

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

– *FEELING OUR WAY*

Pete Mullineaux

Introduction

This article draws upon my experience in schools as a drama and creative writing facilitator, working around development themes and issues. While all education is developmental and should be a vehicle for empowerment, my focus here is on empathy: the integration of *feeling* with thinking – a vital component in the learning process, which I suggest is largely ignored within mainstream education. I believe that more attention to ‘emotional energy’ is central to our understanding of empowerment, particularly with regard to gender factors in learning and socialisation, and can also make a vital contribution to sustainable development.

Information overload

While learning should never be about knowledge for its own sake, in many ways we *have* become overloaded with information – competing from Junior Certificate onwards to own the world through knowledge acquisition – tirelessly trying to keep ahead of the rest. But what are we thinking and *feeling* when we do this? ‘Isn’t it all a bit depressing?’ one pupil challenged me, at the start of an eight week Poetry Ireland ‘Development Education through Literature’ project. We were looking at the theme of child labour and this pupil was saying how she *felt*. Yes, the fact that 300 million children are forced by extreme poverty to work from a young age, many of them in the most appalling conditions, *is* depressing. There is always a danger that simply depositing what we know on learners can produce a numbing effect, unless it offers the possibility of empowerment within a process for change.

Empathy to empowerment

The process for empowerment firstly involves moving beyond mere sympathy (simply feeling sorry for someone or something), which is a passive emotional reaction in which distance is maintained, towards the complexity of empathy: embodying active engagement and forging relationships. For

example, writing a poem or taking part in a dramatic role-play, allows us the possibility of experiential learning that encompasses thinking and feeling from the perspective of others. In doing so, we also open ourselves up and become aware of our own thoughts and feelings. By learning to empathise and channel our anger at the injustices of the world through practical actions such as writing letters, organising petitions, putting on plays or writing poems, we can experience a more meaningful level of empowerment with positive outcomes. Therefore, within this process of acting to change our world, *we* change too as social activists.

Sewing seeds

I became familiar with the justice and human rights organisation Action from Ireland (Afri) through my connection with the Louisburgh Community Project in County Mayo, where I had worked in local primary schools devising drama presentations for the annual Famine Walk which commemorates the Irish famine of the 1840s. My previous work with Louisburgh involved examining famine-related themes such as displacement and global justice. In a new project with Transition Year girls from Loreto School, Crumlin, (Dublin) I worked on issues surrounding the ownership and patenting of seeds. These were issues which I knew very little about until witnessing class inputs from development education expert, Clare O’Grady Walshe, who spoke about biotech transnational corporation (TNC) Monsanto and its activities in genetic modification, the harassment of farmers and other unethical practises including seed-piracy. She told us about protecting seed banks in Iraq and Rwanda from destruction during war and genocide and, whilst I was fascinated by her contributions, I wondered if these young students *felt* the same way? I was concerned they might accept the worthiness of the project but at the same time be overwhelmed by so much information and become distanced, even dispassionate about the issues. Even when I mentioned ‘seeds’ as an issue to adults eyes often tended to glaze over.

The drama process

In our first classroom session I took a broad approach and asked the students to show scenes of people protesting against any issue of their choosing and those selected included preserving the rainforest and women’s rights. Recalling Clare’s impassioned introduction we talked about what makes someone *care* enough to get involved with an issue.

The students were then invited to invent a character that they could

portray and identify with while engaging with sustainable development. The class created a teenager called 'John' who was environmentally active in protecting seabirds and also wrote songs in his attic. I thought it was intriguing that in an all girl group they opted to create a male role model. Were they attempting to distance themselves from the issues, or did it signify a lack of self-worth? Or did it simply add a bit of spice for them to bring a boy into the frame? This was an issue I aimed to pursue and resolved to incorporate this element at some point in our project.

'Jackie and her Beanstalk'

The students depicted John arguing with his parents, walking on the beach, talking to himself and picking up a lifeless seabird covered in oil. They allowed him to be a complex and contrary character but wanted to know what made this person an activist. We looked at earlier moments of influence, including childhood stories. In revising one fairy story, as '*Jackie and her Beanstalk*,' our protagonist finally turned back into a girl. It also gave us a running metaphor, a gender sub-theme and the title of our dramatic presentation. Since its premiere at Afri's Féile Brid conference in Kildare the script has also been performed by a different group of teenagers connected with Scariff Seedsavers in County Clare, as part of the 'Our Fragile Earth' Mountshannon Arts Festival.

Emotional energy

During this project it was clear that the participants were *emotionally* as well as intellectually engaged with the issues raised and delivered. Emotions such as 'caring' had become a major component of the learning experience and more challenging feelings, such as anger, were also acknowledged and used to positive effect. One of our role-plays involved rescuing oil-covered seabirds on a beach. Afterwards, I asked the students for feedback on the exercise and they shared emotions such as 'anger', 'guilt', 'frustration' 'sadness' and 'anxiousness.' The students talked openly about feelings, but from a safe distance, and crucially, in an atmosphere of trust where all contributions were accepted and validated.

Teaching how to utilise, rather than deny, emotional energy was also important when I worked with children in Galway on a 'Power Within' suicide prevention programme. Again, the emphasis on emotions was not simply to promote an articulation of feeling, as some sort of therapy, but rather to share and acknowledge these feelings and then *think* about them.

‘Know yourself – know the world’

Another Louisburgh Community Project, for the Sonas Arts Festival in 2004, was hugely rewarding. I worked in three primary schools, this time in tandem with Tom Meskell, a visual arts facilitator. We started with the following sci-fi premise: a computer virus had done the impossible – escaped into the human body - and the children in role-play as a team of ‘micronauts’ had to enter the bloodstream and find the virus. Their mission was to deactivate the virus before the human race was literally shut down! In entering the body, they discovered other things – overloaded brains, broken hearts, empty or bloated stomachs. They also *became* these organs and discovered how each *felt*, whilst giving each one a voice and visual representation. This exploration provoked some enlightened thinking and discussion, with, for example, the ‘stomach’ group and one 4th class child, talking about obesity and saying that we sometimes stuff our stomachs to hide our feelings. I was struck by the level of awareness of such a young student! On a gender note, one teacher, whose class was playing ‘the heart’, observed her boys and girls mixing for the first time and how the boys in particular, who had initially been obsessed with violent images and the portrayal of anger, were now at ease with a wider range of feelings.

Conclusion: rich or poor?

Ireland is a comparatively wealthy country, and yet in spiritual terms we are arguably still impoverished, given the levels of greed, isolation, and competitiveness as well as general stress that attends such a materialistic society. Despite our wealth in global terms, we still feel envious towards those viewed as wealthier because of their material possessions and we are consequently driven to attempt acquisition of all those superficial accessories. Meanwhile, within the workplace or in school, we largely ignore these feelings, numbing ourselves in order to become vessels for a never-ending supply of information; often digesting it all with difficulty. I have worked on several educational projects that reflect this situation. Primary pupils tend to be more imaginative, open, articulate and unafraid of themselves or each other. However, by the time they get to the third year of secondary school, they can be terrified of making a mistake, uncertain of themselves, gender shy and wary of exposing their imaginations to criticism. A quantity of knowledge may have been acquired but at a qualitative cost to both feelings and sense of empowerment.

Pete Mullineaux lives and works in Galway, Ireland. He has facilitated drama and creative writing projects in schools and other contexts for many years, specialising in devising work around development issues. He has recently devised a drama presentation with secondary school students, on the theme 'Children in Crossfire' for Afri's Feile Bride Conference in Kildare, Jan 26th 2008. Pete has written several plays for the stage and RTE radio, recorded his songs and published a short poetry collection – *Zen Traffic Lights* (Belfast Lapwing, 2005.) He is also the author of two educational books: *Know Yourself – Know the World* (email: info@learninghorizons.ie) and *A Piece of the Cake* (email: petemullineaux@gmail.com).