

Elder's spirit still moving after eighteen years

A short report on the experience of facilitating the Just Forests 'Wood of Life' exhibition from November 12th - 26th, 2007.

Introduction

This is a brief assessment of the Wood of life exhibition made following the author's experience in facilitating the wood of life exhibition at the Ballybane public library, Galway for two weeks in November 2007. The comments and recommendations made here are limited by the fact that the main task was to run the exhibition and evaluation/assessment was a subsidiary task. The comments are made for this one case, but may be concordant with the case in several other sites of exhibition and therefore may be much more widely relevant.

Background

The author was familiar with the Woodworkers for Africa NGO and the Wood of Life exhibition in the late 1980's when she worked as an Education Officer with Concern and recommended that Concern contribute to Wood of Life's establishment and operational costs. The author was, at that time, running a 'forest's of life' lesson session in secondary schools, finalising the Tanzanian People and Natural Resources Pack and co-creating leaflets including one entitled "Concern about medicinal trees". She had not seen the exhibition for at least ten years and so expected it to be tired and worn and was skeptical about its ability to impact on schoolchildren or adults in Ireland's highly computerized and polymer-dependent society. This mini-evaluation was done as a participant- observer with an interpretative approach i.e. a desire to interpret and understand what was happening when people visited the exhibition. It was also a case study with observation of eleven groups of primary school classes, one adult learning group and one homework group. In total over 360 children and 23 teachers, teachers 'assistants or learning guides participated. At times of 'open' visiting without facilitation several other people visited the exhibition including parents with children some of whom used the activity sheets to engage with the subject matter.

Findings

This exhibition is very much alive after eighteen years and those who came to participate in it at Ballybane went away invariably enlivened and feeling that they had learnt something new. Comments from teachers included:

“You could get lots of lessons out of this”,
 “It is very pertinent with environment and climate change as very topical issues”
 “There are good links for geography (on the website)”
 “Lovely, very interesting, we will think more about the table we are using and not take it for granted”
 “Fabulous, really interesting, great website, great links, found activities”
 “There are few opportunities to see things like this”

One must conclude that it is a useful contribution to their teaching and a resource which can act as an entry point to several aspects of education for a sustainable future which is seen as a key means to prepare humans for the challenges presented by climate change and other environmental risks. In this UN decade of Education for Sustainable Development it is offering a unique opportunity for teachers and learners to engage with sustainability issues in an experiential way. It provides opportunities for developing children’s cognitive, emotional and relational skills:

- Cognitive through the facts presented and the questions asked
- Emotional through the use of tactile objects and accompanied by stories and photographs- the most powerful of these is the ‘mahogany wood board/war on wood waste’ section which moved children to sadness appreciation of beauty and an urge to do something.
- Relational through the groupwork approach to carrying out the activity set in the activity sheet which supports development of collaborative and cooperative skills which are seen as key to negotiating a sustainable future.

The spirit of Casper Elder the tree equivalent of Casper the Friendly Ghost rides through the exhibition and, when the story of the swallows from Africa bringing the news of African forest destruction to the elder tree when he lived in Tullamore is told by the facilitator, global, and even cosmic connections, and a positive spirit of the breadth of life’s possibilities give a sense of amazement and adventure to the experience of the exhibition.

Amazement persists as participants touch, smell and look into the grain of the huge range of woods displayed:

“I looked into this wood, its class” said a boy holding the magnifying glass at the “Know Wood” board.

“Miss, did you paint this” said a boy holding a piece of purpleheart wood.

“Is this really wood?” the question when many found the balsa wood which look and feels more like Styrofoam than wood.

“Miss, come here and feel this” was a common call when some learner found a piece of wood exciting. To the author this was a surprise as learners have so many electronic and polymer games, gadgets and stimuli in their lives one would expect a. an uninterested response to a rectangular block of wood. But, find pardon the pun, the response was far from wooden, nine to twelve year old school children in Galway’s schools find pieces of wood fascinating! The polished pieces of Mahogany and African Blackwood were the

children's favourite pieces because of how they felt to the touch. The fascination of the children with the smoothness of these woods and their comparisons of them to plastic suggests that many do not have these woods in their lives, as previous generations had.

The majority of the groups, when asked during the roundup discussion what they liked about the exhibition said that they liked the woods and they liked learning new things. The new learnings mentioned included;

“we are getting a lot of new football pitches, miss” (reference to the Croke Park-sized area of forest being lost every second),

“trees are used for medicine” ,

“there's a label for good wood”,

“we should look for FSC”

“ we should be grateful for what we have because others need things..”

“ we should not waste wood”

That most of the school children enjoyed the exhibition was indicated by their happy mood and their requests to stay. “Can we stay Miss?” “Are you here in the afternoon?”. The library staff also mentioned that some children returned with parents and that others who came had been informed by the schoolchildren about the exhibition. “We have had very positive feedback, congratulations” was the comment of the Ballybane librarian who made enquiries about getting the exhibition back again.

Multicultural linkage opportunities

Children who are not yet fluent in English engaged with the visual, tactile and musical media. International students brought attention to the global cultural and trade dimensions of the exhibition. Amongst other links, a Brazilian boy pointed out his country on the map; Nigerian children recognised tree fruits.

Traveller children connected with the fuelwood aspects and a traveler adult learner woman contributed knowledge on the traditional place of trees and plants in travellers' lives.

Adult learning and special needs

The exhibition has a range of media of a range of learning abilities and stages of development and so offers opportunities for developing lessons according to those needs. A word search learning game on the exhibition's language/ big terms was developed by the author as an example for the Ballybane adult learning class to use.

Empowerment to take action – finding out what happens next

The exhibition has a practical orientation and inspires the participants to take action towards better care of the environment. It suggests follow –up activities but at present has not the capacity to monitor the impact it has on the implementation of follow-up activities in the classrooms or in the wider lives of the participants. Research of former participants’ use of the exhibition and its associated website for teaching/learning and for lifestyle changes would be a useful to inform the development of the exhibition. A preparatory visit to intending participants to the exhibition could be used to target the experience in a more focused way to their current learning/teaching stage and point in the syllabus.

Authors Comments

The exhibition is:

1. Very enthusiastically received by late primary schoolchildren, librarians, primary teachers, adult learners and their tutors and parents.
2. Of high potential as an education for sustainable development (ESD) tool/package.
3. Not adequately available/accessible to libraries and schools; - None of the teachers or library staff in this case had previously heard of it or seen it.
4. Pedagogically¹ competent offering several opportunities for applying currently respected teaching/ learning methods including collaboration and cooperative interaction which nurture *social learning* ; *situated learning* which locates the lesson in the learners’ personal experiences ; *experiential education* which uses sensory stimuli to engage emotions and to stimulate emotional appreciation; directions for follow-ups whereby schoolchildren can deliberate and be empowered to engage in actions for a sustainable future, that is, gain *action competence*.
5. Epistemologically² relevant and clearly focused containing a knowledge curriculum which is current, topical, scientifically authoritative and pitched at a level appropriate for upper primary and lower secondary students, adult learners and teachers who are weakly informed on environment and development topics.
6. Can stand alone as a self –explanatory educational tool, but is much more effective with a facilitator/interpreter/mediator.
7. Not well known what follow-up activities are implemented by the teachers and students after visiting the exhibition, or how they imbed it in their curriculum/syllabi.
8. A resource for making closer cultural and socio-economic links in the multicultural classroom and in adult learning situations because we have the

¹ Pedagogy is the educational term for ‘teaching – learning orientation’ or the science of teaching and learning.

² Epistemology refers to “ways of knowing” or the philosophical theory of knowledge.

- contribution of people who are coming from countries which are the sources of our timber/wood and other forest products.
9. For society and education systems which are quite highly structured, a little confusing in its flow scheme e.g. some panels are left unnumbered or carry no questions in the activity sheets, including the 'know-wood' board, some inconsistencies in labeling.
 10. Accompanied by an excellent website, which has links to relevant environmental, development and development organizations and is regularly updated.

Recommendations for better accessibility, use and impacts of the exhibition as an ESD tool;

1. Multiply the exhibition to ensure availability to every library and every primary school every year.
2. Consider at least one permanent exhibition in a national development educational or environmental education institution.
3. Train and recruit facilitators/interpreters to travel with the new copies of the exhibition, having it constantly wo/manned.
4. Visit the teachers/adult facilitators in their classrooms before they take the children to the exhibition to:
 - introduce them to its concepts
 - consider how the exhibition can be linked to their current stage of syllabus implementation and melded into their lesson plans
 - practice accompanying experiential games, activities.
5. Follow-up into classrooms with teachers to research follow-up by teachers and students and get insights into ways to embed its themes into specific lessons of specific subject syllabi.
6. Standardise the panel numbering and slightly change the order of panels for better flow.
7. Standardise the labelling of wood samples to include English, colloquial and scientific names, to endure and to have equal size font of the clearest and largest type possible.
8. Separate the main theme 'our waste of wood is negatively impacting on other humans and non-human species' from the 'get to know wonderful trees and wood diversity' theme by removing the facts about specific species from the main activity sheet and devoting a newly designed activity sheet to this latter topic.
9. Add and take away sections as appropriate to the participants or contemporary issues e.g. A double panel on music and wood, another on sport and wood.
10. Offer special sessions/workshops for teachers, adult learning, computer literacy facilitators, special English teachers for primary schools, to practice and create appropriate games and activities e.g. web of life, trees of life, forest management game.

11. Answer questions asked, during participation, on the website e.g “what type of wood/s is used to make a guitar?”

Final Comment

This exhibition, and the organisation which promotes it, have been performing a very valuable, quiet, consistent sustainable education service to all-Ireland for 18 years. The global forest and natural resource stock and its management are in their worst memorable crises. Ireland has one of Europe’s worst records in terms of personal consumption and waste of resources. More than ever, and recognised by the UN in its decade of education for sustainable development (ESD) Ireland’s people need to be given opportunities to reconnect with the natural capital which supports their lives in order to respect and value it and understand the impacts of their lifestyles on other humans and species. The Irish government has a commitment to provide ESD. Through expanding this exhibition’s availability/presence and deepening its scope by embedding it further in both formal and informal education syllabi it can contribute to the Irish government’s efforts to shout out the message of a sustainable future from the rooftops. It deserves much more financial support than it presently receives.

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