differ-

ent actors compete with each other for low prices, innovation and market share. The capitalist market economy, which is currently considered ‘normal’, is based on a logic of expansion, i.e. on the compulsion of the economy to grow indefinitely in order to be able to continue to exist in a state of mutual competition, but also to remain stable as a modern society and not slip into recession. And secondly, technological advances that allow Earth’s natural resources to be used/exploited ever more effectively. This combination inevitably takes its toll on the planet.

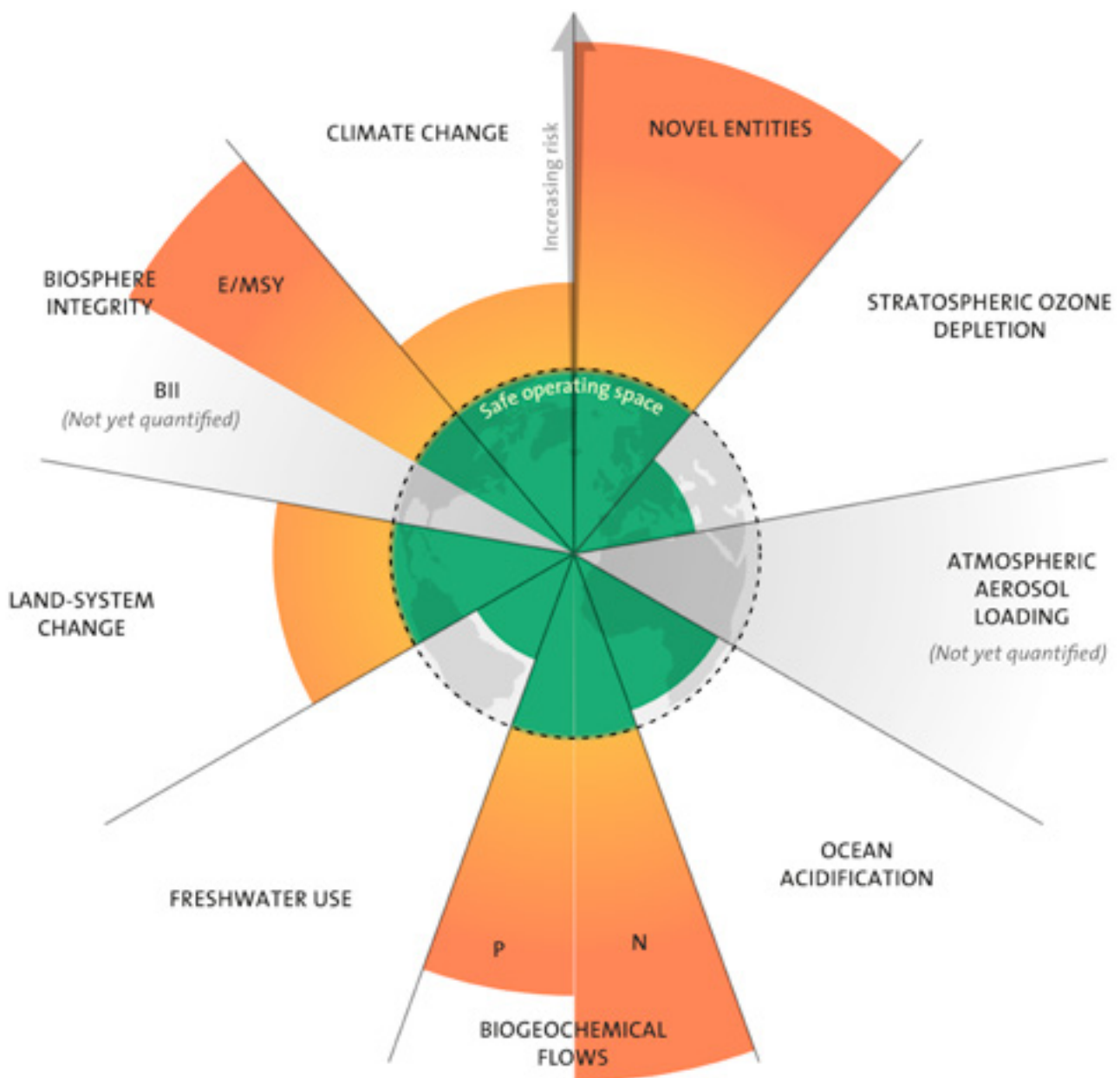


In the meantime, the necessity of “growth” has become so ingrained in the discourse of policymakers that a discussion of its consequences is hardly possible in Europe. At the same time, it has at least been recognised on a global political level since the 1990s that infinite growth cannot have a future on a planet with finite resources. Discussions about a Green New Deal in the US as well as on the European level have attempted to reconcile the compulsion to grow with an acknowledgement of the finite nature of planetary resources. This is to be achieved by covering increasing energy consumption with renewable energies, and thus decoupling growth from the exploitation of natural resources and by dematerialising certain aspects of life by digitisation.

## The promise: We don't have to change

The promise that comes with this is “We don't have to change; we just have to change technology.” As important as technology is in sustaining certain aspects of life in the modern age, it is problematic if we merely rely on it, because advances in the efficiency of technologies rarely lead to less energy consumption.

Example: CRT screens have much higher energy consumption than flat screens. However, more efficient technology has not led to less energy consumption, but rather to screens becoming larger, more accessible to more people, and more devices in general being equipped with a screen that previously had no screen, such as smartphones or smartwatches. The reduced energy consumption has also allowed technologies to become smaller and more mobile, which in turn produces an increased demand for



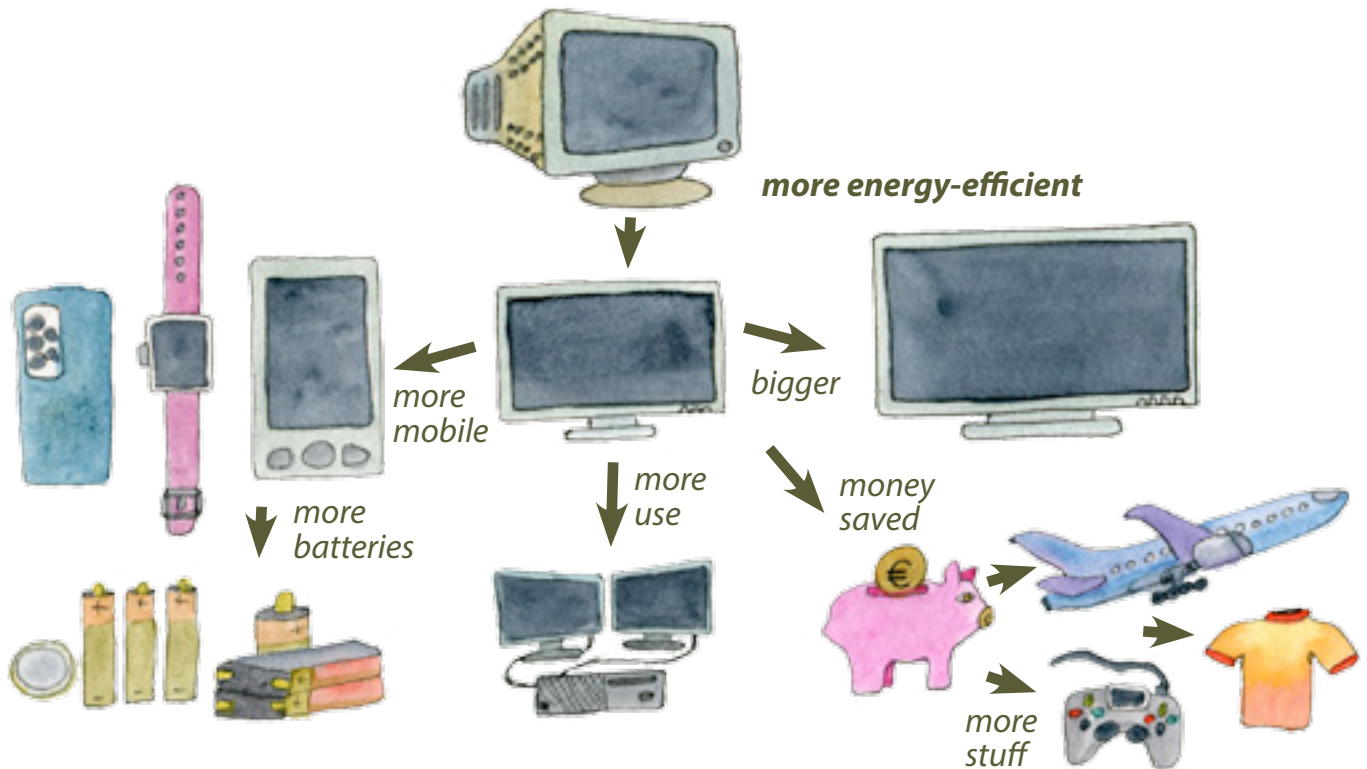
### **Model of the planetary boundaries**

The orange tones show in which aspects the boundaries of the earth have already been crossed  
Credit: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, based on analysis in Persson et al 2022 and Steffen et al 2015.

batteries that are also produced from finite resources and with high energy consumption. Of course, technological innovation in energy efficiency can also lead to reduced energy consumption. In such a case, however, consumers have more money in their wallet at the end of the month, which they will probably spend on other energy consuming goods. Those effects are called rebound effects. The way society is organised

is leading rather to higher CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and more resource consumption. It is therefore a matter of organising ourselves differently to step out of the ever faster spinning hamster wheel in which we are in competition with each other.

Therefore, if we rely on technological solutions alone, we will not be able to meet the challenge posed by the climate crisis.



## Why we need cultural approaches to socio-ecological transformation

In addition to technological approaches, such as the shift to renewable energies, we need approaches that focus on how we deal with technologies, with nature and with our fellow human beings, as well as our systems of production and ownership. These are cultural solutions, because they critically reflect our common coexistence and ask how we actually want to live together. The status quo – the capitalist market economy with its mechanisms of exploitation – has an impact not only on the way the econo-

my is organised, but also on our individual and collective lifestyles: whether it's a car, travel, a smartphone or infinite digital content – those who have it all consider it normal. Those who don't have it consider the pursuit of it normal. Thus, on the one hand, growth is found as a motivator in our minds and, on the other hand, systemic constraints emerge, suggesting certain behaviours and making others more difficult. Education within the context of SET thus always means that we question ourselves, our behaviours,

our desires and dreams, as well as our relationship towards nature and our fellow human beings. We are the content and subject of education itself. And since we all grew up with different starting conditions and live in different environments, this means that we need to think about this cultural dimension in our educational work.

## Diversity as a basic attitude

When it comes to taking our participants' different starting conditions and the different environments they live in seriously, a diversity-conscious attitude is needed. This does not necessarily mean acquiring knowledge about the different cultures from which the participants supposedly originate. Rather, it is about perceiving the participants in their complex relationships. However, this perspective is diametrically opposed to an everyday understanding of culture. For example, in integration discourses or in international youth encounters, the main factor in relation to differences between people is their different cultures (in most cases meaning: countries). In integration discourses, the attempt is made to integrate (supposedly) foreign people (from foreign cultures) into a national culture, so that such people understand the new culture, can orient themselves within it and, if necessary, accept it as a guideline for their action. In youth encounters, the aim is to understand the respective other culture and, if necessary, to establish a new culture together in the short term. However, such an understanding of culture is not sufficient for our work, and creates certain problems.

Such an understanding assumes that there are clearly distinguishable cultures, and that misunderstandings arise when these cultures meet. Cultures are viewed as large collectives with synonyms such as 'countries', 'societies', 'states' or 'religions'. Such an understanding homogenises the living

reality of many people and leads to stereotypes and discrimination. People are thereby made representatives of a certain static culture that guides their actions. In the case of integration discourses, certain groups are therefore allocated different rights, either consciously or unconsciously.

If this understanding of culture is problematic, then which understanding is more suitable for a critical reflection of educational work within the context of SET? Let's begin with a brief definition:

"Culture describes the particular way of life and the corresponding patterns of meaning and sign systems of a group or a society to grasp, whereby such patterns of meaning and sign systems can also be 'materialized', as it were, in objects and structures" (Clarke et al., 1979, p. 41).

With this definition we can perceive culture as active production, in interaction with the environment. Cultures are neither closed nor do they have clear boundaries, but are in a state of permanent flux. At the same time, within cultures there are always dominant/hegemonic forms that go hand in hand with a normative aspect to which the members must conform. This produces inclusions and exclusions through cultural attributes, and makes it easier or more difficult for different people to have access to the different cultures.

Working in a culturally sensitive way means to be aware of the diversity of the participants. Not all people in a country are the same, and we are shaped not only by what is understood as 'normal' within a society, but also by what is expected of us as a woman or a man (or disabled child; Black man; queer Muslim woman etc.). It is of course also affected by our material infrastructure: It makes a difference if we grow up in a big city or in a small village. A culturally sensitive approach also means not unthinkingly assuming the homogeneity of the group in



a 'we all'. It means exploring and reflecting differences and commonalities, and identifying which normalities are lived within the different contexts, making them conscious and thinking about strategies for changing them collectively, towards structures that make it easier to act sustainably and not at the expense of others.

## Diverse subjects

How is my origin connected to my environmental behaviour? The environment and the people surrounding us have an impact on our behaviour in many aspects. How I live, where I travel, what I eat etc. To illustrate this, let's take a more personal and admittedly pointed example: I find it relatively easy to give up meat and other animal products because I live in a big city and have permanent access to restaurants that serve good vegan food. I don't have to explain my actions to my friends, and it is 'normal' that when we eat together we ask about our diet or allergies and cook accordingly. In my home, a village in the south of Germany, there is sometimes no consideration for my diet, nor is there widespread knowledge about vegan cuisine, which is why people find it difficult to cook vegan. Often a vegan diet is also frowned upon, and I am asked why I pursue such a lifestyle and have to justify myself repeatedly. Also, in that region there is a far more limited vegan offer in supermarkets or restaurants. Therefore, while my everyday vegan life in Berlin is mostly carefree, I encounter different obstacles in my home region.

On the level of the cultural practice of cooking, there is a lack of knowledge about vegan diet and preparation. In terms of cultural values, there is a lack of recognition that nutrition is linked to environmental and social problems. Partly there is also the belief that a full meal includes meat, otherwise you would just stay hungry. In addition, it is

'normal' that everyone eats everything, and therefore no one asks whether a certain dish is acceptable. This is how, the same behaviour in different environments comes with different individual costs.

Simply informing people about the social and ecological effects of a meat-based diet is not enough. Instead, we need to look at the various barriers that sustainable behaviour encounters in everyday life. Is there a lack of practical knowledge about vegan cooking or baking? Is there a lack of any offer in supermarkets and restaurants? Is there an absence of a community that doesn't devalue vegan food? Is there a lack of strategies for how to communicate my needs in order to be considered? Or am I afraid that others will question my masculinity if I eat vegan? Because real men eat meat, you know ...

Culturally sensitive educational work within the context of SET needs to recognise individuals as diverse subjects. Each person is diverse and unique. While individuals are influenced and limited by the groups they live in and the positions they are thereby assigned in society and in specific contexts, they nevertheless retain some freedom in shaping their own actions and lives. All of these affiliations, and many more, together make up that person's sense of self and cause them to have certain experiences and not others. The totality of the affiliations and how they are dealt with affect how one thinks and acts, and what ideas are developed about the world and oneself. Thus, one goal of diversity-conscious education might be for people to be able to see themselves as complex, and to be able to conceive others as similarly complex. Diversity-conscious education supports people in dealing with difference and complexity. This also means being able to sense and endure one's own possible insecurities, to get to the bottom of the mechanisms behind them, and to be able to talk about different ideas and understandings.

## The impact of power relations

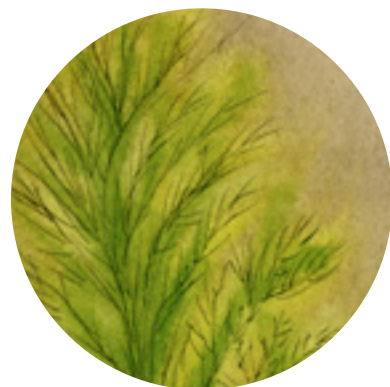
Even though all subjects are diverse and unique, some differences are more significant than others. These differences are not random, and have a history that shapes the normality of today. They are expressed not only in terms of how institutions are structured, what notions of a 'good life' exist, or what is considered right and wrong. They are also inscribed in bodies, and shape how one perceives and feels about the world as someone. If a white heterosexual couple go on a trip around the world, they will encounter the world differently (and people will treat them differently) than a non-white queer couple. If we want to shape the future together, we also need an awareness of our history and its impact on our individual and collective imaginations, so that we do not repeat its injustices.

Some examples of these impacts within the context of SET are:

What is considered sustainable is often characterised by classism. Specifically, this means the vilification of certain social classes (such as low-income families) and the veneration of other classes (such as academics). Primarily, solutions or good examples that address the individual as a conscious consumer are emphasised: The purchase of an electric car and the consumption of organic and fair-trade products are considered the standard for ecological behaviour. These are expensive lifestyles that are therefore only affordable for certain groups. People who cannot afford such lifestyles and hardly fly or don't fly at all are generally not as mobile. They often live more collectively in smaller apartments but are still considered a problematic target group because some do not separate their waste or can't afford to buy organic products in the supermarket. Through certain products, such as an electric car (often as a second or third car), it becomes easy to appear sustainable, as opposed to actual-

ly living sustainably. Those in a position of power are able to determine the issues, and control how sustainability is talked about: This locates the problem in groups other than their own, and presents such individuals as neutral and not involved in it. This is evident when sustainability is addressed with a focus on overpopulation rather than overconsumption, or poverty rather than wealth distribution, or when work is considered only in terms of wage labour, while so-called care work is ignored or not equally valued financially.

This, of course, also has a historical dimension that is easily overlooked by the Global North when it focuses on how it can change society. Solutions such as the Green New Deal are still based on the exploitation of the Global South, where the material resources for the energy transition are mainly located. This dimension is also addressed in the call for a climate justice movement rather than merely a climate movement. The colonial history of exploitation is thus far being neglected or downplayed. Solutions that hide this dimension run the risk of deepening relations of exploitation.



Finally, quite simply, if you are already struggling for material goods and social recognition, you cannot participate in social discourse as much as people from other groups. If you work 40 hours or more per week and have to take care of your

parents or children, when are you supposed to have time to protest or organise a community tool shed for your neighbourhood? If you experience racial profiling, it becomes much more dangerous to participate in a protest. If your perspective and needs are continuously overlooked as part of a community-building process, and it is you who has to keep raising certain issues because otherwise they would be ignored, you probably don't have much desire to participate in the local community garden project.

A culturally sensitive perspective on education for SET needs to broaden the issues it works with. And it must perceive these experiences as both resources and barriers in learning processes, which is an important prerequisite for the successful implementation of education in SET. This includes the participation of learners in the planning and reflection of learning. The complexity of the topics and questions, but also resistance to learning, can be a productive resource within this context.

## Culture of change

If we remain too much on the level of individual subjects in educational work, we run the risk of individualising responsibility and only talking about pseudo-solutions. It is not the products per se that are the problem, but the way they are produced, traded and used. Even if, for example, the electric car is more sustainable than the diesel combustion engine, it would still not be sustainable if everyone owned an electric car. The problem is individual transport or discarding products (or making them non-repairable) instead of repairing them. However, all approaches based on more collective use and shared resources require people to reorganise and redesign their social interaction. To do this, firstly, the collective structures of our coexistence

and their influence on the individual must be made conscious, since often the desire for or pursuit of this lifestyle is experienced and naturalised as one's own decision. In other words, it is human nature. Alternatively, those who do not act accordingly are presented as out of touch with reality. People create their reality in an interwoven relationship of ideas of normality, everyday actions and material conditions. But only those who fundamentally question what is 'normal' can develop new normalities. It is also important to look at how we reproduce these norms in our relationships with each other. What do we praise, what do we condemn, what do we laugh about, how do we express affection, how do we communicate our needs to each other, how do we express respect etc.? It is in social interactions that our values and our notions of the 'good life' are revealed. And it's hard to step out of line and do things differently if we don't support each other.

Secondly, it requires specific testing of the new, and an experience of this new communality. Education can help with both, in the questioning of the normal and the search for common utopias, as well as in the testing of communality and solidarity among ourselves. While criticism of the existing status quo has often already found its way into educational work, social learning does not yet have the status it deserves within the context of education for SET. Skills such as communal decision-making, conflict resolution, making mistakes, staying in relationships, discussing, negotiating, seeking consensus, making compromises etc. are all required in a society that is striving for a climate-smart world. Trying them out or enabling people to implement a sustainable way of living in solidarity within their environments can be an educational goal.

## Summary

Reflection upon the cultural dimensions of educational work within the context of SET has shed light on certain aspects of education:

- The initial conditions and contexts of the participants have an impact on how and whether sustainable strategies can be implemented. It is therefore necessary to work out together with the participants what their personal possibilities for action could look like, and what opportunities and obstacles their personal living environment brings with it.
- With different starting conditions come different possibilities for political participation. If educational work wants to empower diverse groups to participate in the shaping of a sustainable society, it must take power relations into consideration and reflect upon them.
- Culture always takes place between people. In order to enable sustainable behavioural change, group-based approaches are needed which reflect how people can act and live together in solidarity.

A SET towards a climate-just world may sound utopian. But this is a necessary utopia in the face of the climate crisis. If we wish to take a lesson from the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, we can see that people (can) have an influence. However, this needs many people, many perspectives and a great deal of solidarity. And these many people are different and have different possibilities. A reflection upon culture as an active moment in which we develop an awareness of the rules of living together can help us come closer to the aspiration of a good life for all. Our hope is that a culturally sensitive lens can help with this transition, and that educators are inspired to reflect critically upon their work.



## Further Exploration

Video presenting a history of climate science: <https://kurzelinks.de/ClimateScience>

Video explaining the rebound effect: <https://kurzelinks.de/Rebound>

Short video on economic growth: <https://kurzelinks.de/growth>

Santarius Tilman, Digitalization, Efficiency and the Rebound Effect, 2017, blog entry on "Degrowth": <https://kurzelinks.de/DER>

Godfrey, Phoebe et al. Systemic Crises of Global Climate Change: Intersections of Race, Class and Gender, Routledge, 2017.

Moore Jason W. (ed.), Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism, PM Press, 2016.

Clarke John et al., Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview, In: Resistance Through Rituals. Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain, ed. by Tony Jefferson, Routledge, 1989, pp. 41-112.

# Degrowth and the Opportunities for Socio-Ecological Transformation in Post-Socialist Countries

*Jiří Silný*



**A**s degrowth is a movement with its origins in the West, adapting its ideas is not always easy. If we want to use/apply methods and ideas in post-socialist contexts, we need to adapt them to these contexts.

The post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe share a common Central European culture, as well as the four-decade-long experience of the rule of communist parties and their various forms of state socialism. In the 1990s they also experienced the transition to liberal democracy and a capitalist economy. When we consider the ordeals of the Second World War, we see several very significant social changes taking place within a historically short period. Legal systems, social institutions, economic models, ideologies, demography and individual human destinies were all in a process of continual change. Each such change meant gains and benefits for some parts of society and problems and losses (economic, power, loss of prestige) for other social groups or classes. This is one of the reasons why post-socialist societies are so deeply divided. Other characteristics of these societies include pragmatism and survival strategies, a lack of trust in the political representation (“us and them”) and ideologies. As these upheavals usually came from outside (German aggression during World War Two, the subsequent sphere of influence of the Soviet Union and the influence of Western countries after 1989 and the shock therapy ordained by them), a significant part of the population has a natural distrust towards influences from “elsewhere” (currently the EU).

Western Europe has historically been at the core of economic and political develop-

ment, while the Eastern European countries are semi-peripheries. They are already profiting to a certain extent from their proximity to major industrial countries, and their EU membership. Nevertheless, at the same time they are in a dependent relationship, and the gap in living standards is only slowly closing, if at all. Some authors even see a parallel between their situation and the neo-colonial system.

- Švihlíková Ilona, *Jak jsme se stali kolonií*, Rybka Publishers, Praha 2015
- Olex-Szczypowski, Matthew, *EU's secret empire. Wealthy states treat Eastern Europe as a colony*, „UnHerd”, 2021: <https://kurzelinks.de/EUSE>

In the days of state socialism, the goal was to “catch up and overtake the West”. While they succeeded in terms of social security and armaments, they weren't so successful with regard to consumer goods and especially not in democratic participation. The 1990s brought about the ‘transformation or transition’ of post-socialist countries. In this return to capitalism and liberal democracy, often referred to as a “return to Europe”, the goal didn't change to a large degree: To this day it is still to catch up with Western Europe. The French economist Thomas Piketty demonstrated why this process has not been successful – the outflow of resources is higher than the gains from EU funding, which are meant to even out the differences.

- Piketty Thomas, *The year of Europe*, „Le Monde” 2018: <https://kurzelinks.de/monde>

It was difficult for post-socialist countries, which only achieved full political sovereignty in the 1990s, to give up a part of this newly-found sovereignty to EU accession. The relationship of most post-socialist countries to the EU is ambivalent mainly for political and economic reasons. Post-socialist countries are wary of issues such as the migration policy or ecological transformation (European Green Deal). The fear is that their implementation will lead to austerity. Post-socialist countries are still lagging behind in economic and social areas, or are even at the risk of falling further behind. Even though more and more people perceive the growing ecological threat, a gap remains between Western and post-socialist countries in terms of taking steps in this field. Post-socialist countries share this situation partly with the countries of Southeast Europe. Climate change is perceived as a lesser threat in countries which are worse off economically, where people are primarily interested in their material situation.



During the 1960s and 1970s, it seemed that new generations in Western countries, due to their historical advantage, capitalist efficiency and a virtually endless supply of cheap labour and resources from former colonies, were oversaturated with consumerism and shared new values. At this time, the ideas of degrowth and the need for a different economic develop-

ment began to appear, and the environmental movement was born. It eventually gained political influence, reaching the level of the current participation of the Green party in the German and Austrian governments (at the cost of abandoning its more radical stances). But it is due to the deepening crises that 'societies of surplus' currently face the threat of a shocking and long-forgotten lack of basic life needs such as energy and foodstuffs. The question remains as to whether post-socialist countries will be better equipped to meet the forthcoming changes thanks to their experience of transformations and scarcity. Or will the frustrations resulting from failed expectations and a lack of trust in the political system cause the political system to break down? We cannot reasonably expect that social issues will take a back seat for most people in the near future. It is of crucial importance to communicate how the upcoming transformation can improve the current social situation.

In reality, degrowth and fundamental socio-ecological transformation constitute an even more radical change than the previous two transformations. Capitalism and socialism evolved within the context of industrial civilisation, which had faith in the possibility to extract natural resources for free forever. They counted on an unlimited growth of knowledge, technology and prosperity.



Radical change does not necessarily have to mean a complete negation of what preceded it. Technologies will not save us, but can be used more fairly, sustainably and responsibly. Building on the positive experience from the past and existing alternatives, and developing them in the desired direction is essential. Examples of good practice are critical for learning. It is necessary to point out that potential restrictions in one aspect (material consumption) can be compensated for in other fields (social security, inclusive decision making etc.)

The language we use is also essential (see as well Language Matters, p. 32). Degrowth is not the best term, as it is negative and doesn't express a positive vision of a new society. The term socio-ecological transformation is too abstract and may evoke the less than successful transformation from socialism to capitalism. Words like socialism or communism may also be discouraging due to their historical connotations. Such terms are helpful for theoretical discussions, but we should describe our desired changes and how we want to achieve them for educational and organisational purposes.

We need to reach and involve the broadest possible spectrum of people from different social groups. Due to the character of social processes, it is impossible to plot only one correct path to change. We need to advocate and attempt change on various levels – from the personal to the global – without knowing what will work. Where possible, it is best to build on traditions and existing behavioural patterns such as subsistence economy and food sovereignty, cooperatives or neighbourhood help. We also need to work with examples of alternatives, not just from the West but also from the Global South.

- Gagyi Agnes, *Solidarity Economy and the Commons in Central and Eastern Europe*, „LeftEast“, 2019: <https://kurzelinks.de/SEC>



Today, even in post-socialist countries, many already existing initiatives and projects are exploring alternative models of coexistence and economy, and there are countless more worldwide. The critical question remains as to whether and how these streams can create an enormous flood of civilisational change. To achieve this, we need to form alliances and networks and assert political pressure, because we will not be successful without substantive local, national and international policy changes. To start with, we can work on developing existing progressive policies such as the following:

- progressive taxation and the abolition of tax havens
- ecological taxes and tariffs
- developing public assets (public education, health and social care, transportation, information, infrastructure, water sources etc.) and defending against privatisation
- supporting a local, municipal social and solidarity economy (tax relief, non-commercial loans, legalisation of local currencies and moneyless exchange)
- supporting public participation
- prohibiting speculative trade with commodities and financial derivatives
- thorough implementation and monitoring of ecological standards, work and social regulations by businesses
- improvements in educational systems towards a better understanding of socio-ecological transformation.



# A limited shortlist of topics, resources and inspirational examples

## **Economic democracy and cooperatives**

Ed Mayo, A short history of co-operation and mutuality, Co-operatives UK, 2017:

<https://kurzelinks.de/Mayo>

Mondragon Corporation:

<https://kurzelinks.de/MOC>

David Schweickart, After Capitalism, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002

## **Employee Share Ownership**

European Federation of Employee Share Ownership:

<http://www.efesonline.org/>

<https://kurzelinks.de/TEE>

## **Social solidarity economy**

Nadia Johanisova, Eva Fraňková, Eco-Social Enterprises, in: C. Spash (ed.) Routledge Handbook of Ecological Economics: Nature and Society. London: Routledge 2017, p. 507-516.

Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy:

<https://ripess.eu/en/>

The Social Solidarity Economy resource website: <https://kurzelinks.de/SSE>

## **Care Economy**

International labour organization:

<https://kurzelinks.de/ILO>

Nancy Fraser, Contradictions of Capital and Care, „New Left Review“ 2016, No. 100:

<https://kurzelinks.de/CapitalCare>

Frigga Haug, Die Vier-in-einem-Perspektive.

Politik von Frauen für eine neue Linke, 4.

Auflage, Argument, Hamburg 2022.

## **Fair Trade**

World Fair Trade Organisation:

<https://wfto.com/>

Fair Trade International:

<https://www.fairtrade.net/>

## **Universal basic income**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal\\_basic\\_income](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_basic_income)

## **Alternative financing**

David Bollier, Pat Conaty, Democratic Money and Capital for the Commons: Strategies for Transforming Neoliberal Finance Through Commons-Based Alternative. A Report on a Commons Strategies Group Workshop in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015:

<https://kurzelinks.de/Commons>

Participatory budgeting:

<https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>

Community-supported agriculture:

<https://kurzelinks.de/CSAgri>

## **Local economies and new technologies**

Programme Autoproduction et Développement Social:

<http://www.padesautoproduction.net/>

Anja Höfner, Vivian Frick (eds.), Was Bits und Bäume verbindet. Digitalisierung nachhaltig gestalten, Oekom, München 2019:

<https://kurzelinks.de/bitsbaeume>

FAB City: <https://fab.city/>

## **Citizens' assemblies and citizen media**

<https://citizensassemblies.org/>

<https://thecitizensmedia.com/>

## **Public commons**

<https://futureispublic.org/global-manifesto/>

## **Humanist economy models**

International Network for a Human Economy:

<https://inheasia.org/>

Michael Alber, Parecon. Life after Capitalism, Verso, London, New York 2003:

<https://kurzelinks.de/lifeaftercapitalism>

Wellbeing economy: <https://weall.org/>

Buen Vivir: <https://kurzelinks.de/buenvivir>

# The Relationship between Humans and Nature and the Role of a Holistic Approach in Education

*An Interview between Maroš Prčina and Ľuboš Slovák*



**MP** Could you give us a short introduction to the perspectives on the humanity-nature relationship? Is humanity still a part of nature, even if many people think of us as superior to nature? Is the dichotomy between humans and nature just an artificial and obsolete construct?

**LS** As you rightly suggest, we have never been truly separate from the rest of nature in any fundamental sense. Most human societies in history were aware of that. We in so-called Western civilisation have been convincing ourselves otherwise for a long time. However, at least since Darwin we have re-discovered that we are part of a vast evolutionary kinship.

Without doubt we have some quite unique properties and abilities, such as the capacity for abstract thought or immense skills at making and using tools, but these are of such importance only from our own perspective. An eagle would not find them so impressive, and might in turn be scornful of our inferior sense of vision. Human supremacy is, I am convinced, merely a chauvinistic assumption stemming from a strongly biased view of the world.

So yes, the strict dichotomy between humans and nature is very misleading and in fact dangerous. The crucial problems that almost always accompany this dichotomy are the assumption of a fundamental difference and the positing of an opposition between humans and the rest of nature. Because this is not only about concepts, but also about their consequences. We enact this biased worldview in our everyday lives, in all the workings of our civilisation. We might say

that although humans are not separate from nature in principle, we set ourselves apart systematically by acting according to this worldview. For a long time we have understood nature as an adversary that we must subdue, or as a wasteland that we should transform by our labour. We have built our civilisation upon these beliefs. But the price of this so-called 'progress' has been and still is immense, though we often do not see it, since it is being paid in apparent silence by the other myriad beings with whom we share this world. In silence, because we have either become deaf to their voices or have actively silenced them. And even now, when we ourselves are having to deal with the long-postponed consequences, most of what we can think of are 'technical' fixes, be it of technology, economy or society. However, I am convinced that without addressing our underlying alienation from the rest of the more-than-human world, we will merely appease our feeling of growing unease and postpone the worst impacts on ourselves, while continuing to devastate life all around us, obscuring it even more.

**MP** Where did the separation between humanity and nature originate? And what are the prospects for the evolution of this relationship?

**LS** This is an immensely complex question. My answer will hence be simplifying and superficial. Take it rather as merely hinting at topics that have been discussed over thousands of pages.

I think that the separation itself evolved over time, and various factors have pushed this evolution in various directions. The ones I will mention I see as especially important in developing and reinforcing our present alienation.

One of the deepest roots can be found in the development of the first cities, whose

walls separated humans not only from other humans but also from the rest of nature. A completely new and different lifestyle also developed within cities. Another important factor was the emergence of the Abrahamic religions, which viewed humans as either stewards or even rulers of the rest of creation. Even more consequential was the centuries-long systematic subduing, or rather annihilation, of other beliefs and worldviews, most of them animistic, by Christianity. Within non-religious thought, Western philosophy, dating from its ancient Greek roots, established the mind as something not only exclusive to humans but also uniquely suited to knowing the true essence of things. This emphasis on rational intellect strengthened over time, and today rationalism is basically considered the norm of any thinking. Another aspect is the division of the world into the material and immaterial/spiritual (from which the dualism of nature and culture is derived), which was reinforced by Descartes and then embedded in the foundations of modern knowledge. Another factor is the specific Western merging of science and technology that enabled the overwhelmingly rapid technological development of the last centuries, and which is ever increasingly widening the 'practical' gap between our technologised lives and the rest of nature. And technocratic systems, both capitalist and socialist, in turn normalised attitudes that view everything (both human and non-human) only in terms of its instrumental value, that is as a means to our ends.

And to your second question: judging from the past two millennia and how our separation and alienation from the rest of nature is ever deepening, today mainly through the reinforcement of technocracy and neoliberal capitalism, we might not see many prospects for significant change. On the other hand, taking into account the context of the entire history of humankind, our current worldview is actually rather the excep-

tion than the rule. Most humans throughout history had completely different relations towards the rest of the world. And many of these other cultures were much more sustainable than ours. My hope is probably that we will cast off our arrogant and short-sighted belief that we know best and learn from these other cultures, or at least from what little we have not yet subdued or erased. We should be careful not to bluntly appropriate or mechanically copy other traditions, as is often the case in our culture, but we can certainly learn and find inspiration. We need to find our own way back to the more-than-human community of life.

## Overcoming alienation

**MP** Why do you think it is important to think and learn about the relationship between humanity and nature?

**LS** Although thinking is undoubtedly important, we cannot simply learn about some 'right' relationship of humans to the rest of nature. You used the word 'relationship', which is precisely what it needs to be. But a relationship cannot be learned, it must be lived. As I have said, we have reduced most other beings (and in fact ourselves as well) to the status of resources. Even if we go hiking in the mountains, we mostly see the world around us as a background and a resource – it offers us pleasant vistas, fresh air, it calms us down, or some suddenly appearing wild animal might amuse us. We say that we like or even love nature, but what we mostly mean is that we love being in nature. Loving someone is a far deeper, more delicate and difficult thing. It requires personal knowledge, attention, respect and care. It requires time and effort. A relationship is an ever-evolving process, and when it is not tended to it fades away. We can easily see this in relationships with other human beings. It is the same with any and all of our nonhuman kind.

I think we must re-establish our broken relationships with our fellow nonhumans, and with the land as a whole. That can only be accomplished in specific places and with specific beings. In other words, we must become indigenous again.

**MP** How would you imagine a process of strengthening a holistic approach to the humanity-nature relationship in the educational process towards socio-ecological transformation?

**LS** I think that the most important thing to really transform our society towards a properly ecological one is to develop new ways of relating to all beings, both human and nonhuman. In order to achieve that, we need to transcend both our conceptual and our practical separation from the rest of the more-than-human world. These two dimensions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, so it is not enough to work only on the conceptual level (as many philosophers have been attempting for decades) without changing our attitudes, behaviour, the economy and our relations towards others, nor is it enough to focus entirely on the practical dimension (e.g. to move to the countryside and live simply, but without changing our thinking and language). Moreover, we must realise that in both these dimensions our alienation goes very deep, and it is embedded in nearly all aspects of our lives. The intricate webs of hidden consequences in every choice of consumption we make are one of many manifestations of this alienation.

Therefore, more practically, I think that truly transformational education should work in a synergistic way with three areas: experience/practice, thinking and action. And this needs to be rooted as much as possible in a specific place, ideally in a place with which the students might develop a relationship.

Within the realm of experience, we need to cultivate new ways of relating to the more-

than-human world, both more generally – how we speak about it (or rather to it, as David Abram suggests), how we practically engage with it, and more particularly – through developing meaningful personal relationships with other fellow beings. In order to do this, we also need to rediscover and recultivate our openness and perceptiveness towards the more-than-human. This also means enlivening our senses and healing the rift between our minds and our animal, sensuous bodies, a rift that is just the inner counterpart of the outer separation between us and the rest of nature.

Secondly, we need to cultivate deep critical thinking which continually questions our assumptions, concepts and language, and also to develop and adopt new concepts and language.

Finally, all this cannot be limited just to our own personal lives, it must be realised within both the human and the nonhuman community. It must be complemented by education towards an active role within society, making the personal transformation also a societal one. For example, this also means being able and willing to stand up for our fellow beings who suffer from oppression and exploitation by our society. This is a gesture of care and respect, an active, practical way of realising relations and relationships.



These three dimensions are intertwined within deep ecology as conceived and practised by Arne Naess and others, so we might use it as a kind of framework for our educational practice.

## Rebuilding relationships

**MP** Can you describe the obstacles that might possibly arise when trying to overcome the alienation between humans and nature through education?

**LS** Well, there are plenty, unfortunately. First, what I have been describing so far is probably a task too large and complex for most non-formal educational programmes and courses. I think that it can be broken down into smaller steps. However, I also consider it very important that we as educators have the overall objective in mind even when focusing just on some partial goals. It is really important that we develop all this by ourselves. We cannot just 'teach' something that we ourselves have 'learned', as is often the case with conventional knowledge. We should strive to explore alienation and ways to re-establish our relationship to the more-than-human world by ourselves, ideally in our daily lives. That might be a big obstacle in itself. Too big a task not only for the students, but for us as well. However, what can help is to view it as a process which we can invite the students into. To walk the path together. In this sense, it might be somewhat easier than first of all learning all that you need to teach, as in formal education. We just need to be good companions in the transformational process. After all, we are all in this mess together.

One obstacle, though, weighs on my mind often and heavily. Today, our alienation from the rest of nature is so pervasive. It is reinforced by technologies that accompany us literally every minute of our lives. We are seduced by and saturated with the need – satisfaction cycle of consumption. It is then not only hard to break out of it, but most people do not feel any need to do so at all, being fully contented with their way of life. This is also reinforced and reproduced by

the political-economic system in which we are strongly embedded, so even when we want to live differently, we are often practically unable to, but that is a whole other issue. And even though on one hand I am convinced that this alienation is detrimental to all of us, not only practically but also physically, mentally and spiritually, at the same time I sometimes have to doubt it, feeling that it might be too presumptuous to think so. We should not force anything on anyone, even if we feel that it might be right. What we can probably do is to probe our seeming sense of satisfaction, and provide opportunities for experiences that might resonate with something deep but forgotten in people. Maybe they will resonate and stir something up. And if not, well ... never mind.

**MP** What other steps would you recommend to build a better and stable connectedness with nature?

**LS** These changes and practices that I have been describing must become a new personal and societal norm in order to transform both our lives and society. We need to make them part of our everyday lives, to gradually learn to live differently. It takes a lot of time. Even one good deep relationship takes a lot of time and effort, and we need to transform all our relationships and develop new ones. We also need to change how we perceive the world. That is not an easy task, but it is very rewarding and healing. It's not only the rest of nature that's suffering from the consequences of our alienation. We are too, even though we might not be consciously aware of that. Renewing our connectedness to the more-than-human world means developing truly reciprocal relations with it. Because the rest of nature is ceaselessly offering us an exuberance of gifts, and we need to be aware of that and express gratitude. Such reciprocity is immensely nourishing and healing, on both personal and societal levels.

## Incite wonder and desire

**MP** Do you have any other advice for people working in the field of (non-formal) education? How could they approach learners?

**LS** The experience of such education will most probably be only a small part of anyone's life. However, the attendant transformation must eventually embrace all our lives. So, I guess the most important thing is to try to evoke in learners the desire, motivation and empowerment to adopt the things that they've learned and experienced in their everyday lives, to continue with the transformational work by themselves. To this end we might incite their sense of wonder (to fuel motivation), create an opportunity for transformational experiences (to stimulate desire), and do all of this in an equal, respectful and democratic environment (to cultivate a feeling of empowerment).

**MP** Would you recommend any literature (articles, books, manuals, vlogs etc.) that might be useful for trainers and lecturers in this field of the relationship between humanity and nature?

### For practice:

- books and online lectures by David Abram (or even better, attend a workshop with him)
- Joana Macy's **The Work That Reconnects**: books **Active Hope** (with Chris Johnstone, 2022), **Coming Back to Life** (with Molly Young Brown, 2014)
- Young, Jon; Haas, Evan; McGown, Ellen, **Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature**. OWLink Media, Shelton, Washington 2008.



### For thought:

- works by Arne Naess, David Abram, Andreas Weber, Freya Matthews, Stephan Harding, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Bill Devall, George Sessions

### For action:

- The ULEX project (<https://ulexproject.org/>)
- self-organisation manuals and booklets often published by various activist collectives (e.g. in Czech Republic one good work aimed at climate justice has been published by Limity jsme my: <https://kurzelinks.de/limity>)
- Wild pedagogies approach to education (<https://wildpedagogies.com/>)
- Magazines and journals: Emergence Magazine (and its podcast), The Trumpeter, Orion

# Some Ideas on Human Nature and Living Together

*Jiří Silný*





**I**t is obvious that the dominant form of human civilisation (i.e. the Western model) is reaching the limits of the planet, and is destroying livelihoods through injustice and inequality. The important question is as to whether we as people are able to live together without destroying our environment and ourselves. Whether our nature is compatible with a sustainable model of inhabiting planet Earth, or whether (as some believe) we as species are an error of nature, which is condemned to doom.

If we look back, we can find examples of very different ways in which human communities have organised themselves. It seems that this flexibility and adaptability is one of the important elements of humans' extraordinary successful development. In this great variety we can find cultures based on cooperation and sharing, and others that are highly competitive and aggressive. Some cultural anthropologists and historians have shown that "more humane", "friendly" and "cooperative" ways of living together are more common throughout the long history of mankind, and are more sustainable.

- Fromm, Erich, *The Anatomy of human destructiveness*, Rinehart and Winston, New York, Holt, 1973.
- Graeber, David; Wengrow, David, *The Dawn of Everything. A New History of Humanity*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2021.
- Bregman, Rutger, *Humankind. A Hopeful History*, Little, Brown and Company, 2021.

There is a stream of new approaches to understanding the rise of humankind and even

the functioning of nature in a way, which seems to be more cooperative and symbiotic than the erroneous interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution as a fight for survival. Peter Wohlleben gained renown by writing about the mutual help provided by trees. Neurobiology has discovered "mirroring neurons" in our brain, which help with empathy, learning and cooperating. Anthropologist Christopher Boehm explores cooperative behaviour among primates, and shows the origins of moral behaviour. Sociologist Hartmut Rosa criticises the acceleration of modern life, suggests slowing down, supports degrowth, speaks about resonance between persons and between people and nature. A Swiss sociologist popular in German speaking countries, Harald Welzer, thinks we should learn how to stop and think of how to develop a utopia.

- Wohlleben, Peter, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, translated by J. Billinghamurst, HarperCollins, 2017.
- Bauer, Joachim, *Warum ich fühle, was du fühlst*
- *Intuitive Kommunikation und das Geheimnis der Spiegelneurone*, Heyne, 2006.
- Boehm, Christopher, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior*, Harvard University Press 2001.
- Boehm, Christopher, *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Altruism, Virtue, and Shame*, Basic Books 2012.
- Rosa, Hartmut, *Resonance: a Sociology on our Relationship to the world*, translated by J. Wagner, Wiley, 2019.
- Welzer, Harald, *Nachruf auf mich selbst*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2021.
- Welzer, Harald, *Alles könnte anders sein. Eine Gesellschaftsutopie für freie Menschen*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2020.

Others explore traditional ways of living together, which still exist in cultures of the Global South or are at least remembered. Well known is the concept of “ubuntu” of South African origin, which means “I am because we are, we are because you are” – displaying the dialectics of the individual and the community. The community can be healed, even if a member commits a crime. On this basis, the commissions of truth and reconciliation were established after the end of apartheid (and similarly in Rwanda after the genocide). Another interesting example is the philosophy of “orang basudara” developed in the Moluka archipelago, where more than one thousand islands were home to about 50 ethnic groups speaking 100 languages, who were able to coexist peacefully. The First Nations of Abya Yala (what we call America) developed the art of good living (buen vivir) – caring for relations in the community, and for sustainable living with the gifts of Mother Earth (Pachamama). This does not in any way mean that traditional cultures have lived together peacefully and sustainably all the time, but it shows that it is possible to develop such ways of living which secure long-standing stability.

- Life-Enhancing Learning Together (Especially contributions from Wahu Kaare, Rogate Mshana, Carla Natan)
- <https://oikotree.net/resources-publication/>

In the European tradition we have the old concept of commons, which many are discussing once again and which deserves extra exploration, but I will focus here on the less common idea of conviviality.

The French philosopher and cook Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote about “la con-

vivialité” in his famous book “Physiologie du gout”, published in 1825. Conviviality for him is a way of eating and living together and sharing the good things of life in a spirit of friendship and kindness. We can sense traits of French culture here, but the community based around shared food has deep and old meaning within human development. By using fire for cooking food, a new social behaviour and structure emerged: hunters and gathers didn’t eat the food where they found it, but brought it to a common fire-place – and developed rules for sharing.

In 1973 Ivan Illich, an Austrian theologian and social critic who lived most of his life in the Americas, wrote a small but very influential book about conviviality as a social concept which represents an alternative to capitalist industrial society. In this he was influenced by Marxism, Catholic social teaching, liberation theology, and the life practice of the poor in Latin America. Illich held the view that industrial civilisation and economic exploitation leads to dehumanisation, and harms relations between humans and towards nature. He was very critical of modern institutions like schools or medical systems, as well as of the overwhelming power of “experts”. Conviviality by contrast means to abandon “industrial productivity” and to orient the society towards goals of good living together, using the knowledge and abilities of each and every member. Men and women must not become servants of tools, of the system, we must not become objects. Tools for conviviality are all instruments, institutions, ways of organising, which are used “in accordance with life”.

Illich was in contact with figures such as Paolo Freire and André Gorz, the first scholar to speak about degrowth, and even today Illich’s ideas are discussed in the degrowth movement and beyond. In 2013, a group of mostly French intellectuals led by the philosopher Alain Caillé published the “Convivial-

ist Manifesto. A Declaration of Interdependence”, followed by the “Second Convivialist Manifesto. Towards a Post-Neoliberal World”. The starting point for convivialism is the fact that humans are social beings and live on a planet with limited resources. Based on different religious, philosophical and political traditions, convivialism develops an ideology of common humanity, the dignity of each individual, solidarity and nonviolent resolution of conflicts.

- Ivan Illich 1973, *Tools for Conviviality*
- *Convivialist Manifesto 2014, A declaration of interdependence*
- Convivialist International 2020, *The Second Convivialist Manifesto: Towards a Post-Neoliberal World*

In the 1970s some people came to see the dangers for the survival of humankind clearly. Since then the situation has become much more grave, but the responsible and powerful who rule the states and large institutions are still not acting accordingly in order to prevent the worst. This is the reason why radical movements like Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion are emerging, and more radical thinkers are analysing the situation.

Some speak about ‘Inevitable Near-Term Human Extinction’ (INTHE) as a fact. Some see the collapse of our current civilisation as inevitable, but think there is still a way to survive, such as the “deep adaptation”, formulated by the British environmentalist Jem Bendell. Bendell believes that resilience

- Jem Bendell 2018, *Deep adaptation*; <https://kurzelinks.de/deepadaptation>

will not be enough, and that we will have to abandon many activities and conceptions, while we will have to re-adopt some abandoned skills and ways of life. In his view we will need to reconcile ourselves to our new situation without panicking, and accept that we don’t know if we can succeed.

Another interesting thinker, the Italian Ugo Bardi, a natural scientist and member of the Club of Rome, works with the concept of the “Seneca cliff”, meaning that growth is slow but collapse is rapid – like in the case of so called “tipping points”. However, he sees all development as a series of collapses and new beginnings, and looks for ways of learning not to make the same mistakes.

- Ugo Bardi, *Before the Collapse. A Guide to the Other Side of Growth*



# How to Have Fun without Money

*Wojtek Mejor*



**A**fter working with groups concentrating on conceptual work, discussion, brainstorming and writing things on flipcharts for many years, I timidly started to shift my attention away from the enclosed space of the workshop room. This is not to say that I abandoned all my previously used tools, but rather that I found that stepping out of the busy hive of words and human interactions could give me a fresh point of view and a broader picture of whatever the subject matter may be.

Movement, smell and touch evoke memories of the body which may not be so easily accessible during a conversation. Memories are stored in different parts of the brain, and creating diverse multisensory experiences can trigger these memories, transform them and verify them against new experiences. This is why, whenever I can, I try to take participants outdoors and help them experience a world beyond the sphere of human relations. Not in order to escape these relations and entanglements, but rather to reconnect them with the ecosystems we're embedded in.

This is especially important in a time when rapid technological development is creating tools that capture our attention and force us to focus on screens rather than sensory experience. The resulting social acceleration is often detrimental to our health and wellbeing.

Here I present a selection of thoughts and ideas that guide me when I'm attempting to introduce participants to an open-ended process of discovery and reflection. For the sake of writing, I found it easiest to divide them into small sections, but you can use them in any combination that suits your context.

## Calibration

The first step before engaging in any sensory activity in- or outdoors is to calibrate the only direct tool you have for experiencing the world – your body. Start by focusing on your breath, the sounds around you, and the sensations inside and outside of the body. When you become aware of your own mental and physical state, only then you can start taking in and processing stimuli from the outside world with deeper attention. Simple exercises borrowed from mindfulness, meditation and somatic bodywork can be very useful and help you become more sensitised to detail, and enhance your awareness of the countless nuances and wonders of your surroundings.

## Speed Matters

If you try cycling down a narrow, winding path at high speed you may experience what is called "tunnel vision" – in order to keep up with the challenge your brain has to stringently select the information to analyse, so you stop paying attention to details and focus only on the small area in front of you, just enough to react to the next turn and obstacle. The higher the speed, the higher the focus and the smaller the area you can take in.

Conversely the slower you walk, the more details and different layers you can appreciate in your surroundings. In fact, in many cases the best you can do is to stand still or sit down on a tree stump and wait. I promise that sooner or later you will notice something that would have been impossible for you to observe while in motion. Varying speed is a great tool for sensitising yourself to nuances of perception and to different layers of the landscape – geological formations, plants, birds, insects. You may need a bicycle to watch the landscape change, but to observe a small beetle you will have to crouch down on the ground.

## Getting Lost

Distinguished traveller and natural navigator Tristan Gooley (2018), despite having explored the most remote parts of the world and having crossed the Atlantic singlehandedly by both boat and plane, claimed that he became increasingly aware of an important thing that was missing from his ambitious endeavours. "Some of the wonder had gone from the journeys. I wasn't experiencing the fascination I had as a child." He tried to rediscover that lost simplicity. "I decided to try and cross a couple of miles of English countryside, only this time leaving all the kit at home. No screens or dials, no map, no compass, no GPS, I just used nature as my guide. And suddenly it was back, that feeling of wonder!"

For me this brief story illustrates the quality I'm looking for when I try to engage people with their surroundings. It is about discovering the feeling of adventure in whatever activity you may be involved in. About stepping out of your comfort zone and opening up to the discomfiting possibility of getting lost. As acclaimed author Rebecca Solnit (2006) puts it, when you get lost "the world has become larger than your knowledge of it". And this is precisely when a window opens and you get your chance to learn something new and experience things that you weren't aware of. This doesn't necessarily mean you have to travel to unknown areas of the country – that would be too easy. Instead, you can challenge yourself and try to search for this feeling and quality in your own backyard or the small, abandoned plot of land down the street.

## Wilderness

I find a special value in exploring wild, unmanaged places, where I can witness autonomous natural processes, not directly affect-

ed by human agency. Places that manifest natural succession, even if only at the early stages. The point for me is that these places remain untouched for a number of years and start to lead a life of their own. Without a plan and design we can witness and learn, even on a small scale, how the world works without humans.

These don't necessarily need to be remote natural reserves, but can just as well be the abandoned plot of land that I mentioned before. As Berlin-based researcher and author Ingo Kowarik (2013) points out, "urban ecosystems may achieve a high level of self-organisation and thus provide chances for urban people to experience natural processes in their own neighbourhoods." There can be surprisingly wild patches of land hidden at the fringes of overcrowded, concrete-laden suburbia, sometimes even very close to the centre.

## Less is more

I discovered that the level of satisfaction I get from exploring outdoors is not so easy to plan. I could experience a highly satisfactory walk full of new observations and interesting incidents a few hundred metres from my place of living, and conversely be surprisingly inattentive during a journey far from home. The difference lies in my state of mind and the attention I'm ready to give to the world around me.

Learning to appreciate small things is key here. If we constantly bombard our reward system with ever stronger stimuli, it will be harder and harder to become excited about anything. Neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky (2017) claims this is because "the system must constantly rescale to accommodate the range of intensity offered by particular stimuli. The response to any reward must habituate with repetition, so that the system can respond over its full range to the next new thing."

To put it in a nutshell: If you get too used to bungee jumping it may become difficult to find it exciting to explore your neighbourhood. So, practice noticing the small and unobvious, and your explorations may become much more exciting than you imagined.

## Birding

Birds are great to observe, study and enjoy. They can be found in virtually any place on earth and at any time of the year. Day and night. The more I get into birdwatching, the more things I notice, and so they never cease to surprise and delight me with their presence. It's still hard for me to realise that more than 200 species can be observed in a place like the metropolitan area of Warsaw alone! That kind of richness is a great way of engaging with the natural world without traveling far from home.

There have been several articles about the health benefits of birdwatching, so I find it an activity to be universally recommended, but it's also very effective from an educational point of view. Birds are much easier to find outdoors than wild mammals and, I would argue, relatively more engaging than wild plants. Birds can be a great way to captivate people's attention and help them start paying attention to non-human worlds.

## Storytelling

All these tips and activities are great by themselves, but they become a very powerful educational tool when you embed them within the right story – one that is relevant to the participants' lives. I feel that better effects can be achieved when the learning process is not an abstract space separated from everyday experience.

When you connect sensory, site-specific experience with concepts and ideas, you can

create powerful and relevant meaning. It is up to you to shape and discover that meaning. You can first go together to buy a pack of nuts at the shop, and the experience you create will be relevant to a consumer society. Following that you can try to forage the nuts together, finding the right time and place, and then peel them collectively. The subjects that activity will bring forth will likely be connected to seasonal change, edible plants, manual skills and collective survival. Invite participants to share in the responsibility and try to go beyond a contrived lesson, because the most important spark in the educational process may appear at the most unpredictable moments. And the facilitator of that process is by no means excluded from learning, as each of the situations is unique and unpredictable.

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# Language Matters

*Anna Dańkowska*





**L**anguage is one of our main tools for communication. We use it every day, but often do not pay much attention to the choice of the words. However, language is of great importance, especially in education: on one hand it can have an empowering, inclusive, encouraging effect, and thus support respect and resilience. On the other hand, it can have quite the opposite effect: it can be discouraging, discriminating, judging or excluding, and thus reinforce power relations, manipulation, conflicting attitudes or stereotypes.

In education for socio-ecological transformation (SET) it is important to be aware of this powerful tool and use it wisely. In the following text I would like to present some reflections about challenges connected to the use of language that educators can face, together with tips on how to cope with them – and thus make our education more inclusive, accessible and possibly truly transformative.

## Conscious choice of words

Thanks to a specific selection of words and terms and choice of certain framings, we can sketch out different pictures of reality. Therefore, it makes a significant difference as to which term we use with the participants in our educational practice, e.g. do we talk about *climate change*, about the *climate crisis* or rather the *climate catastrophe*? Each of them carries a different significance and weight. Or if we talk about refugees or immigrants, are we aware enough to avoid dehumanising phrases like “a wave of refugees is flooding Europe” or “we need to fight the plague of immigrants”? Again, it makes

a huge difference whether we refer to people rather as *consumers* or as *citizens* – the first points rather to the passive role of the recipient as a source of money, while the latter suggests an active political role and decisiveness. Studies have shown that the use of certain terms influences people’s reactions to the situation.

## Being aware of greenwashing and hijacked terms

There is no doubt that terms and phrases can be interpreted differently, and that their meaning also changes with a changing society. In the field of sustainability and climate change issues, however, language often becomes instrumentalised: mainly for marketing or political purposes. There is an ideological takeover of certain words, and they lose their meaning through such misuse. Think about words such as: *natural*, *green*, or *sustainable development* – they are used frequently, but are very often far from describing the reality of the situation.

In our educational practice, we should draw learners’ attention to this greenwashing of words by business, industry and politicians, and thus train their ability to detect and question such false narratives. For instance: can there be a *fair* and *sustainable* clothing collection by a company that follows the rules of fast fashion, with all its disastrous environmental and human consequences? Many such companies use these kinds of terms to attract the consumer’s attention and create an imagined and frequently untrue USP (unique selling proposition), which implies that you can be a responsible consumer and that you have the power to act sustainably. But can a fast fashion industry be sustainable whatsoever?

## Adjusting your vocabulary to the characteristics of the group

It might sound banal, but adjusting your vocabulary to the target group – speaking as much as possible in their language - is crucial for educational process. Let's take a look at some of the challenges connected with it. When educating about or for SET in post-socialist societies, remember that certain terms might not meet approval, e.g. the Polish term *kolektywny* (*collective*) may be associated with collective actions imposed in the socialist past by the state. In this case it might be more advisable to choose another word, e.g. *wspólny* (*common*). More on these aspects is presented in the chapter "Degrowth and the Opportunities for socio-ecological transformation in Post-Socialist Countries" (page XXX).

If you are working in groups with different cultural backgrounds, make sure you use terms understood by everyone, and try to create a common understanding of the terms used by the learners. If you are not sure whether the participants of your educational activity truly understand the term, ask them to explain it in their own words. You can also introduce a sign (e.g. an 'L' made by the thumb and index finger, signifying *language*) to be shown in the group when some more clarification or translation is needed. Once a common linguistic territory is agreed and respected by the educator, there should be less risk of misunderstandings arising, and the participants can fully and actively participate in the learning process – even in culturally diverse groups.

I experienced these cultural differences particularly when working at The Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe, and supporting it on its path towards greater sustainability. The foundation

runs an international youth meeting house situated in a small village in Lower Silesia in the south west of Poland, and employs more than 50 workers who differ in several aspects (age, place of living, education). There was a need to introduce a larger vegetarian and vegan offer in the canteen. However, the words *vegetarian* and *vegan* turned out not to be understood by all of my colleagues, causing embarrassment (while seeming more than normal to others). It was sometimes useful to use the term *meatless* and *plant-based* to achieve a mutual understanding.



## Using simple, but not oversimplified language

"Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler." This maxim of Einstein can be successfully applied when it comes to the language used in our educational practice. Language in education should be adjusted to the cognitive skills, background knowledge and also the needs of the learners, as described above.

While it is important to use language in such a way that it can be understood by all our learners, we should avoid oversimplifications or generalisations. After all, we want to express our thoughts precisely, to differentiate between phenomena, pointing out sometimes subtle but not insignificant differences. When educating for SET, we tackle complex topics such as global interconnections, social, economic and ecological systems, sustaina-

bility, and global injustice. Therefore, appropriate and precise use of words is crucial. Let us also not be afraid to introduce some new terms, even if they seem complicated. Once illustrated with examples that relate to everyday life, they will be understood (just as in the case of the *rebound effect* in the chapter “Connecting Culture, Education and Socio-Ecological Transformation”, page 4).

## Having fun with linguistic innovations

The umbrella of SET covers novel mental patterns and different ways of valuing things, while different lifestyle choices are made and new social innovations and practices are constantly being established. These new ways of thinking, living and doing business require names to identify them, so they can take on greater significance in our perception of them. We give names to things we find worthy of attention. Some old and partially familiar practices are now being rebranded with new (fancy) names and a special framing, and in this manner gain more attention. A grandmother’s allotment garden in the city centre may now be framed as *urban gardening*, or the practice of giving old objects a new function and thus following the *upcycling* trend, are now treated as significant degrowth activities. While it might be acceptable to use such trendy names or English terms for a certain constituency, for real transformation we need to change the society. This means that everybody has to understand and grasp the terms, and so we shouldn’t be afraid also to revive the traditional terminology – like subsistence gardening, mutual help, saving.

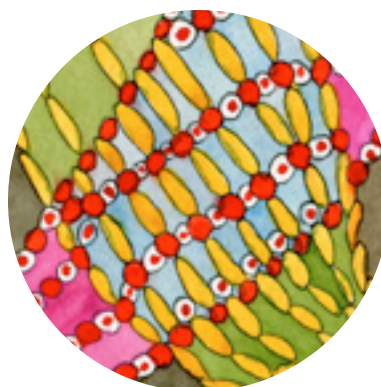
It is fascinating that in the field of SET we can co-create a language for the future, giving names to newly arising phenomena. This became very clear to me while doing proof-reading for specific terms with a translator of the Polish text (translated from English)

of the methodological handbook for education for SET called “Wszystkie ręce na pokład” (Kremer et al. 2021). My colleague made me realise how much room for manoeuvre we have doing this job. As there is no authority who permits or forbids the use of certain words or phrases, we can actually shape the language and coin new words ourselves.

We had several dilemmas when trying to find proper Polish equivalents for English terms. How should we translate *transition town*? Do we translate it at all? If we don’t, who would understand the term? And if we do, then how? Are there any *transition town* movements in Poland that use some specific Polish term for it? Are there any academic papers already published that prefer one or another term for it?

If there are some phenomena that don’t yet have any names at all, a fun educational activity to be conducted with a group could be to look for names to give to newly emerging phenomena or practices. When doing so, remember to check first if it already exists, and then see if that term fits for what you want to convey. Searching the internet is the first thing you can do, followed by asking people who use the new practice how they refer to it. This is how such fun words from sharing economy, like *Foodsharing*, *Tauschregal* (German), *jadłodzielnia* (Polish) or *knihobudka* (Czech) came to life.

So let’s get ready for some linguistically innovative fun!



## When concerned about conscious use of language for SET, consider the following:

- Is my language understood by those participating in my educational activities? How can I use words that are clear to everyone?
- Do I make sure that the terms I use within a culturally diverse group are understood in a similar way by everyone, and clarify if necessary (can I double check with a colleague who is from the same cultural context as the target group)?
- When I enter into a new topic with a group, do I make sure that there is a common understanding of all the most important key-words?
- When using literal translations of English terms, words of foreign origin or simply words in another language, do I make sure they are clear to everyone?
- Am I expressing myself precisely, without blurring the meanings of words?
- Am I aware of greenwashing and the misuse of certain terms in politics and marketing?
- Do I follow the current developments in the field that I'm speaking about, so as to not present outdated information or use words that have become inadequate or obsolete?

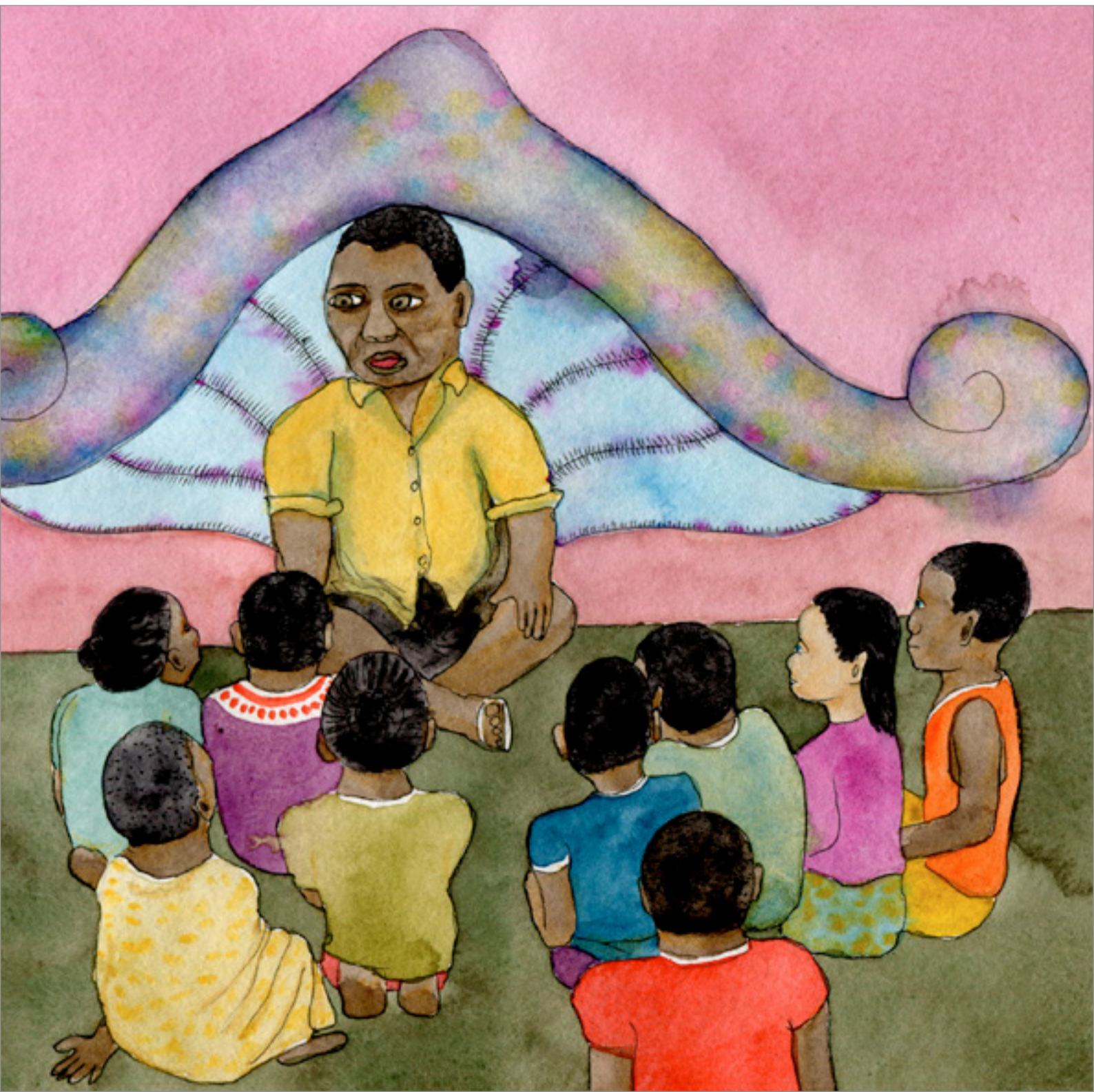


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# How Sustainable is our Education?

*Liubov Shynder*



**S**ince the languages that I mainly use in my work, and even now as I write this text, are learned rather than my native tongue, I usually spend some time playing with words and comparing their translations to get a better feeling of the meaning.

The term 'sustainable', being one of those 'fancy' 'grown-up' words, hasn't avoided this fate and has become a favourite word of mine.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary - sustainable is something that can be sustained (*surprise!*) - "maintained at length without interruption or weakening", also - *lasting* - "existing or continuing a long while" - and *enduring*, durable - "able to exist for a long time without significant deterioration in quality or 'value' and 'designed' to be durable".

I am a big fan of using the word sustainable in other contexts than only the debate about sustainability and sustainable development. I often try to examine how the word sustainable fits onto education, precisely the type of education that I practice and orbit around - namely non-formal education.

Returning to the dictionary definitions of the word 'sustainable' mentioned above, there are a few things that are relevant for me when talking about education - firstly time, durability of the results over time and the length of the process itself, and secondly the intention of ensuring durability, something that is created to last in terms of quality.

Since we are already digging through dictionaries and definitions, let's take a look at the basics of non-formal education according to credible institutions.

The Council of Europe says that "Non-formal education should be:

- voluntary
- accessible to everyone (ideally)
- an organized process with educational objectives
- participatory
- learner-centred
- about learning life skills and preparing for active citizenship
- based on involving both individual and group learning with a collective approach
- holistic and process-oriented
- based on experience and action
- organized on the basis of the needs of the participants."

I want to argue (fight me if you wish) that by definition non-formal education is able to establish a sustainable change and effect in its participants. It tackles 'Head, Heart and Hands' - something that was projected by David Orr (an educationalist and environmentalist professor from the U.S., a white cis-man\*) into a holistic educational model. It states that in order to create a quality educational process we need to focus on all three realms: head - knowledge, understanding, the cognitive side of the mind, heart - emotions, values, feelings, and hands - skills, abilities, tools and instruments.

Paying attention to all the three areas in the education process can provide a sustainable change and sustainable attitude - one that is rooted in our understanding and knowledge, supported by our skillset, which is

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\* A cisgender person is a person whose sex at birth is in alignment with their gender identity and with what is typically culturally associated with this gender.

evolving and developing within our values and priorities. And this, I strongly believe, is the desirable effect of education for sustainable development.

My suggestion here is that to teach all three, 'head, hands and heart', we need to take as our basis the needs and background of those who we are approaching with our educational content on all levels.



Firstly, we must identify knowledge, the previous concepts that are considered true and the previously learned way of learning. Those who have worked with youth from different countries will often recognise that the style of learning, readiness to question the educator, and the forming and voicing one's own opinions differs. For me, having often worked with mixed groups from Poland and Germany, I can see how students from Germany are more eager to question concepts and voice doubts and opinions even if they are not 'fully baked' yet. Students from Poland, on the other hand, 'switch off' more quickly when the presented content is something that doesn't instantly fit with their existing knowledge. I connect this to the way authority of the teacher is formed in the educational institutions and the way in which students are encouraged to question this authority. What I have described above, of course, are very generalised and stereotypical examples which differ from group to group. However, one thing is important - before we meet the group it is hard to predict and expect a particular way of openness to new information. And in order to make the

educational process sustainable, we can start by giving ourselves and the group an opportunity to share the previous knowledge and understanding, and by acknowledging and analysing the way in which this knowledge was acquired and accepted as true.

Very close to this comes the part of the 'heart' - beliefs, values, emotions. As anything involving the word catastrophe has a potential to, teaching about the climate catastrophe involves emotions and feelings. It also questions the values of the capitalist world order, such as constant economic growth, happiness through increasing wealth and consumption etc., a world view which the majority of us are brought up to respect as the only possible one. In this respect I see a strong possibility of sustainability and degrowth education evoking "too hot to handle" emotions, which may cause our recipients to resist and feel reluctant to engage with what we have to talk to them about. The potential to do this sustainably and to create an enduring change in the mindset and understanding once again consists in the possibility of going back, and discussing and voicing the already formed values and emotions that the questioning of these values evoke. Perhaps this is too obvious to mention, but I will mention it anyway: this is a completely natural process for all of us - to feel angry, scared and attacked when our values and beliefs are questioned or when we are presented with a set of different ones, especially by an educator, whose position is taken as a position of an authority. I see a great potential in the acknowledgement of emotions in the learning process, in terms of giving the group a chance to form values and beliefs that they can fully stand behind, backed up with the knowledge and understanding from the previous paragraph.

Skills, being the third pillar of the learning process, are something I feel I've already opened up a bit on in the text above. Skills

are not just a particular manual ability to make or do something, but when talking about non-formal education, very important skills include the skills to learn and to think critically. Firstly, we need to meet our recipients on their own territory, where their skillset is. This also means to recognise that working with the group we will be faced with people with very different levels of ability to voice their own opinion, argue the point and question the material. A situation in which part of the group feels excluded and shows resistance to the topic and the process can be avoided by slowing down and starting at the most accessible level for everyone.

All of what I've described above is demanding in terms of time and effort. Nonetheless, as I see it these are the things that have potential to make these educational processes deeply sustainable: Invest some time in order to produce a longer lasting effect. This means spending time on meeting the 'audience' on their own territory. Give them space to find out how what we offer them connects to their needs and ideas. Recognise resources and the foundations that people already have, and build upon them instead of offering them something as a replacement of their values. Impart knowledge as a way of acknowledging individuals and their experiences, while facing and welcoming diversity. Have fun exploring!

- Definition of non-formal education by The Council of Europe: <https://kurzelinks.de/COEdefinitions>





If You are not Angry, You are not  
Paying Attention.

Emotions in Education for  
Socio-Ecological Transformation

*Aneta Osuch*



## Why do we need emotions?

“When we do not fear what we should fear, we are in terrible danger”, claimed Lao Tzu (2019).

“Climate crisis, rapid loss of biodiversity, growing social inequality, exploitation. Today’s reality is characterised by a series of escalating social, environmental and economic problems with devastating consequences at both local and global levels.” – reads the methodological handbook for education for SET called “Wszystkie ręce na pokład” edited by Kremer, Mejor and Sanders (2021).

Information about the escalating crisis is reaching us through a wide variety of different channels. We are experiencing some of its effects increasingly frequently, more intensely and more violently. Particularly if our personal resources do not allow us to cope with the consequences of disruptive change. Crisis is not democratic. If the crisis is an intensely stormy ocean, different people and different societies have very different boats (some have big yachts, some overcrowded dinghies).

Considering all this we are accompanied by fear, sadness and anger.. There exist, of course, also other emotions. There is a distinction in the literature between primary and secondary emotions. The primary emotions most often include joy, anger, sadness, fear, disgust and surprise. However, the exponentially growing crisis can also encourage us to face challenges.



There are many theories of emotions, and there is also a great deal of research being conducted in this field. One psychological perspective that answers the question: “why do we need emotions?” is the functionalist approach. In this view, emotions essentially have an adaptive role (which is not to say that this role is fulfilled by every manifestation of them).

Emotions can be understood as a mechanism for signalling relevance: if an event does not evoke emotion in me, it means that it is not relevant to me. From this perspective, they have an informational function: they allow the communication of an individual’s interests or goals. A second important aspect of emotions is their motivational function for behaviours aimed at maintaining or changing the relationship with what triggers them (the events triggering them) or anticipating them (when I anticipate that they will appear).

## Classification of emotions

The most common – but not the only – popular division of emotions, which can also be found in the literature, distinguishes between positive ( joy and related emotions) and negative (the other remaining) emotions. This division can and often does have practical consequences for the willingness to experience them. Usually when I think something is positive I desire it, whereas if it is negative I feel it is better to avoid it. If, as outlined above, emotions inform us (“positive”: it’s O.K., “negative”: it’s not O.K.) and motivate us to sustain or change the status quo (it’s O.K. – keep it going, it’s not O.K. – something needs to be done, changed), then avoiding “negative” emotions can have

serious consequences for our being in the world. If information about the deepening crisis and our experience of it did not trigger “negative” emotions in us, we would most likely remain passive in the face of the danger this crisis brings. Sadness can be seen as an emotion that evokes passivity, hence long-term sadness can be a problem in education for change. Sadness, however, is also a reflexive emotion, and as such is very important within the context of change - it allows us to come to terms with loss (when we change something we also lose something, things don't work out as we would like), it gives space to think about e.g. what didn't work in our implementation of change and why. When we talk about education for SET, we think of education geared towards change. For this we need emotions.

## Intensity of emotions

Positive as well as negative aspects and consequences of different emotions can also result from their intensity. If an emotion is too weak, it will not motivate me or will motivate me only weakly. If it is too strong, it can destabilise me and cause any action taken under its influence to be inadequate or counterproductive.



## Do emotions deceive us?

If emotions inform us, can we speak of their inadequacy? If I feel fear, does it always mean that I am threatened by something?

Emotional justification is the cognitive bias of believing something to be true based solely on emotions, without reference to facts or non-emotional reality.

In addition to the stimulus itself, the emergence and intensity of emotions can be influenced by the following: factors related to the constitution and previous experiences of the subject (emotional reactivity, disorders of triggering and controlling emotions, need for stimulation, previous suppression of emotions, traumas and triggers); the state of the body (insomnia, hunger, fatigue, hormones); the state of the environment (heat, crowding, noise, air pollution); and others (cognitive overload, the emotional state of others in the environment – a phenomenon known as contagion of emotion or affect); prolonged stress; culture; and even less obvious aspects such as power relations, social class or gender, etc.).

## Thinking versus emotions

The cognitive evaluation of an event (often automatic and unconscious) mediates between the stimulus and the emotional response. Emotions enable us to react quickly, without us becoming intellectually caught up in the nuances and time-consuming formulation of action strategies (and as a result can often save our lives). In addition to emotions that are aroused automatically, there are emotions that are triggered reflexively – their emergence is linked to a conscious cognitive process. The conscious cognitive process can also extinguish automatically triggered emotions when, for example, I perceive more clearly that a given stimulus is not what it initially appeared to be. The conscious process can also be the source of emotions associated with stimuli that we do not directly experience ourselves. Like when I feel anger at

the fact that people are starving because they are poor, not because there is no food, or I feel joy at the thought of a different, fairer world.

## Anger

Anger seems to be an important emotion within the context of social change that is met with resistance. Anger is an emotion that arises when someone breaches our boundaries, when we encounter an obstacle to meeting our needs, when our values are violated. Its purpose is to change a state of affairs perceived as hurtful or unjust.



Anger has the power to subvert the maintained social facade. Polite, official language is often part of a system (it is no coincidence that one of the basic skills children of peasants and slaves were taught was to be polite to their masters) that privileges some at the expense of others, and this is the system we are currently dealing with. This is why anger and the language of anger is so important in strategies of resistance. What we do with anger as part of education for SET depends on the answer to the question: how radical should education be, and how catastrophic would it be for us not to take radical action for change? Have the results of anger-free actions based on polite campaigns been successful enough? Who benefits from the stigmatising of anger?

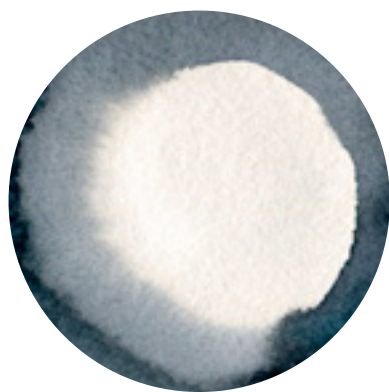
## Constructive and destructive anger. Risks associated with anger

The power of anger consists in its capacity to be used in the struggle for survival in the face of disaster, or in action for a more just world. It can also show its darker side when used against an individual (as in the “Scapegoat” by René Girard), or against people or groups without power (e.g. when migrants are blamed for an economic crisis or people driving old cars in countries where mass public transport does not exist are blamed for climate change). In today’s world of information overload, in a world of fake news and deepfakes, the fomenting of destructive anger is extremely easy.

## Individualism and the privacy of emotions. The normalisation of anger

Why is anger given so much space in an article on emotions? It seems to be taboo and privatised within the contemporary discourse of individualistic cultures as a problem of maladaptive individuals who are to be referred for psychotherapy. Indeed, sometimes psychotherapy is necessary. In Poland, psychotherapy is mainly outside of the public health system, thus it has to be paid for by individuals and is very expensive (which can also trigger justifiable anger in those who need support and are economically excluded, while in turn those who believe that the individual is responsible for all their own failures will call them scroungers). If anger is an emotion that motivates and empowers us to change unjust social relations, negation of the right to anger on the part of the underprivileged is an action intended to preserve the status quo. What are the dangers of the

'business as usual' approach? The IPCC reports (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) inform us about some of them. If we do not react, we do not resist, the world goes on as before according to the logic of infinite growth, unlimited resource extraction, greenhouse gas emissions, exploitation and poverty associated with the capitalist economy and neoliberal ideology. When we hear that anger needs to be regulated, when we are told not to shout, to talk calmly, to be polite, not to interfere, to go to therapy, because our anger can cause harm to someone, and when we succumb to this by refraining from acting (if we are able to act at all, due to our socio-economic situation, psychological state etc.) for social change, are we not co-responsible for the damage this system causes? *Omission bias* is the tendency to judge harmful actions as worse and more immoral than equally harmful inaction. What if inaction is more harmful?



## Joy and hope

Why do we need 'positive' emotions when educating for ecological and social transformation? Why do we need joy and hope when we act for change? As stated above, 'positive' emotions motivate us to sustain action. Without them, our actions, the result of which may be far away in time, would fizzle out after the first failures. Hope allows us to believe in a different world and that a SET is possible.

## Inter- and intra-cultural framework of emotions

If cognitive appraisal (automatic or reflexive) mediates between stimulus and emotional response, the cultural framework of emotion cannot be ignored: culture-dependent cognitive appraisal determines what meaning we give to stimuli. Culture, through socialisation, strongly influences how we experience emotions, how we name them, and whether and how we show them. In education, we will have to deal with both intercultural and intracultural differences. Intracultural differences will concern, for example, gender (e.g. feeling and expressing anger and fear in men, women and non-binary people in patriarchal cultures) or social class (differences in accepting the expression of emotions in relation to underprivileged groups). Also relevant here is how emotions and their expression are judged by different social groups.

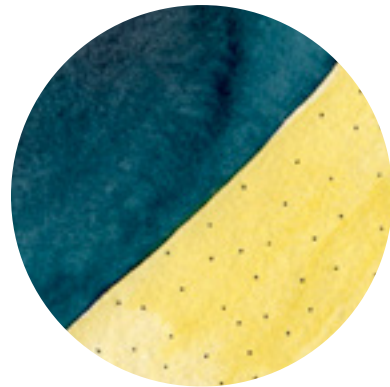
## The pitfalls of empathy

Nowadays there is a lot of talk of the kind that the world's ills are due to the fact that we lack empathy. If we understand empathy in emotional terms, as feeling what we believe others are feeling, this is not necessarily true. Empathy is biased, acting as a spotlight that focuses our attention here and now on particular beings (often those who are 'ours', similar to us), while overlooking the suffering of others. Empathy overlooks the further consequences of our actions, and can favour the individual over the group. Often, the people to whom we attribute a lack of empathy to (of course, such people also exist) are those who empathise with people with whom we do not empathise. What is the alternative to empathy understood in this way? Rational compassion, which requires, among other things, recognition of power relations.

## Resistance and resilience

A crisis can be both: an opportunity and a threat. The current socio-ecological crisis is obviously a threat (and for many has already become a catastrophe), but also an opportunity to change the unjust, exploitative system that has led to it. Which way the change goes will also depend on the action we take and the counter-action taken by those in a position of power who profit from the current system. Resistance is what will allow us to oppose them and this is where anger comes in! Resistance can also arise in the group we work with in SET - its sources may be cultural (e.g. different attitudes to power or the system itself, attitudes towards radical actions allowed by the belief system and religions), it can also arise from defence mechanisms related to crisis, as well as a different position in the social structure and the fear of losing privilege as a result of social change. Sometimes resistance is a substitute response to an entirely different situation or is due to some dislike of the group or educator. Sometimes resistance is simply the result of a phase in the life of the group, or is related to the emergence of different roles within the group. Working with this resistance – which is not always effective – will vary depending on what is at the root of it and the emotions that accompany it. What seems to be important in working with resistance in a group is to investigate what is behind it. When we understand the participants in our group, we can respond accordingly: give them the information they need, cater for their emotions or simply show understanding. If we do not try to convince the participant by coercion, but rather act with curiosity and attentiveness, resistance can begin to wane. When the participant feels understood, there is a greater chance that they will convert the fighting strategy into cooperation. It is not necessary to convince everyone in order to achieve social change, see critical mass theory.

Apart from resistance, we, as individuals and we as a group also need resilience as a capacity to recover from difficult events, trauma or failures. We can speak about resistance when we oppose someone or something (e.g. an unjust system), and about resilience when we are recovering from the difficulties we have experienced due to resistance, so that we are able to continue with our actions.



## Emotion regulation, or why shouldn't we always be polite?

What are we to do with difficult emotions? The options (more or less adaptive) are several. We can avoid situations that trigger them, block information, deny situations and emotions, dissociate, activate defence mechanisms, redirect emotions to another object, focus on lowering their intensity, modify our cognitive evaluation of the situation or bring about a change in the situation itself. E.g. using different techniques. One example is RAIN: Recognise (Recognising What Is Going On In Your Mind And Body), Accept (Accepting The Thoughts And Feelings That Arise), Investigate (Investigate What You Are Experiencing With Gentle Curiosity), Non-Identify (Nonjudgmentally Release Or Let Go Of Any Thoughts, Feelings, Or Sensations That No Longer Serve You). Reducing emotional tension is also facilitated by physical exercise (“go for a run”) and, above all, by social support. All of these ways can

apply – not always well – in different situations (depending on whether the emotion is adequate or destabilises us, how much influence we have over the situation, whether we have the resources to deal with it etc.). Which of these options is most desirable in education for SET?

## Emotions within the group

In addition to emotions triggered by stimuli from the world in crisis, we also experience emotions in interpersonal relationships, including within the groups in which we work (e.g. activist groups). Functioning within a group, in addition to similarities and common goals, involves differences and power relations (especially if the group is positioned differently), which entails the possibility of conflicts and related difficult emotions. These in turn threaten to break up the group. One way to deal with escalating conflicts is nonviolent communication, NVC. It is also worth remembering that functioning within a group with which we act and share values, despite any differences and conflicts, is a source of joy and social support.

## A small exercise

Exercise on taming emotions: combine a group of participants into 4 smaller subgroups (preferably diverse). Assign each group one of 4 basic emotions (joy, anger, sadness, fear). What are the positive and negative aspects of each of these emotions? What would happen, if we did not have any of these emotions? Let each emotion go to each group. After the final round, ask the group representatives to present the results to the forum.

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**W**hen I look out of my window in the centre of Berlin and see all the unsustainable infrastructure, and imagine what a sustainable and socially just world would look like, it quickly becomes clear to me: there is a lot to do and time is short. I strongly feel this time pressure in relation to the enormous challenge forced upon us by climate change in workshop groups or with people who organise themselves politically. I'm sure it's not just me. An increasing number of people feel this urgency and want to change something. They are coming together in ever broader groups and in different contexts. This is important, since we want a "good life for everyone". At the same time, however, there has been an increasing amount of criticism of the educational work and the movements from marginalised perspectives. They have experienced situations in which the approaches to solutions often ignore their living realities, their experiences are not taken seriously and that power relations and discrimination are denied. The pressure to act due to the climate crisis, especially in the climate (justice) movement creates mindcuffs among people with substantial privilege, which can lead to discrimination. Those injustices are often not dealt with, and therefore the people who are affected by them withdraw or separate themselves from those groups.

In order for this not to happen and so that educational work can benefit from diverse experiences and perspectives, I would like to present a few tips from my own practical work as a seminar leader and participant.

## The Setting

A common experience of people experiencing discrimination is not being included. And if one is worried that this will happen again at an event, such people are quite reasonably less likely to attend any further. For this reason, it's necessary to show up front that there is an awareness of certain challenges. Especially if I have the impression that certain people won't come to my seminars anyway, it's worth reflecting on how I design my call for participants, and who I have in mind while creating the programme. I don't need a solution for everything at the time of the call. However, it's good to show that certain things are being considered, so that the obstacle for asking for adaptations to one's own needs becomes somewhat lower.

Possible, unsorted hints that can already find their place in the call for participants:

- Whom do I want to address and can I adapt the setting to their needs?
- Can I offer single rooms?
- Is there a possibility for more protected dormitories such as FLINTA\* dormitories in Germany (for female, lesbian, inter, asexual\* persons only)?
- Can I show pictures of the terrain in advance?
- Can I describe the accessibility to all rooms?
- Are there excursions and how are they arranged?
- Can I offer assistance with travel?
- Can I make the announcement in easily comprehensible language?
- Do I know of supplementary funding for events addressed to people with disabilities??
- Is the participant contribution the same for everyone? Can it be adapted to different incomes?

- Do people have to assign themselves to a binary gender in certain situations (e.g. toilets, dormitories or in tasks or games)?
- Do I use gender-inclusive language in my announcement?
- Is there access to necessary hygiene items nearby or can I even provide them?
- Is there a space where people can pray without being disturbed?
- Is there an opportunity to take a short break from the programme for prayers or personal needs?
- Is the month of fasting taken into consideration for eating times?
- What major holidays take place during my seminar?
- What diets can be considered when eating?
- How can people with children be included?



## An Explorative Approach

Often, educational seminars are about concrete approaches for our daily life in order to make a contribution to socio-ecological transformation (SET). Living vegan, giving up cars and air travel, generally limiting our mobility, buying organic and fair-trade products or even better: Just buying regional and seasonal vegetables from a small farm if we can't grow them by ourselves, repairing all our devices or at least giving them a new purpose (upcycling), organising in

unions and going on protests or striking, being politically active, using things more collectively, and so on. Thus, there are many demands on the individual that are meant to convey a sense of agency. Often it is not the knowledge about the possibilities of action that is lacking, but a lack of the means of implementation. If we imagine a room with participants from different contexts and with different starting points, it quickly becomes clear that the demands cannot be implemented equally for everyone, and that different people face different challenges.

Instead of just suggesting possible actions I suggest that the participants engage in an exchange, imagine which possibilities they want to implement and what attempts have failed. In this way, the participants become experts on their own living reality. In a culturally sensitive educational approach, the living reality and the perspective of the participants is shifted to the centre of interest. The participants are strengthened in their knowledge of their own living reality. What would it individually take for them to be able to act sustainably in the long term? What would my everyday life look like, if sustainable behaviour seemed natural? What are the moments in which I am (de)motivated to act sustainably?

## Round of Pronouns

Not all people identify with the gender they were assigned with at birth. In the communities I have got to know, the custom has been established to link the introduction round with a round of pronouns, or to add the desired pronouns on the name tags. People with trans-identities often have the experience that their existence is not considered and that they, or an essential part of them, are rendered invisible. This part often plays an important role in their living reality, because a world that only knows two genders creates discomfort for many who cannot or

do not want to fit into it. A pronoun round is a low-threshold method to make this visible or to show that these identities are recognised. Even if no trans-person is present in the workshops, I think it is useful to disrupt norms. After all, the point of workshops on SET is to enable a good life for all and to question what we are used to.

## An example

“We want everyone in our seminar to be able to be here as they are. Therefore, in addition to your name, or how you want to be addressed by the others, state your pronoun. So for example they/them, he/him, she/her or others. This may be unusual for some and mistakes will happen. Maybe also by us. However, it's important to us that we point it out to each other when someone is wrongly addressed.”

Unfortunately, there are always people who find the topic ridiculous and dispensable and are annoyed by it. In my experience, however, the topic mainly triggers fear or concern about hurting other people because gender is constantly present in many languages, and mistakes are always being made. To mitigate this, it is also worth pointing this out briefly before the round of introductions.

It also helps if there is material in the room so that participants can look up terms and find basic information about sex and gender, since a lack of knowledge is often embarrassing, especially in groups where this is natural for many.

## What I would much rather say...

The topics dealt with in the context of SET are complex and closely linked to one's own living environment. They are often about breaking down and questioning normalities and habits. Just as the material world (such as buildings, institutions, borders etc.) carries its (sometimes problematic) history with it, so do language, concepts and theories. If we want to change the world, it is worthwhile thinking about which words and images we use to explain a situation.

For me as a trainer it is important to find a balance between a learning space in which mistakes can be made and learned from, and a protective space in which learning takes



place in a manner that is as little as possible at the expense of the people who are discriminated against. Especially in groups that don't really know each other yet, it can be a good introduction to the topic to check terms that could become problematic, while offering alternatives. In this way, situations can be avoided that are unpleasant for some participants and, on the other hand, different perspectives and knowledge about an issue can be presented.

This is especially true in seminars where global contexts are discussed. Many terms that have been coined in European contexts have a colonial and racist past, and continue to cause offense. Collecting terms together, explaining why they are problematic and offering alternatives can be an appreciative way of dealing with the fact that terms are usually not used consciously but are rather 'normalised', and there is no hurtful intention behind them. In cases where there are different perspectives, it can help to ask for personal references to the terms. What does this term mean to me, and what do I associate with it? It is important to show tact, because terms can be associated with traumas and participants should not be forced to talk about their personal traumas in front of a group of strangers. Ultimately, the goal is for discriminated positions to experience that their discomfort and hurt is heard, that the group tries to avoid discrimination in the future, that discriminatory statements are not related to the whole person and "mistakes" are not absolute, but allow space for change. In addition to pointing out terms at the beginning, it is then important to react in practice when incidents occur, in the sense that incidents have priority. In cases where there is no space to work on the incident, the problem is not clear or a person insists on their problematic statement, the conflict can also be worked on after the unit in a dialogue, if necessary. In any case, the incident should be addressed.

## Facilitation a.k.a. letting everyone have their say

Whenever I ask a question to the group, brainstorm together, lead a discussion or attempt to get a picture of the group mood, there are people in groups who speak more and some who speak less. What is said or how it is said is usually unevenly distributed. People have various difficulties participating: speaking in front of a group, speaking up, showing their feelings, sharing something private, disagreeing, correcting someone, lightening the mood with a joke, asking if someone doesn't understand something, summarising what has been said, and so on. Different people may find all of this easy or hard in different ways. There may be many reasons for this, and it is not always problematic. However, if it is always reproduced within the same groups of people it then becomes problematic. Even when something is said, it is not necessarily valued equally. Cis men, for example, are taken more seriously and on average are seen as having more professional competence. This is also true for white people versus "Black, Indigenous and People of Color" (BIPOC). But factors such as education, language and cultural context also play a role in the situation. This, of course, affects how naturally people participate in group situations and when they are more likely to listen. On the one hand, it is therefore important to recognise such situations as a facilitator and, on the other hand, to deal with them. If we as moderators or seminar leaders want everyone to participate in open discussions and to hear all perspectives, then we need to employ a few tricks to balance out unequal power distributions. But even though it is important for me to get an impression of all the participants, I would like to point out that it is always legitimate not to participate and not to open up.

## 3 Tips for moderation

### Appreciative queries

When I notice that people haven't spoken yet, it's sometimes worthwhile simply asking appreciatively if they have any thoughts on the topic. Especially when brainstorming, I find it helpful to pause briefly at certain points and ask if anyone has any ideas. I often find that people who have not yet contributed anything in particular contribute great ideas!

### Raising group consciousness

When people are talking a lot and animatedly, many others find it difficult to ask questions or participate. I find it helpful in these situations to give feedback and tell the participants to make eye contact with everyone before they speak, in order to see if anyone else wants to speak. It also helps to establish a speaking order by a show of hands. The person who is to speak next has one finger in the air, the next two, and so on. This helps slow down the conversation, and also helps the participants to get a feeling of the group itself.

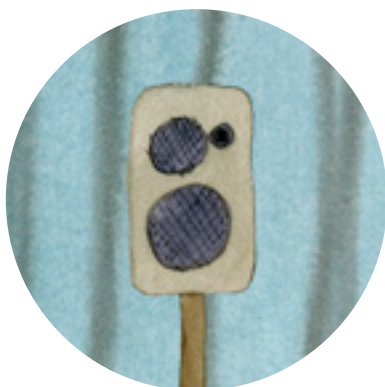
### Quick round

Depending on the size of the group, I find it helpful to hold a quick round every now and then, in which everyone can briefly say something about the topic.



## Further Reading and Tips

- Free to be you and me Toolkit: <https://kurzelinks.de/FTBToolkit>
- Norm Criticism Toolkit: <https://kurzelinks.de/NCToolkit>
- A reflective guide for individuals and groups to talk about white privilege: Layla F. Saad (2020): Me and white supremacy
- Also her Instagram challenge: <https://kurzelinks.de/instalayla-saad>



# Creating Learning Spaces for Socio-Ecological Transformation

*Barbora Adamková, Jakub Mácha*



**W**e are currently facing multiple crises, from witnessing the climate breakdown in Central Europe first hand to widening social and economic inequalities. The time for socio-ecological transformation (SET) is now, and one of its pillars must be education. However, the ways in which we and many other educators currently think about education must be reflected upon and revised. It is not sufficient only to lecture, channelling knowledge and information in a one-way process. Education that can be beneficial in an uncertain world must be universal. We need to embrace learning from each other, but also from the non-human world, to respect different experiences, learn how to truly listen, process and analyse new information in order to be able to use it further.

Non-formal education provides us with an excellent basis for exploring and expanding the possibilities of learning. In our practice as lecturers, we try to build educational programmes and training in a way that creates the most fruitful learning environment. All groups have diverse participants, and being able to engage fully in the process may appear different to each person. Fulfilling their needs is crucial – it can range from needing space for silent, individual reflection, sharing in pairs or just a sufficient number of breaks with drinks and snacks.

The usual practice includes guiding the group to create its own rules or a code of conduct, reflecting on how the participants want to be and learn together. These commonly include respecting different opinions, active listening, agreement that one person speaks at a time or not using phones during the sessions. When framing the code of con-

duct creation, we often refer to our training as a ‘safe space’. In non-formal educational events, a safe space often refers to a space where everyone can share what they think, how they feel and where they can act freely and be free from judgement by others.

But is this really possible? Can we really create a space that often accommodates up to 20 individuals, with different worldviews, perspectives and emotional needs? Can we ensure that no one will get hurt by spiteful or uninformed, but well-meant comments and questions?

In other words, is a safe space actually the right reference point in our educational practice? From a historical perspective, the roots of safe spaces are within the praxis of marginalised groups such as feminist consciousness-raising groups, different groups of people of colour, LGBTQ+ etc. To provide an example from the field of feminism, these groups consisting of only women created a safe space in order to share and learn about the experiences of others, about the common ground of their experiences. One of the most famous slogans of the feminist movement, “the personal is political”, draws from these safe spaces. These spaces were necessary because the public realm – not only the media, patriarchal families and churches – but also leftist movements were felt to be unsafe. Dominant power dynamics were replicated also in these environments, and experiences of inequality were overlooked, not taken seriously...



## Panic Zone

Learning is beyond what you are familiar with and becomes very difficult.

## Learning Zone

Where you grow and learn.

## Comfort Zone

Safe place to reflect.



While recognising the importance of safe spaces in the past and today for marginalised people, we would like to establish a different framing within the educational context. The notion of safe spaces referring to educational spaces which provide a haven for people from many different environments could be false and potentially dangerous, as we cannot guarantee complete safety. More precisely speaking, the notion of safety in the educational spaces is different from the one referred to in the safe spaces in their historical meaning. Rather, we can frame our learning spaces as “safer” – recognising our efforts and our active approach towards accommodating everyone’s needs, while being frank about the fact that no one is in complete control of how the space will evolve.

In order to change the currently prevailing systems, we need to go beyond our comfort zones, we need to explore, hear different voices and be confronted with different

realities. If we want SET to be successful, we need to craft new alliances and create learning spaces that are as diverse as possible. Moving people out of their comfort zone doesn’t mean lessening the responsibility of the facilitator for being attentive to everyone’s needs. It is about keeping people within the learning zone, because the panic zone resembles the harsh reality that is all too familiar to many marginalised people in their daily lives.

Drawing inspiration from the work “Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism” of bell hooks (1989), in non-formal education we do not invite marginalised people to the centre, where they have to comply with one-size-fits-all standards. Non-formal education allows us to think about our learning spaces as temporal non-institutional arrangements, and therefore create a space on the margins where all voices can be heard, and which allows everyone to learn together how to resist all forms of oppression.



*Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised. Theorizing this experience aesthetically, critically is an agenda for radical cultural practice. For me this space of radical openness is a margin - a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a "safe" place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance. (hooks 1989:19)*

Diving deep into the learning zone needs courage, as it is often risky and challenging. Sometimes it demands that we are brave enough to overcome a certain level of discomfort, together with abandoning former stances and attitudes in favour of new ones. Especially when it comes to political and transformative education, keeping people in the learning zone requires active care and support. We, as facilitators, provide guidance within the learning zone in which people are brave enough to take an active part. Moreover, it is our responsibility to recognise that not everyone is taking the same risk and that we should shape the educational process accordingly. At the same time, it is important to establish within the learning group that the participants are responsible not only for their own learning, but also for group processes.

When it comes to our participants and their participation in the programme, staying within their safe space could mean staying silent rather than speaking up, or being polite rather than provocative. We suggest that the framework of a safe space refers to an important tradition of thought, which however does not serve us well within the context of diverse groups in non-formal education. A safer space points to the procedural nature of any learning space creation and the fact that spaces are never 100% safe. We would like to support the framework of a brave space, which draws significantly upon the traditions of both safe and safer spaces, while being appreciative of the bravery of

every participant who enters into the learning space. It is also crucial to establish such an atmosphere where criticism of how the space is organised can be raised, especially when you are trying to create a brave space from the position of a privileged person.



## **Brave space and learning zone as an initial method on the training course**

One of the ways in which responsibility for the establishment of a learning space is shared between facilitators and participants is the creation of the code of conduct or ground rules. At the beginning of our training, this often feels like a mundane necessity, which sets the tone and limits of the learning space, but it is only after the session that you move to the actual educational content. "We respect others and don't use our phones during the session, sure,..."

However, we suggest introducing the idea of a brave space as a general framework for the code of conduct, together with a discussion about the history of safe spaces. We argue that it turns the "introduction of a training necessity" into a full session with conceptual input, while keeping in mind that the ultimate goal is to be attentive to everyone's needs and to keep people in the learning zone throughout the whole meeting.

## Abstract

This activity is meant for the beginning of an educational session, as it allows for a common establishment of the learning spaces. Within this activity the history of safe spaces is presented, leading to the creation of a Code of Conduct, using the framework of brave spaces. The activity helps the participants to explore their preferences for creating the most fruitful learning environment and sharing it with others.

## Goals

- To co-create a Code of Conduct with the learning group for an educational event;
- the participants know what kind of learning space they and the facilitators want to achieve and how to do it,
- the participants know the meaning of the terms safe spaces, safer spaces and brave spaces
- the participants learn about the history of the concept of safe spaces

## Tools

Flipcharts, markers

## Time / Total

100 minutes



10 min

### **Introduce the participants to the activity.**

*Now we will take time to talk about different spaces, particularly those related to learning and education. We will explore what safe and safer spaces are, and what brave spaces are. We will take time to think about our own preferences when it comes to learning. The outcome of our sessions will be a Code of Conduct, a set of rules and recommendations for working together that is respectful towards the needs of all.*

### **Welcoming the participants**

Begin with “welcoming” activity. Prepare a list of identities that are relevant for your training course and the group. Do not read them or share them with the group. Welcome the participants instead. Open the learning space and welcome all the people on your course.

*Now I would like to ask you to welcome anyone you want. Think about all the people that should be welcomed and considered when it comes to our learning space. Whose voice and experience would be beneficial? Who do you learn from a lot?*

The aim of the activity need not be to produce an exhaustive list of all the conceivable identities.

Example: People of colour can sit in the circle with people from a working class background, with people with disabilities or those who didn't have a chance to study at university.

After the circle has been completed and everyone has spoken, thank everyone for welcoming so many people in your learning space.



30 min

### **From safe space to brave space**

Moving on to focus on a little theory and history. Depending on the group, you can directly explain the history and purpose of safe spaces and how this term is used in education (see the text above). Alternatively, you can ask by asking questions to the group:

- *Are you familiar with the concept of safe spaces?*
- *If so, can you explain what it means? Have you ever participated in a similar space?*

Together with the group, you can work out a definition of a safe space. You can add the context and origin of the term. Afterwards you can move towards the potential pitfalls or criticism of this term within an educational context.

- *Can you think of any problems that might occur in safe spaces?*

After listing a few potential issues (different needs of people, inability to guarantee safety etc) you can explain the concept of safer spaces and brave spaces in more depth.

*In this training session I would like us to create a brave space together, so that in the following part we can draft the framework for our common learning.*

Start with the notion of safe spaces, which people are generally more familiar with than brave ones. Mention their historical context and purpose, and explain why you want to make a shift towards brave spaces (see the text above).



30 min

### **Group work**

Form groups of three to four people, each group is given a flipchart and markers.

*Your assignment now is to discuss your needs, priorities and experiences from our learning spaces. Try to formulate them in an understandable manner and set them down on a flipchart - they will create a basis for our common Code of Conduct. This will be a set of rules and recommendations to follow throughout the whole training, so everyone can participate as they wish.*

Here are the guiding questions:

- *What best supports your learning? (environment, format, style etc.)*
- *What do you need in order to participate fully in our brave space?*
- *How can the learning space be made safer for you?*
- *Do you have a positive experience of learning in a safe space?*



30 min

### **Reflections and sharing**

Invite the groups to come back to the circle. First take time to reflect upon how the exercise went and provide space for sharing emotions:

- *How was the exercise for you?*
- *Was it easy to recognise your needs in learning?*

After a few people have shared, invite each group to briefly present what they have talked about. Let others ask questions or comment. Reflect on points that occur repeatedly, or perhaps on contradictions.

There is no need to finish the session with a Code of Conduct that is set in stone. The debate itself is more important, as it helps participants recognise that there are many needs, each person is different and has a different learning style.

Do not forget to emphasise that the whole group is responsible for creating the space they want to see. After the session you can either hang the flipcharts on the wall or create a compilation that you display.

If a training session lasts for a number of days, it is recommended to go back to the Code of Conduct in order to remind ourselves of our own role and responsibility in the group and the learning space.

## **Tips and tricks**

### **Role of active listening in brave spaces**

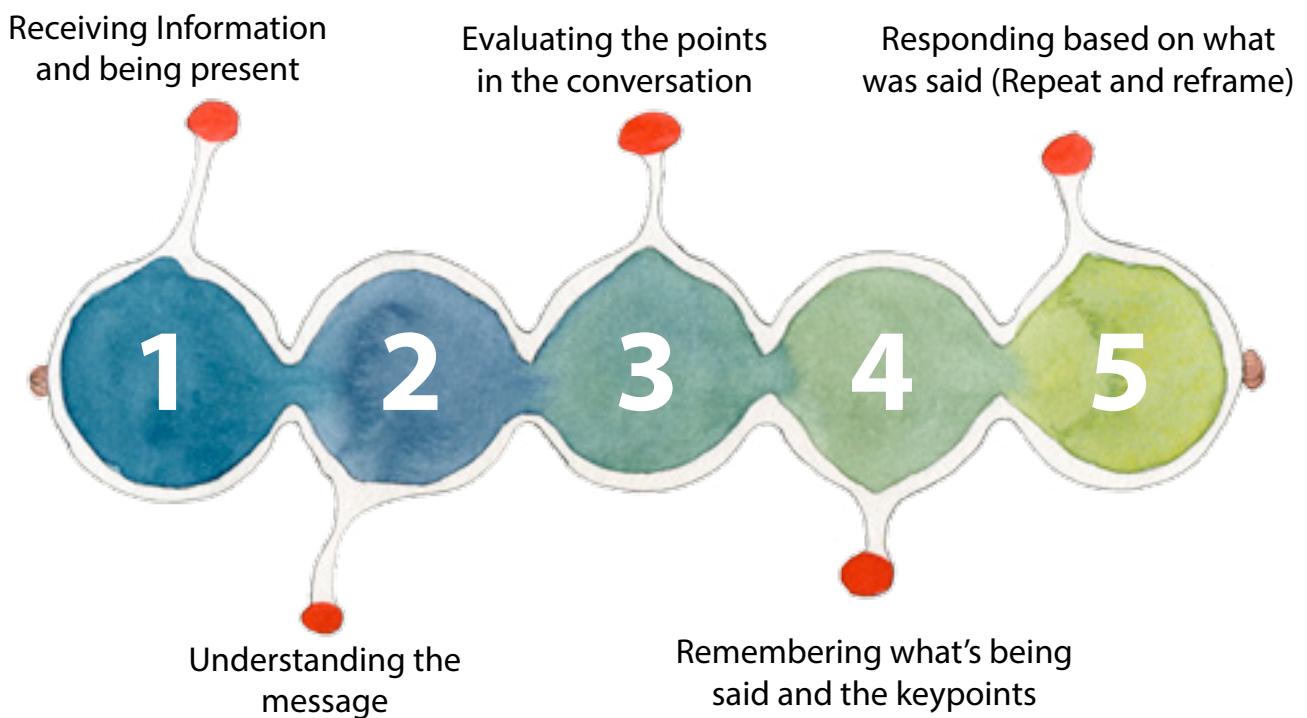
You can encourage people to use their free time to share their learning process, concerns or thoughts with others in the group. There are multiple ways to make this safer and effective. You can establish “learning buddies” - pairs who will share their learning process during the training/event. Simply ask people to find someone to reflect with, and maintain the buddy system throughout the whole training session. Another option is to let participants share within their “home groups”, which means people with whom they already have connections. In case of international projects, this

could be people from their home country with whom they share their mother tongue, which makes it easier and safer for some.

### What if they don't have anyone to share with?

Not everyone makes friends quickly, it is not always possible to establish the above-mentioned roles, and not everyone is eager to go directly to the facilitators for help or support. Tip - establish the role of listeners in the training session. Place a flipchart on the wall with a table and designate two listeners for each day. People voluntarily sign up to the brackets for each day. They are not supposed to be therapists or feedback givers, they provide support through active listening. Explain what active listening is if necessary.

## FIVE STEPS TO ACTIVE LISTENING



## Resources and further reading

- ARAO, Brian; CLEMENS, Kristi. "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame a Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice". In *The art of effective facilitation: reflections from social justice educators*, First edition., 135–50. Sterling, Virginia: Washington, DC: Stylus Publishing, LLC ; ACPA, 2013. <https://kurzelinks.de/bravespaces>.
- ANZALDÚA, Gloria, KEATING, Ana Louise , ed. *This bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*. New York: Routledge, 2002 , pp. 1-5.
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# Collective Ideas about Power-Critical Education

*Kippunkt Kollektiv*



## The complexity we are educating in

**“System change not climate change!”** is probably the most famous slogan of the climate justice movement, which you might have heard or even already shouted yourself in a demonstration or a protest. This particular political slogan also guides our work in the *Kippunkt Kollektiv* (German for: tipping point collective), an emancipatory educational collective located in Berlin working on issues around climate justice through participatory workshops, training sessions and creative learning spaces for youth and adults. Understanding the interconnectedness of the capitalist system and the climate crisis is at the root of our work. As this system is also intimately connected with problems of de-democratisation, sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination (Fraser, 2021), we place special emphasis on issues of social justice in our work as educators. At the same time, we actively attempt to create different ways of organising and relating to each other.

In other words, a grass-roots utopian practice is at the heart of how we organise as a collective and the kind of educational spaces we create in order to guide individuals and groups through the complexity of the world we are living in. How we understand this “complexity of the world” is briefly described in the next section. Section two offers guidance to educators in order to become aware of their own social situation within this complexity. In section three we collected some of our approaches to act for “System change not climate change!”

Although we are all affected by the capitalist system and related systems of racial and sexual oppression, as well as by the fossil-fuelled climate emergency, we are not all in the same boat. Our physical location and our social situation determine how severely the web of intersecting systemic injustices affects us. Relations of power and position in society – most prominently those of class, *race and gender\**, however, also those of age and (dis)ability - among other matters influence our life expectations, our health, our possibilities to engage politically and our chances to adapt to climate-altered realities and futures. In other words, power relations set the boundaries and possibilities for our thoughts and actions (Haslanger, 2018). However, these power relations not only structure our everyday lives and political realities, they also influence our educational work. In the *Kippunkt Kollektiv*, we therefore believe that it is crucial to become aware of these relations, to make them visible and challenge them by developing different ways of organising and being together, which account for uneven power distribution and allow a responsible use of power for the purpose of climate justice.

One important way of inquiring into power relations in educational work specifically is to look at the aspect of *accessibility*. Therefore, we ask ourselves the following questions: Firstly, for which people and groups is it easy to access our workshops and trainings? Secondly, which people and groups do not take part in our educational offers and what might be the obstacles causing that? Thirdly, how can we make our educational work more accessible to

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\* We follow on from Charles Mills, Sally Haslanger and Carol Pateman in speaking of race and gender in a social and not in a biological sense. Both categories describe systems of differential privilege and discrimination that have been constructed by political, social and cultural processes, and that still exist and reproduce themselves in various ways (Haslanger, 2012; Mills, 1997; Pateman, 1988).

the people most affected by the climate crisis? And finally, who gets the chance to work as an educator in the first place? All these questions are valuable in examining who is included and given space in the field of education and who, on the other hand, is excluded and discriminated against in education (Mills, 1997). This prompts us to reflect upon what power-critical education actually means.

## The first steps towards power-critical education: a practice-based reflection

We believe that by developing awareness about ourselves within the web of intersecting power relations it is possible to become an active agent for SET. Therefore, in the first step, we invite you to critically reflect upon your own social situation and its consequences regarding your work in the field of education. We invite you to take your time while going through the questions below. Try to be honest and kind with yourself, and take some notes for further reflection.

### Questions for individual self-reflection (a more detailed list is attached to this text):

- Looking at your social situation, how are you positioned with regard to the power relations of class, race, gender, (dis)ability and age? When going through all the mentioned aspects, please reflect on whether you are close to or further away from power. If there are other relations of power influencing your life, feel free to add them.
- After doing this mapping of your social situation: How does it feel in your body? What emotions, questions and insights emerge?
- Try to connect your findings with your role as an educator: Which of these power relations influenced your chances to become an educator and how?

If you are organised collectively or within the process of teaming up, we suggest doing the individual reflection first and then sharing and discussing your thoughts and emotions with each other. If you usually work alone, ask friends who are also engaged in education to reflect together with you. This can be much more insightful and fun!

### For collective reflections we suggest to additionally speak about:

- How diverse are social situations and identities within the group?
- What power relations might exclude people with other identities and from other social situations from being part of your group?
- What power relations are at work within your group as formal or informal hierarchies? (E.g. Cis-male persons talking much more in plenary sessions, or financial inequality influencing decision-making)
- How do power relations influence your educational work as a group? What projects (financially well compensated vs. in line with your values and visions) do you accept and why? What topics do you work on and why? What perspectives do you use within your work and why?
- What resources and possibilities do you have as a collective to work more in accordance with your values and visions, and to diversify the perspectives included in your work?

When engaging in reflection and exchange with other people, keep in mind the diversity of identities and social situations; You might fail to appreciate what experiences people have and what identities (e.g. in terms of gender) people have chosen for themselves. Be open to correction, for example, in the case that you accidentally used the wrong pronoun to talk about someone. Continue being open and kind towards yourself and



others. Self-determination of identities and sovereignty over the interpretation of experiences are of immense importance. Moreover, be aware that sharing experiences of discrimination and privilege can trigger strong emotions and be very exhausting. We recommend establishing sensitive facilitation that creates a space in which everyone can feel safer and respected. In the attachment we provide a quick-guide on what such sensitive facilitation would look like.

We are aware that it might not be possible to win any political struggle with a single reflection alone. Nevertheless, we believe that these questions and ideas can be helpful as a basis for building up processes of regular reflections and implementing change within the group. Furthermore, they serve as a practice that enhances general awareness. Often, knowledge about power and associated problems is less widespread, and specific experiences for addressing them are absent in many groups. In this case we also suggest engaging with additional material about these gaps, like on our website. For now, let us skip to ideas for collective solutions.

## “System change not climate change!” translated into educational practice

Our experience in the Kippunkt Kollektiv has shown that one major resource for practicing power-critical education is solidarity. Being organised collectively is not always easy and sometimes even very challenging. However, integrating reflection and practices of solidarity can enhance the resilience of the group, support a shift towards more equal power relations and help to prioritise ideals over financial necessities. Therefore, we suggest teaming up as a first step for practising solidarity. Working in teams opens up a space for building and experiencing relations of equality, trust and solidarity

– at least as far as this is possible within the bigger complexity of our social situations described above. Last but not least, we hold that changing the way we organise as an educational collective can lower the barriers for others to become involved in transformative education. In our collective we have been reflecting on accessibility and utopian political visions. Based on these reflections we are trying out other ways of organising as a collective. In concrete terms, this means the following to us:



### With regard to money and time:

- We do not pay ourselves based on working hours. We know that not everyone has the same capacities. Correspondingly, we pay based on what people need to pay their bills.
- We offer educational formats free of charge or donation-based to individuals and activist groups. To do so, we apply for foundation grants and public subsidies regularly.
- Especially in the first year we performed a lot of voluntary (unpaid) work that focused on reflecting privileges and hierarchies within the group and building up the inclusive and transparent processes and structures that our collective is based on. Consequently, this meant having less time for the educational work we actually aspired to do. In retrospective however, we see this as a key factor for establishing the relations of trust and solidarity we collaborate in.

### **With regard to work and decision making:**

- Attendance at our weekly plenaries is not mandatory. Nevertheless, the plenaries are organised as hybrid (physically attended meeting with additional video conference) if necessary, so that everyone can be part of the meeting.
- We have a facilitator and a registrar to write a protocol for each plenary, and we try to rotate those roles. This aims to reduce knowledge hierarchies and to distribute the reproductive labour within the group.
- Everyone can choose to work on what they like and feel confident in or want to learn about. There are no strong personal obligations to perform a particular task. At the same time, shared responsibility is an important aspect. This balancing act between responsibility and personal freedom needs reflections and processes grounded on trust, commitment and solidarity.
- We do not have a boss. We agree upon all the important decisions in a consensual process. Here we try to take enough time for reflection, considering the significance and urgency of the decision. We also aim to involve as many perspectives as possible. For this purpose, we use diverse methods and materials. In addition, we also encourage people to write their own perspectives via email in case they cannot attend the discussions in the plenary.

### **With regard to individual and collective development:**

- We try to educate and empower ourselves and reflect on different topics and tactics together, sometimes with the support of external experts (e.g. critical-whiteness-trainings, visualisations, how to speak and breathe while facilitating).
- When deciding for new people to join, we pay a large amount of attention to

the aspects of accessibility to education mentioned above, and to collective structures. By this we aim to diversify perspectives within the group, and to deal with privileges as responsibly as possible.

## Literature

- The Power Flower as a practical tool to better understand the concept of Intersectionality: <https://kurzelinks.de/powerflower>
- Helpful tools on Sensitive Facilitation, Group Decision Making and many more: <https://kurzelinks.de/sensitivefacilitation>
- Toolkits for Organisational Culture, Structure and Strategy: <https://kurzelinks.de/OCSSToolkit>
- Large catalogue of trainings, tools and resources “for yourself, your group, your campaign and your trainings”: <https://trainings.350.org>
- Interactive Online Collaboration Tool for Workshops, Trainings and Group Processes: <https://www.mural.co>
- For a guide to sensitive education and a detailed list of further reflective questions: <https://kipppunkt-kollektiv.de/power-critical-reflections>
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**The Kippunkt Kollektiv**, Berlin, Germany  
The tipping points collective creates workshops and training sessions for climate justice. The Berlin-based collective of cur-

rently 15 people has been operating since 2018, and works together with flat hierarchies and no bosses. Money is redistributed and shared based on personal needs. The collective believes that common learning spaces, awareness and exchange with each other are essential for achieving climate justice.

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Wojtek is an independent educator and activist in the areas of degrowth, food sovereignty, social solidarity economy, feminism. Wojtek is of the opinion that there can be no systemic transformation without solidarity, i.e. without taking into account and giving voice to all affected stakeholders, both human and non-human. When we do that, we will start to see who is benefitting from continuous economic growth and whose existence is under threat. SET can only start once we address the destructive powers and inequalities at the root of the contemporary crises.

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Ľuboš investigates the relationships between humans and non-human nature in various ways. He teaches and philosophically studies transformations of the concepts of nature at the Department of Environmental Studies FSS MU. Inspired by the deep ecology, he explores enlivening ways of teaching. At the Global Change Research Institute CAS he studies non-material values of nature and the landscape. Occasionally he also tries to defend those that do not have a voice in our society through activism.

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(The editorial team)

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