

Reflective Teachers, Reflective Learners: Weaving Permaculture Principles into NH Curriculum

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Permaculture – more than gardening?

While many people equate permaculture with gardening, this is only one of the many ways that permaculture can be practiced. Permaculture at its core is a set of ethics and principles applied dynamically to daily decision making. It can be flexibly used to inform choices about the best combination of plants for a shady part of the garden, or for designing a process to make sure all children's voices in a classroom are valued.

The active role of a designer

Permaculture is often referred to as a design system, seeking to emulate the interdependent patterns of ecological systems. When one steps into the role of a designer, this requires an intelligent, strategic and creative attitude. It is an empowered position, in contrast to the passive position of a simple user or consumer. In education, inviting children into the role of a designer, means to see them as dynamic co-creators of their own curriculum, rather than as recipients of content and skill building exercises, according to learning objectives pre-determined by adults.

Developing a Reflective Neohumanist Consciousness

Using the three ethics of "earth care, people care and fair share", permaculture challenges human beings to broaden the way they make decisions. Rather than blindly considering only our own short term comfort and welfare, permaculture ethics guide us to include the welfare and prosperity of other beings and natural resources. This is a key part of developing a reflective Neohumanist consciousness, rather than an anthropocentric one. This is the consciousness we need in order to transform human beings current dysfunctional, toxifying relationship to the natural world into one that generates health, abundance and prosperity for the whole ecosystem.

Scaling Permaculture to the Mainstream

Yet, the permaculture movement has remained mostly confined to a fringe of progressive thinkers and activists, and predominantly identified with its application in agricultural contexts. Unfortunately, its rate of absorption into the mainstream is still far slower than the great and urgent need for massive shifts in our collective behaviour and the consciousness determining it.

Part of this is due to a perception that permaculture would require us to all return to a pre-industrial revolution lifestyle, renouncing the lifestyles and comforts we are accustomed to. Human psychology is to continuously expand towards the new and the subtle. It is one of the underlying laws of human nature. As permaculture seeks to work in harmony rather than in opposition to nature, it helps us then to recognise that sustainable human change must take into account this quality. To oppose the tendency towards expansion and progress may have limited success for a period of

time with highly motivated and committed people, but this is difficult to spread on a mass scale. Even if successful on a mass scale, change that is not aligned with human nature would likely only be temporary if it is reactionary rather than progressive.

Working with human nature

However, a true permaculture strategy that is aligned with human psychology, is to apply our intelligence, creativity, and technology towards solutions that are

harmonious and beneficial for the whole natural system that includes, but is not limited to human interests. Such a shift implies a fundamental shift of values. Do we only value immediate sensorial pleasure – or can we learn to become increasingly sensitive and to develop our ability to seek pleasure in choices that are ecological and compassionate? How to tap the natural inclination of human beings towards service in this direction?

Introducing Permaculture in Childhood

As childhood is a critical time of life for the formation of life-long world views and attitudes, it is an ideal period to introduce the permaculture ethics of earth care, people care and fair share in order to develop a neohumanist relationship with the surrounding world. Yet permaculture can sometimes seem sophisticated, abstract and difficult to access for the non-technically minded. Is it then even realistically possible to make it palatable for small children?

Whereas coherent ethical behavior, in which a person explicitly uses a set of values to weigh their decisions, emerges together with other complex cognitive skills of analysis, even small infants already respond in a rudimentary, but clearly positive way towards kind, compassionate behavior vs. selfish, mean behavior. (Wynn and Bloom “Moral Baby”, Yale University.)

Weaving Principles and Ethics into Daily Life

So ethics and principles can be taught even to small children – but not in a direct, didactic, lesson-based style – but rather woven into the fabric of everyday life. When the adults in a child’s life narrate the thinking happening during decision making processes, and bring ethics and principles into that conversation, it brings the hidden mechanisms of choice making to light. Explicit demonstration of ethical thinking in the direct context of ordinary situations effectively help children to imbibe those values. This approach works not only with small children but is effective with school aged children and youth that can be even more involved in answering open ended questions, and invited to contribute their thinking about decisions.

Given the great need in modern society for a fundamental shift in how we relate to our natural world and each other, how can education provide a pathway to accelerate the understanding and application of permaculture principles in a wide variety of circumstances? How to successfully integrate these principles into existing kindergarten and school curriculums?

The Children in Permaculture Project

This was the very challenge that the Children in Permaculture (CIP) project has undertaken. This three year project was the result of an intensive collaboration between permaculture teachers, neohumanist educators, public school teachers and forest kindergarten experts from seven organisations in five partner countries. One of the significant achievements of the Children in Permaculture project was the publication of the teachers' manual "Care, People Care and Fair Share in Education". This book, which was advertised in the last issue of Gurukula Network, is available for free online, and can also be ordered on the website: www.childreninpermaculture.com.

In the manual, the permaculture ethics and principles were translated into simple, child-friendly (and teacher-friendly) ways, in order to give teachers the tools to not only explain the principles, but more importantly, to use them as tools to systematically reflect on decisions and enhance learning throughout the day. Whenever ethics principles are introduced in the manual, they are accompanied by set of open-ended reflection questions for direct use with children, thus stimulating them to consider the needs of other people, animals and plants, or to use other permaculture principles as a lens that deepens their understanding and connection to nature.

Continuous reflection for deep, lasting change

Changing a value system does not happen in a two week theme project, but rather is something that happens when there is a continual process of reflection in ordinary situations and decision making. The manual and website provide many "seeds for activities" – in which short, practical examples of activities are given that are designed to trigger further elaboration by teacher for inclusion in different areas of curriculum – science, social studies, art, etc. Small children will not sit attentively to understand the principle of "catching and storing energy", but they can be fascinated by an experiment to catch rain water in differently shaped containers. They also are picking up on all of the times that an adult explains why they fill up the sink with water to wash the dishes rather than letting it the tap run continuously while rinsing. Children are pattern-seeking machines and through repeated experiences, understand what is important.

Permaculture as a pathway for normalizing Neohumanism into mainstream society

Bringing permaculture into education has a revolutionary potential to usher in Neohumanist consciousness into mainstream society. It requires long-term coaching and supporting teachers to make this value shift in their thinking, in the first place. However, once children grasp and internalize a permaculture approach to thinking, there is the potential to viralize permaculture thinking, as they become agents of change in their own families. Imagine the impact on parents when children start to advocate for using bicycles instead of fossil fuels, or want to grow vegetables together at home. Parents tend to aspire towards being the best examples they can for their children. The mass changes in human behavior needed for a sustainable, livable planet will certainly require many influence strategies to be successful – but education can play a key role in reaching the mainstream.

Let's Bring Children in Permaculture into NHE schools and beyond!

Indeed, when the executive director of the Permaculture Association of Great Britain, that was the lead partner in the Children in Permaculture project, met at the conclusion of the project with the CIP team, he announced that their next year's strategic plan was going to prioritize bringing permaculture into education. It is natural for all Neohumanist kindergartens and schools to play a lead role in pioneering the integration of permaculture into their curriculums, using the CIP materials. In writing the Children in Permaculture manual, I directly integrated much of our Neohumanist Education approach into it, and I believe that it can enhance our ability to cultivate awakened conscience, or rationalistic mentality in the children and adults we are working with. The CIP project has also developed a two day training for educators. Please contact didi@amurtel.ro if you would be interested in organising such a training at your school or kindergarten.