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Heading Towards an Unknown Future

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Nordén, Birgitta; Avery, Helen

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Heading Towards an Unknown Future: Non-Formal Learning Communities for Sustainable Societies – a Possible Pedagogy in Refugee Education?

Birgitta Nordén, SISME, Malmö University

Helen Avery, CMES, Lund University

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Background

There is a wide consensus that radically different pedagogies are needed to deal with the challenges of our times (Reid & Scott, 2013). Barnett (2012) argues that preparing for the unknown should be a central principal in education. Not only do young people need to independently evaluate highly complex situations that will arise, but they also need to be prepared to take appropriate action, solve major social and environmental problems and organise their own learning throughout the life course (Öhman, 2008; Almers, 2009). School cannot provide a set of ready-made recipes, nor can education be limited to narrow national objectives. Increased mobility over the life course involves quickly getting our bearings in new surroundings, and learning to cooperate with people who may not share our culture, our language or our values.

The challenge that transnational mobility poses to education is even more salient with respect to refugees and displaced populations. With the latest wave of refugees, this has become one of the most pressing questions on the European agenda (European Parliament, 2016). Thus European Commissioner for Education Tibor Navracsics underlined in his speech of 29 September 2015 that education will play a key role in integrating refugees. A future rise in forced migration is a major concern also globally (British Council, 2016).

Refugee education may be interrupted or altogether suspended at several points. Education systems differ across national borders, and validation of prior education is very limited. On each step of the journey, requirements and goals will differ. Language-in-education policies constitute a serious obstacle. Importantly also, refugees have a low status in the host countries, and young people are disempowered. Depriving this generation of access to education and preventing them from realising their dreams will have serious consequences.

This paper argues that some of the pedagogies we find in transnational non-formal education networks can help to address these issues, building the competencies and capabilities young people need, more urgently than ever (Nordén & Anderberg, 2012). Such non-formal learning environments also have the potential of complementing formal schooling, which tend to be focused on transmitting an existing body of knowledge, rather than building the capability to autonomously transform societies and shape the future.

Potentials of non-formal learning communities in refugee education

This case study analyses the development of learning processes among international network representatives meeting annually within Caretakers of the Environment International, CEI (Global Forum, 2013). CEI is committed to enabling students to see the planet as one interdependent

environment, and believes this can be achieved through having students meet and work together, both virtually and in person. By organising annual international conferences, making available a periodical for – and by – teachers and students, setting up national branches and organising regional workshops, CEI tries to establish a worldwide network of actively concerned secondary school teachers and students, willing to prioritise challenging issues through their education and their action-taking. The network intends to be a podium for teachers and students to exchange concerns, ideas, strategies, actions and projects in the field of ESD. Teachers and Mentors have an important role in guiding the students in their projects.

CEI is thus engaged in creating a platform that allows students to develop understanding of complex global environmental issues, as well as giving them a basis for action. Development of capabilities and competences needed to address major sustainability challenges has been extensively researched in ESD, both in general and on the meta-level (Scheunpflug, 2014; Cotton & Winter, 2010; Rauch & Steiner, 2006). In this respect, it is significant that communities of learning across borders such as CEI consider projects and learning agendas not limited to national interests, but matching the different circumstances people are facing across the globe. Several characteristics of GLSD could be compared with what Dawe et al (2005) have called 'sustainability literacy'.

Another central point in capabilities and competences in social changes for sustainability is the ability to self-organise. Nordén, Avery & Anderberg (2012) have summarised the characteristics for transition skill competences, stressing that they involved by learners needed critical knowledge capabilities in (1) organising themselves and making decisions independently; (2) developing transnational learning communities and (3) democratic collaborative action.

Methodology

It is common in educational research to focus on learning outcomes that are easily measured. By contrast, many of the learning outcomes relevant in Global Learning for Sustainable Development are highly complex (Scheunpflug, 2011; Nordén, 2016), and do not easily lend themselves to measurement. The capability to work with multi-dimensional and changing sustainability challenges is by definition a moving target. Additionally, self-organisation and democratic deliberation (Biesta, 2004; Roth, 2006) are a question of setting goals independently, and outcomes of such projects are not measurable against standardised goal criteria.

Similar arguments can be made concerning the ability to effect social change for sustainability, which includes changing agendas in education systems. Rather than focusing on learning targets specified in advance, we have therefore found it preferable here to look at the possibilities offered by CEI's non-formal learning environments in terms of learning affordances for developing and practicing competencies and capabilities for sustainable futures. The notion of learning affordances (Caldwell, Bilandzic & Foth, 2012) has mostly been used to discuss the opportunities various digital environments provide for learning. We will use it here to describe different characteristics of the transnational network studied in this case study, in terms of providing advanced learning opportunities for young people with different backgrounds.

Conclusions

Findings suggest that the overall challenge in trying to enable this learning of those involved is keeping momentum between network structures and network processes. The informal learning settings created in CEI teach awareness about how, not what, to think. The learning continuum advances as youth and their educators attain a sense of community and find their place within the local-global context by engaging in network activities.

The analysed learning settings allowed learners to develop the ability to: think creatively and holistically and to make critical judgements; develop a high level of self-reflection; understand, evaluate and adopt values conducive to sustainability; bridge the gap between theory and practice; in sustainable development, only transformational action counts; participate creatively in interdisciplinary teams; besides the ability to initiate and manage change. The results show similarities among examples of activities found in the CEI projects with those suggested by Cotton and Winter (2010), which are; stimulus activities, critical incidents, reflexive accounts, personal development planning, critical reading and writing, debates, group discussions, case studies, role plays and simulations, beside problem based learning.

At a global level, there is a growing need to develop competencies and capabilities for transitions towards sustainability. Conflicts and climate change are drastically increasing the number of refugees and displaced people who need proactive preventive strategies, as well as skills that can be used across numerous contexts and in the face of changing circumstances. Increasingly, also young people need to manage their own learning processes in self-directed learning, regardless of where they are physically and where they may move in their lifetimes. As established social structures struggle to address global challenges, people across the planet need to be able to organise themselves and to take initiatives. Against this background, several aspects of the GLSD approaches investigated in this study appear highly relevant.

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