Environmental education and curriculum challenges

To continue this introduction to the VSI, we start by noting that with questions of orientation, instrumentality and extensionism, their associated challenges require the careful navigation of assorted ‘fine lines’ in both curriculum and curriculum studies, as well as a recognition that these questions and challenges are not only for or from the field of environmental education.

This is because, as is often the case with other ‘adjectival educations’, they can require curriculum makers to wrestle with the expectation that a growing plethora of issues are represented by curriculum, even as any particular need for curricular time and space will have to be addressed within an often already crowded and contested domain (see GOODSON, 1983; GREENALL GOUGH, 1991; LEE, 2000; COTTON, 2006; FOSTER, 2011; FAHEY, 2012).

Moreover, after Arthur Lucas (1979) and his empirically-based descriptors of a range of practices from the early days of the field, environmental education can be regarded as typically only ever an ‘adjectival education’ when it comes to the mainstays of much curriculum practice. This is because high status knowledge in the curriculum is (still) largely built around notions of a pecking order of school subject disciplines. However, the examples of curriculum scholarship gathered in this VSI might also suggest environmental education scholarship stands to offer much more than yet another focus for such deliberations in curriculum circles (be those internationally, or nationally to locally), by raising a deeper set of challenges beyond those that have become ‘stock questions’ of curriculum construction, breadth, accommodation or integration (see GOUGH, 1989; JARDINE, 1994; BONNETT, 2007; MOROYE, 2009; FAHEY, 2012).

To expand, we might first consider how an adjectival terminology relays the ways in which conjunctural phrases are used in Anglo-American accounts of education, e.g. by arguing for a development education, global education, citizenship education, human
rights education, and/or sustainable education. These examples deliberately employ an adjective to signal a specific form and remit to education (primarily understood as a noun), and in this refocusing, can serve to broaden and narrow curriculum provision and perspectives simultaneously, if not purposively too.

Closely tied to this, certain adjectival formats have come to be both prioritised and linked to particular models of education, as noted in the analysis and critique of prepositional forms of curriculum construction and commentary. Associated with, for example, the seminal work on educational concepts and slogans by Israel Scheffler, this requires an appreciation of the way an adjectival phraseology can be expected to work both in theory and practice. That is, it often requires: (i) a reversal and (ii) an adjective-to-noun shift too when a prepositional form is used, so that (iii) the assorted prepositions available to the English-speaking world (such as about/in/for) might then be used to signal and assess different modes and objectives in the associated education. (That this language for curriculum is often verbless should not be skipped over, even as it is educating for ‘global citizenship’, ‘intercultural peace’, ‘late capitalism’ etc. that might be expected to be going on. In fact, it is the very forms and formatting of that educating (with perhaps due consideration of which ends-in-view too) that has often become the crux of debate about whose and which curriculum and pedagogy.)

To illustrate the effects of a prepositional format, an ‘education about the environment’ can be shown through both common sense as much as through philosophical examination to be the default position for how many schools have addressed environmental topics since the 1970s (typically by defining and delineating key concepts, content and topic areas from the natural to social sciences; see also Lucas, 1991, on priorities for understanding, skills, attitudes and values).

Equally, an ‘about’ construction can be shown to offer something distinct from:

- an ‘education in the environment’ (e.g. through a focus on ensuring students have access to fieldwork and other experiential learning opportunities largely outside the classroom),
- an ‘education with the environment’ (e.g. by focusing on processes and infrastructures, as in pedagogical activities and decision-making designed to
acknowledge and reduce ecological footprints, such as by asking what to consume during schooling; or how (if not how far) to travel to learn; and

- an ‘education for the environment’ (e.g. by focusing on a felt need and justifiable outcome to stimulate community action-taking within and/or beyond the educational institution, as when undertaken to help resolve a pressing or important environmental problem affecting said community).

Of course, each of these might be ‘co-enacted’ during an educational experience or sequence (and with some variation), be that deliberately within environmental education, or perhaps incidentally through other domains, such as citizenship education, environmental science, marine biology, home economics, arts-based approaches, or ‘Studies of Society and Environment’, depending on the prevailing curriculum framework.

**Towards curriculum critique**

Setting aside questions of why it might be necessary to include a particular form or configuration of environmental education in curriculum for the moment, in reformulating the components of an adjectival education in such ways, it can also be seen that prepositional forms might then be used to illustrate a range of contrasting and competing theoretical and practical interests about curriculum (e.g. FIEN, 1991). For example, in some quarters, these can help highlight possible matters of ideological orientations and (co)vert bias in curriculum, or the differentiated weighting of a range of learning outcomes and competencies expected through curriculum, e.g. geared towards furthering rather than critiquing highly consumptive lifestyles? In others, attention to prepositional forms can help foster questions of the adequacies of particular and general curriculum and pedagogical coverage and depth, alongside matters of the adequacies, and possibly, contradictions and (in?)coherence, in what is found within the margins through to the mainstream of curriculum (GOODSON, 1983; LEE, 2000; BRUUN JENSEN, 2004; COTTON, 2006; ROSS, 2007).

So at a second level of complexity, in light of the above and a close reading of the associated papers in the VSI, the quandary about curriculum coverage and focus might also be expressed in terms of a simple question about priorities; that is, does one part of
an adjectival phrasing get ‘the upper hand’? Put bluntly, in the case of environmental education, is it a particular version of the environmental or educational, and if so, why? A corollary on the how aspect is, can both be balanced or integrated to some degree so that each aspect is properly heard, be that within a specific course of study or a prepositional or adjectival construction, as well as in relation to wider curriculum thinking, planning, provision and debate (see Ball & Bowe, 1992)?

As the pages of JCS show, specialist and generalist curriculum scholars have routinely debated such matters, including the sense of ‘necessity and sufficiency’ of prepositional distinctions and formulations for such ‘adjectivalized’ areas of curriculum development and provision, as well as whether the whole is greater (or in fact, less) than the sum of its parts. This ecological and Gestalt-like query is often asked in and of environmental education, while in a paper published elsewhere by one of the VSI’s contributors, we note that Bob Jickling (1997) has probed the limits of both a strict and literalistic adherence to these forms in terms of his analysis of ‘educational slogans’, when a more generous conceptualisation and interpretation may be in order. (For curriculum scholars and practitioners in the VSI, see in particular, FIEN, 1991; GREENALL GOUGH, 1991; and BONNETT, 2007. See also Smyth, 1995, on the faring of the various environmental and educational constructions, and a summary of responses to this and the previously listed questions.)

A bigger picture?

However, in being faced with what can appear to be largely conceptual exercises (if not linguistic gymnastics), we do well not to ignore the continuing shifts in the discursive framings and institutional frameworks for curriculum and its debate. Be those that occurred before, during or after the ascendancy of scholarly interests about curriculum modelled after, say, the work of Basil Bernstein, Nell Noddings, Maxine Greene or Michael Young, these have been applied to understand various efforts associated with curriculum development, control and reform at school-based and government levels. And it is these interests that can lead us to ask those critical questions, for example, of vested interests and special interest groups which might each look to imagine and shape curriculum in distinctly ‘conservative’ to ‘progressive’ ways (and not necessarily in that order).
To regular or even occasional readers of this journal, perhaps it is unsurprising that such questions and their answering have examined the explicit to veiled claims on the curriculum field, focusing in on its ‘terrain’ and ‘territories’ as much as its ‘knowledges’ and ‘control[s]’. Examples can be readily illustrated through reference to the changes in curriculum thinking, priorities and practice, particularly in the Anglosphere, to which we now briefly turn.

In terms of the UK, we might start by revisiting the chequered history of adjectival educations and their relation to both a subject-based culture and a legislative framework built around providing a ‘national curriculum’ for schools. A vivid example of this emerged in the mid-late 1980s to 1990s (see GAYFORD, 1986; BONNETT, 2007; ROSS, 2007), given the largely government-instigated work attempting to develop a modern-day national curriculum in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The prospect of this rallied the interests of many non-governmental organisations and (p)layers in the educational system in each of the countries, noting, albeit in passing for the moment, that each had distinctive cultural histories and curricular and pedagogical priorities too.

In revisiting the National Curriculum Orders in their original guise, we can recognise that their architecture was predicated on a ‘grid’ of core and foundation subjects in schools that also sought to ‘infuse’, ‘embed’, and ‘integrate’ - but not ‘compartmentalise’ - cross-curricular themes ‘related to the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life’. In this instance, the cross-curricular themes were expressed largely in adjectival and prepositional terms, under banner headings of immediate and anticipatory learning outcomes: *health education, careers education and guidance, economic and industrial understanding, environmental education and education for citizenship*. (For analysis at the time, including the failures of this policy and its underlying logic, see Nixon, 1991, and Whitty et al. 1994. See also FIEN, 1991, for a critical account of similar initiatives in Australia to establish consensus on the scope and components of a ‘national curriculum’ during that period too; a debate that has re-emerged in updated form in the 2010s, in relation to what would be a distinctly ‘Australian Curriculum’).
Relocating the sphere of examples to the United States, questions about the profile and value of broadly equivalent environmental currents and their prospects in curriculum can also be identified. These also invite consideration of whether a range of environmentalist shades of green exist (including from a palette of light to darker green), as well as whether their usual enactment is independently possible or supported, or largely occurs via (muddied) blends, given the predominantly red and blue hues to the political and curricular spectrum for teaching about ‘controversial issues’, for example.

The brief examples that follow illustrate matters of complexity once more, in this case, through being both a working with and against what those familiar with the sociology of education would recognise as different classifications and framings of educational knowledge, ideology and curriculum, as well as to suggest there may be other ways of accounting for this, be that politically and sociologically. For example, in returning to the question of the ‘upper hand’, is an environmental education supposed to be compulsory in all states, a ‘free choice’ for learners and teachers in any setting, and/or differentiated if not non-doctrinaire on both environmental and educational aspects? (On this latter point, consider the slogan found in some quarters of the US of “creation care”. Is it best achieved by bald instruction or broad education if this is the framework associated with the environmental education on offer? Or broadening this out, as when we consider further nouns in relation to dinner party taboos, namely, religion, politics, sex and death– is it, say, ‘religious instruction’ or ‘education about religion’ that is preferred, and why; and perhaps somewhat cheekily, does an equivalent logic apply when it comes to the others, including in relation to the application of the other prepositions that are possible?).

So to further illustrate some of the currents, swirls and contemporary patterns in curriculum design and their possibilities, we note there have been efforts in the US to:

(i) argue for both subtle to gross shifts of curriculum focus, such as to invert (and possibly subvert) ‘No Child Left Behind’ through its reworking towards a notion of ‘No Child Left Inside’. This might be achieved by using, for example, ‘Environment as an Integrating Context’ for learning; or through meditative and
therapeutic nature-based encounters, such as for ‘youth at risk’; or to ‘better engage’ questions of what should and does count as ‘national standards’ for education in the face of wider environmental protection or poverty alleviation goals. The most prominent popular movement in this regard is associated with Richard Louv’s work (e.g. his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*) which advocates combatting ‘Nature Deficit Disorder’ among children (and adults) through the sustained provision of education out-of-doors. But we must note that this too has been subject to critique, given it is largely a rhetorical ploy that is too often linked to a misdiagnosis if not misuse of the terminology most usually associated with Attention Deficit Disorder.

Next, we might detect efforts to:

(ii) raise debate about when it is known—and with what qualification—that a particular adjectival education might turn out to be (or in fact, avoids becoming?) another ‘incursion’ or ‘raid’ into ‘subjects’ with their various ‘tribes’ and ‘empires’. The language used again here is quite stark, as can be some of the motives: be they to challenge not just the sense of the ‘purity’ but also the ‘plurality’ of school subject discipline approaches—as found in questions of the content, history and foci of traditions and commitments in the curriculums of school geography, social studies, world history and civics—particularly if curriculum is critiqued from place-based, ecological, intergenerational or ecojustice perspectives (be that in general and not just in terms of a ‘speciality’ or elective environmental education provision).

While in a final example for now, there are also efforts to:

(iii) ask whether conceptual frames, such as metaphors and metonyms for thinking about school subjects and adjectival educations, can be ‘rebooted’ too. On this, we note that some environmental educationalists have tried to provoke the reconsideration of subject identities and boundaries with such statements as ‘all environmental education is media education’ (John Fien), and ‘all education is environmental education’ (David Orr). Related questions highlight claims to aspects of the ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ of education and curriculum: for school science, for example, there is exploration of the notion of *parasitism, mutualism*
or commensalism in relation to environmental education, a broader STEM education and its various components, and then within and as education as a part of a whole. But also, there are questions of how these considerations can actually untangle various lines of argument about the provenance and merit of established ‘subject disciplines’ and the priority of providing engagement with ‘powerful’ and ‘worthwhile knowledge’ in educational institutions. These, it appears, are particularly important when scholars, curriculum designers and practitioners look to decipher why a certain lop-sidedness seems to dominate thinking and practice within and across various curriculum ‘silos’ and ‘domains’, when a more dappled, ‘real worldly’ situation may be emerging, or in fact be regarded as more faithful or preferred by students and teachers alike (for more on the examples above, see Gough, 2002; Le Grange, 2004; Sauvé et al., 2005; Hopmann, 2008; Greenwood, 2008; Marcinkowski, 2009; Young, 2013; Penuel et al., 2014; Reid & Dillon, forthcoming).

**What counts**

As might be expected, the contributions to the VSI show there is little by way of consensus on such thorny matters, be that within or beyond the studies of curriculum reported in this Journal. And on this point, an additional ‘lack’ can be seen to emerge too; namely, on what the various advocates and critics of curriculum and its scholarship have regarded as both intellectually compelling and the key aspects worth deliberating about in a public forum, such as in the pages of scholarly articles. (On this, readers may want to consider the structure, organisation and depth of analysis of the VSI papers, be that in their theoretical or empirical aspects, or even what is footnoted.)

A harder and more demanding task though, is to consider what is regarded as ‘authoritative’ rather than, say, ‘authoritarian’ in terms of theoretical and/or practical concerns related to environmental education (cf. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 2013, special issue on “The Practical, Curriculum, Theory And Practice: An International Dialogue On Schwab’s The ‘Practical 1’”, e.g. Westbury, 2013; as well as for the VSI: GOUGH, 1989).

One particular response explored in this Journal—but not always in its papers on
environmental education—has been through an attempt to expand the sphere of analysis to acknowledge and then include a deeper sense of educational polity.

This approach has distinct advantages, particularly given the aims and scope of the Journal: it recognises not just the role of curriculum makers and policy makers, but also those of career academics, independent scholars, professional associations of educators and educationalists, single- and multi-issue groupings, school-based groups and networks, task forces and commissions, think tanks, foundations, and (not) for-profit organisations.

But it is also clear that be it in relation to environmental education or other curriculum areas or even in terms of ‘subject disciplines’, it is never simply a question of who it is that is (or isn’t) in the ‘big tent’ erected for curriculum deliberation (see McEneaney, 2002). In fact, urgent and important matters are shown to be asking what they are all doing, have done and might do (individually and with others), in light of wider socio-political, ecological, economic, ethical, moral—and pedagogic—challenges facing the world (ibid., but see also Kirk & Macdonald, 2001, on teachers’ voice in curriculum change, in a study from Scotland; and elsewhere, Potter, 2009, on how US government spending might be (re)directed in the face of challenges associated with environmental pollution and a culture of ‘malconsumption’).

Intensifying these concerns, we note again that not long after WEEC 2015, various international and national bodies will be expected to debate the ways the replacements for the Millennium Development Goals—the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’—might be understood, addressed, monitored and evaluated, including in relation to education, over the next 15 years (see SDSN, 2015). While in the context of a Post-2015 Agenda, all this will happen alongside questions of how these do or don’t articulate productively with other matters of public—and pressing?—concern, e.g. on mitigation and adaption as key lines of response to the anthropogenic forcing of natural climate change in accelerating the realities of global warming.

So, how (else) might curriculum studies and scholars respond?

One option emphasised here, is to critically engage with a broad range of thinking and
scholarship about procedural and substantive matters in curriculum, as introduced and discussed in the papers composing this VSI. The articles it brings together have been deliberately selected to demonstrate a wide range of theoretical and practical positions (be they explicit or tacit, pre-dispositional or emergent), strategies (e.g. given various views and alliances on which knowledge is valuable and why for curriculum) and tactics (such as injecting anthropological, social and ecological interests within curriculum considerations)—so as to then consider how these might be brought to bear on curriculum thinking and practice related to (environmental) education.

Yet in delving into papers from this Journal (if not the wider literature), there is also an acute sense that any attempt at shaping both curriculum and curriculum debate about education and environment in one particular direction (and at the expense of others), also imperils a sense of simplicity, clarity, and urgency found in much of the scholarly work in this field. This can emerges quite problematically in mismatches between ideals and praxis, including when a curriculum study of environmental education oscillates between yet another proverbial ‘Scylla and Charybdis’: in this case, between sincerity and hyperbole.

Besides, arising from considerations of historic to recent claims and delineations of ‘challenge’ and ‘import’—while also maintaining a long view of the field of curriculum studies about education and environment—if there is trouble in statements that arise from ‘the trouble is’ variety of critique, something ‘other’ appears to be on the horizon. Either in general or for particular forms of education about/in/for addressing environmental matters, a key question that can be detected at this particular time is that which coincides with the advent of the much vaunted and widespread talk about the onset of the ‘Anthropocene’.

This is because, amongst other things, the core claim of this discourse is that events like the World Environmental Education Congress, just like all curriculum scholarship, have taken place in this epoch, but that a certain ‘geo-epistemological illiteracy’ (if not ‘fog’) still seems to prevail.

The challenge suggested by these papers in the face of this particular ‘planetary
juncture’ is compounded as much as destabilised by taking this on board. For example, it can raise questions of whether talk of the Anthropocene is to be regarded as more than (yet) a(nother) framing device to rally critical attention and activity, even if this might also revitalise and redirect curriculum and curriculum studies related to environmental and other educations away from its historic interests (see JICKLING & WALS, 2008; cf. Greenwood, 2014)? Or perhaps, as has been argued before, while mindsets and praxis may properly shift on these and related watchwords and environmental(ist?) notions, might there also be some sense in maintaining that we are always already going to be enframed by an ‘anthropos-’ notion, given the decidedly anthropocentric heft of much curriculum, including curriculum thinking, practice and reform (see BONNETT, 2007)? While in reflecting on whether this is actually more about an intensification than a redirection, a counter view might be to raise whether it is more truthfully the case that we were never in ‘the Anthropocene’ anyway, given the twinned criticisms of the term’s intrinsic hubris and anthropocentrism, no matter whether it is invoked portentously or for that matter, somewhat ironically?

In other words, by raising such questions of priorities, forms and substance, we are all invited to examine the ways and positions from which education, curriculum and curriculum studies can be understood and practiced as anything other than more or less anthropocen(tr)ic (see MORRIS, 2002; MOROYE, 2009; FOSTER, 2011), particularly given how important the Anthropocene is currently argued to be to trajectories of all life on the planet.

In sum, as we trust readers’ explorations of this VSI will reveal, such historic to contemporary curriculum questions and challenges arising for and from environmental education return us to some of the key interconnecting questions of the field of curriculum inquiry, debate and action; namely:

- which educative experiences should a curriculum foster and why?
- what should be the scope of a worthwhile curriculum and how should it be decided, organized and reworked?
- how might different curricula be provided to different groups of students? and
- how should (a) curriculum be best enacted and evaluated?
We look forward to receiving follow-up submissions to the Journal that address and extend these editorial observations and questions, alongside those on the studies and perspectives offered by the papers here and elsewhere, focusing in on curriculum challenges for and from environmental education.

References


i This too, might involve privileging appreciative, ecological, restorative, and place-based ways that show this is never really about arguing for increased budgets for sports, health or adventure provision, even if this wider canopy of curriculum provision is important. Key here too, is the question of balance – is it on environmental awareness, appreciation, knowledge or stewardship, for example, as in Project WET (Water Education for Teachers).

ii As David Orr (2005, xi) has often put it, “all education is environmental education … by what is included or excluded we teach the young that they are part of or apart from the natural world”. See Orr (2003) and (2004:94-98) too, on the knotty challenge of distinguishing political conservatism from ecological conservationism as these relate to subject matter, curriculum and pedagogy – and the preconceptions versus evidence about their linkages.

iii Potter opens her piece with a section called ‘Missed opportunities’ after an epigram from the Science Advisory Board stating: “When one generation’s behavior necessitates environmental remediation in the future, a burden of environmental debt is bequeathed to its children just as surely as unbalanced government budgets bequeath a burden of future financial debt.” Potter continues by listing various misgivings about what the Environmental Protection Agency and various US agencies, reports and bills have (and haven’t) achieved to address such a predicament.

iv In brief, the term foregrounds human agency as a cryospheric, hydrospheric, lithospheric, biospheric, atmospheric, geologic, and hence, planetary force. As such, it signals the wholesale transformation of the planet but also because in attributing this to the scale and scope of industrialisation processes unleashed and then intensified over the last 200 years, the burden of this notion is to show that ‘something more’ is occurring well beyond the immediate imaginary and scope of IPCC-style accounts of carbon and temperature shifts, the markers of which are primarily associated with anthropogenic climate [as opposed to planetary] modifications (see Crutzen & Stroemer, 2000; Crutzen, 2002; Crist, 2013; Garrard, Handwerk, & Wilke, 2014; Malm & Hornborg, 2014).