

# Rethink (Climate) "Education"

by Scott Beall

The other day I logged in late to a global E.O. Wilson Biodiversity conference in time to catch a key scientist's comment, "So yes, environmental education to date has been an abject failure!"

Ok then, its not just me. This shot through my heart validating a come-to-Jesus moment I had several years prior and has been brewing. The uplifting part of this is that maybe, just maybe, there might be a realization afoot to prioritize a change of course in the trajectory of the education game.

It has become painful to watch well-meaning colleagues in pursuit of "climate education" and "education for sustainability" careen down the same rabbit holes for three decades with virtually zero results. I've been right with them, running with the pack, but now there needs to be a *huge* course correction.

Insanity: *"Doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results."*

So what is the point of climate and sustainability education? If it is to lower emissions and build a sustainable future, three decades of this effort have failed miserably. This is not some subjective interpretation or rant. It is reality. CO2 continues to rise beyond each target we set. Natural systems of the planet continue to degrade at unsustainable rates. Society elects climate deniers into leadership positions in the government. Climate and sustainability barely register in the public media discourse on "most important issues." Granted, our current situation might be worse if it were not for the climate education efforts thus far, but by any measure the accomplishments to date are tinkering around the edges of this problem.

So is education as a strategy to solve the climate crisis wholly useless? Hardly. What is useless is business as usual. What is needed is education of a different kind, and more of it. If I am being a bit harsh with this, it is because we must be, and sometimes one can watch insanity for only so long.

Education of a different kind--what might that be? What is it about climate education that has failed? A perspective from Alan Watts comes to mind here--

*"The question 'what shall we do about it' is only asked by those who do not understand the problem. If a problem can be solved at all, to understand it and to know what to do about it are the same thing. On the other hand, doing something about a problem which*

*you do not understand is like trying to clear away darkness by thrusting it aside with your hands. When light is brought, the darkness vanishes at once."*

Is the "problem" simply that educators do not understand the problem? In some respects, yes. What climate educators do not understand is what *type* of education will have real impact on the problem. But in all fairness, education's lack of impact on sustainability problems is at least equally driven by the systemic dysfunction of the "education" system itself. This is where the light needs to shine.

Today's schools are a holdover from a factory model of learning implemented at the time of the industrial revolution to leverage assembly line efficiency to impart information and skills to train workers. Assembly line strategies were designed for mass production of things. By virtue of this model, in many respects students were, and are, if not unwittingly treated and measured as objects more than human beings. Today metrics and data rule the roost in schools. Elements such as critical thinking, ethics, civic engagement, reflection, higher order thinking, philosophy, creativity and imagination are generally left on the back burner, undervalued, underdeveloped. "Memorize the information and learn to follow instructions" is largely the mantra in current public education. And the irony here is that these ignored elements of human development are the very ingredients needed to create citizens who value sustainability and civic responsibility and have the capacity to see through the onslaught of misinformation and propaganda of all stripes.

The new kind of education needed is one that holds the creation of a conscious society as a fundamental aim and priority. Conscious citizens are those who reflect habitually, think critically and deeply, imagine, are creative and ethical, and hold a holistic awareness of themselves and the world. Populating the world with such citizens is the only way one can expect to facilitate the creation of a sustainable society.

This focus is shared by many. Holistic thinking and awareness is central to notion of "higher consciousness" of which interdisciplinary learning is a key component. The nobel laureate and Stanford University climate scientist Stephen Schneider weighs in on this:

*"... environmental literacy is not simply being well versed in the knowledge and methods of related environmental disciplines, but includes having familiarity with the interdisciplinary integration process . . . Learning to ask what outcomes are possible...that is my objective for an environmentally literate society, not the unobtainable goal of teaching detailed knowledge of all environmentally relevant disciplines."*

Additionally, a key characteristic of a conscious citizen who sees the world holistically is an understanding of interdependence. Clearly this is not lost on the great MIT lecturer Peter Senge and its relation to creating a sustainable citizenry:

*“While there are many facets of the malaise of global industrial society, it is hard to imagine much real change without beginning to address this gap between our growing interdependence and our ability to understand that interdependence. No technological fixes are likely to solve climate change alone. All of these changes, and more, will only happen as our thinking changes.”*

"As our thinking changes..." Hmm, This brings up the famous Einstein quote:

*"The great challenges that face civilization cannot be solved using the same level of thinking that created them."*

These great scientists and thought leaders are pointing to the fact that information and skills (the centerpiece aim of traditional public schooling) are not sufficient for education to develop citizens that act, consume, advocate and vote for the sustainability of the planet. Something much more is needed--a form of education that targets the heart and soul and full dimensions of humanity, not merely the intellect. While STEM programs and science and technology are essential to develop a green workforce, they are *not* the drivers that will create a *green citizenry*, a citizenry that is awake and sensitized to the role of nature in all aspects of life, a citizenry that consumes, votes, and advocates with that sensibility as a priority. *This* is what education must deliver; it is the only outcome that can move us toward real policies and behaviors that can actually make a difference in the climate crisis and a sustainable future for the planet.

Challenging? Pie-in-the-sky aspirational? Maybe. So was going to the moon. But it is difficult to imagine a more important priority.

---

*So how do we do this? **Scott Beall** has pioneered and implemented the platform and curricular program "NoBoundary Learning - Education For A Conscious Society" for over 25 years in the United States and overseas.. Visit [www.noboundary.org](http://www.noboundary.org) to gain access to find curricular examples, essays, testimonials, teacher training and student work in this vision.*

*[www.noboundary.org](http://www.noboundary.org)*