

Community Informed Practice...Designing the Future of Earth Education for Sustainable Societies

Designing the Future of Earth Education for Sustainable Societies – frankly it’s easy to be overwhelmed by such an expansive concept. Where do we start? How do we sustain it? How do I educate myself before even attempting to educate others? No doubt, it is easy to be crippled by the sheer weight of attempting to address such a far-reaching, time-sensitive and significant global topic. And frankly, it’s even easier to get caught up on the “what we think should happen”. Let’s be honest, there are a great deal of “we’s” in this conversation. We the individual, we the community, we the educator, we the learner, we the indigenous people, we the non-native, we the collegiate, we the lay-person, we the minority, we the majority - WE the global citizen. Acknowledging the “we” is just one step of a lengthy journey. This global issue requires the cooperative, collaborative voices and actions of the collective “we”. The pressing issue at the fore of my mind is centered around how I actively participate in bringing together the collective “we” in this narrative - how we inquire and inform, how we learn and educate, how I evolve in my own understanding and how I move the needle forward in working within my institution to actively invite the “we” to co-develop learning experiences and pathways that are respectful, relevant, accessible, engaging and empowering. And at its very core, I must reflect on how I advocate for social and environmental justice.

The topic of climate change is arguably the most critical global issue we face today. The most recent report of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a stern warning that if we don’t act immediately to significantly reduce the emission of greenhouse gases and remove some of the existing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, the planet will face dire consequences by the year 2040 (IPCC 2018). Although the disastrous effects of climate change reach into every community and social class, our communities of color disproportionately pay the heaviest toll for the environmental inequities we experience. To add salt to that wound, there lies a common perception that low-income and ethnic minority populations are disinterested in the topic of climate change. A recent study from Cornell shows “most Americans underestimate just how concerned minorities and lower-income people are about environmental threats, including members of those groups.” (Newswise 2018). Although people from low-income groups are likely to be concerned about environmental threats and want pro-environment policies (Pearson et al., 2018), they are heavily influenced by what they perceive those who are most like them are doing. They are more inclined to engage in pro-environmental actions if they perceive that a majority of those they consider similar to them, are engaged as well (Cialdini, 2003). Armed with this knowledge, how do I use it to positively inform my work?

Working within a science museum has its advantages and certainly its disadvantages when navigating the issue of environmental justice. Our affiliation to a prestigious university, and access to top-notch research has its advantages. But it is these same advantages that if left unchecked, an academic “business as usual” attitude can perpetuate the disconnection between the institution and the diverse community it wishes to serve. When the goal is to reach wider and more diverse populations on the topic of climate change - especially low-income and ethnic minority populations, great thought must be given to the co-design of these learning experiences. This is where my work, and the collective work of my colleagues, as representatives of our institutions, can be a catalyst for change. We plan to address this by working with the community to develop and provide accessible educational experiences that inform, empower, and inspire action across a spectrum of audiences. Again the question lies – HOW? What does this respectful, reciprocal partnership look like?

To help begin to address the complexities of what this community informed practice looks like, we are moving forward on an initiative to bring together a community-based Advisory Committee. One that is reflective and recruited from local populations traditionally underrepresented in science. A committee that includes youth, parents, teachers and community members from these communities. A committee that will inform the work throughout the museum - reaching into several museum departments including: camps and youth programs,

teacher professional learning, school programs, and public family programs. But before we can think about this convening the work must start with us, the “we” of educators within this institution, as we need to gain a deeper insight into the programmatic interests of our currently underrepresented communities. Then we can embark on the work together - the work that will lead to the co-imagining, co-construction, and co-development of services and approaches that better meet the needs and interests of our local communities. With the desired results of developing a model of community informed practice that will enable us to have the sustained benefit of creating a museum that is far more welcoming, responsive and inclusive -empowering visitors to advise the direction of our programming and the direction of their advocacy.

Now, this is just the work of one museum, in one city, in one county, in one state. How does this work translate into the larger scale work of designing the future of Earth education for sustainable societies? It starts with the “I’s”, the “me’s” and the smaller institutional “we’s” - by sharing lessons learned, by collaborating with like-minded agencies, by aligning with the work of the larger “we” of educators, by intentionally inviting voices to the table, by community-responsive actions and initiatives, by each of us contributing to and taking a piece of the responsibility to keep this action moving forward “we” can enact change for global good.

References

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¹ <https://www.newswise.com/articles/view/702985/?sc=sphn>