

The International JOURNAL of the HUMANITIES

Volume 7, Number 7

Engaging Uncertainty in Environmental Education: Postmodern/Poststructural Possibilities

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES

<http://www.Humanities-Journal.com>

First published in 2009 in Champaign, Illinois, USA by Common Ground Publishing LLC

www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

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“The first section of this paper examines the apparent common interest in uncertainty as an epistemological issue in environmental education. **It presents a reading of why uncertainty can be entertained as an epistemological issue worthy of consideration from the philosophical positions of positivism, liberalism, critical theory and postmodernism/poststructuralism.** As a range of sub-positions constitutes each of these philosophical positions, the readings presented adopt a broad stroke approach. The following section then presents an in-depth examination of engaging certainty as an epistemological issue in environmental education from **postmodern/poststructural perspectives.**” (pp. 3-4)

“...Moreover, **the differentiation and acceptance of an irreducible ‘scientific uncertainty’ as opposed to the standard probabilistic uncertainty,** which can be reduced in principle through the careful control of parameters, has fuelled considerable interest from beyond the scientific community, including environmental education (Ashley, 2000; Panel for Education for Sustainable Development, 1998; Scott, 2001). **Scientific uncertainty** “applies to a condition under which there is confidence in the completeness of the defined set of outcomes, but where there is acknowledged to exist no theoretical or empirical basis for assigning probabilities to these outcomes” (Stirling, 1999, para. 51). **A great deal of certainty is embedded all**

renditions of scientific uncertainty, which enables it to be admitted into positivist and postpositivist discourses. This form of uncertainty is of great interest to environmental education because it is frequently attributed to environmental and health issues.” (p. 62)

“Those who endorse critical theory can uphold uncertainty as an important issue in environmental education. **Both education for sustainable**

development and critical education for the environment draw upon the critical theories of

Marx and Habermas. Furthermore, they both incline towards Habermas’ venture to “counter the positivism and economic determinism of Marx’s latter writing and thus allow a greater role for capable, reasoning actors in social development” (Huckle, 1993, p. 60). As May (1997, p. 5) notes, “the Critical Theorists from Germany, have considered themselves duty-bound to understand the holocaust and to prepare against its return”. This aspect of critical theory finds expression in Habermas’ work through his quest to “provide norms for non-dominating relations to others and a broader notion of reason” (Bohman, 1995, p. 279). Thus, Habermas requires that we think and act in anti-totalitarian ways. Thinking in anti-totalitarian ways entails the rejection of exhaustiveness and indubitability as ideals. Hence, uncertainty must be embraced as a constitutive element of anti-totalitarian thought.

Finally, many postmodernists/poststructuralists acknowledge an intellectual debt to Marxism; Derrida, for instance, states that deconstruction would not have been thinkable “in a pre-Marxist space” (Derrida, 1993/1994, p. 92). Thus, resonances exist between postmodernist

/ poststructuralist and critical theorists’ theorisations of uncertainty. **However, postmodernisms and poststructuralisms can be read as responses that question and go beyond the formulations of**

Marxism. Subsequently, postmodernist / poststructuralist renditions of uncertainty are not simple replications or continuations critical theorists’ conceptualisations. Moreover, characterisations of postmodernist/poststructuralist notions of uncertainty are deeply problematic for epistemological reasons. This arises from the problematic of characterizing postmodernist / poststructuralist thought per se. It can be observed, however, that commitments to anti-totalitarian thought, difference and (the) other are recurring themes in postmodernisms/poststructuralisms, and that commitments to anti-totalitarian thought frequently invoke formulations of irreducible uncertainty as a constitutive element.” (p. 64)