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NAMLE 2015 Panel: Media Literacy Education and Green Cultural Citizenship

Green Cultural Citizenship and the UN's Sustainability Development Goals

Introduction:

Though media education and education for environmental sustainability are often thought of as separate or disconnected subjects, they in fact share many of the same goals of empowerment, participation and critical engagement. But to make the link, it is necessary to recognize that media are interconnected with the environment in terms of their material impact on living systems because of the extraction of rare earth minerals, pollution from manufacturing, e-waste and CO2 emissions from the data cloud. Media also affect how we perceive ecology, including beliefs about how humans and living systems interact, framing of environmental policy in the news, and the influence of consumerism that leads to resource extraction and waste. In addition, gadget usage influences our own sense of place, space and time, which is a necessary component of environmental awareness. Finally, media engagement and media and information literacy and intercultural dialog can positively contribute to sustainable cultural change and solutions. To address these issues, this talk outlines how media education can be "greened" by incorporating the concept of green cultural citizenship and shows how this can be connected with the international efforts of the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs).

Background:

It is fairly common for media educators and students to have difficulty seeing the relationship between media and environmental sustainability. In the 19th century the mechanistic paradigm of the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions separated technological progress from its environmental consequence, which is maintained today by a general perception that technology is disconnected and isolated from living systems. This is reflected in disciplinary silos and by the way universities, academic institutions, nongovernmental organizations and governments categorize fields and disciplines that define where media and environment are studied. Subsequently, my research confirms that very few contemporary media literacy resources actually address environmental issues. However, media education should be holistic to incorporate connections, relationships and systems thinking so as to promote environmental awareness.

Connecting the Issues:

The connection between media and environment can be divided into two broad categories: ecological footprint and ecological "mind print." In terms of media's ecological footprint, the material impact of media can be traced all along the production chain of our technological gadgets, which disproportionately and negatively impacts the developing world and destroys biodiversity. Smart phones, televisions and computers require rare earth metals (coltan, cassiterite, wolframite, gold) that are extracted from mining operations that have had a particularly devastating impact in African countries. Once extracted, minerals and other resources are shipped, processed and assembled in developing nations like China. The production of electronic gadgets impacts the health of workers and poisons the water and air where they are produced. Once shipped around the world, gadgets are consumed and then disposed of at an alarming rate in poor countries. In terms of cloud computing, on a global scale, server farms already produce as much CO2 as the aviation industry, due largely to the fact that most energy they currently consume comes from coal-powered plants. Unless large social networks such as Facebook, and search engines like Google, convert to renewable energy use, the total emissions of the global data cloud will double in ten years.

Media's mind-print relates to how our understanding of the environment is largely influenced by media. Given the manner in which media are a kind of informal education, they affect our attitudes about how we define and act upon livings systems on multiple levels. Media shape and define our experience of the world by a) propagating an ideology of unlimited growth, b) reinforcing the view that nature is separate from humans, c) marginalizing alternative ecological perspectives, and d) favoring industry discourses

surrounding environmental issues. In addition, our increased use of smart phones impacts our sense of place, space and time. Sustainability educators believe that environmental responsibility and action starts when humans learn to care about their habitats and develop a "sense of place." Increasingly, travel and gadget usage has made many of us global citizens, but also have increased a sense of alienation and disconnection from living systems. Screens are also impacting our individual health, which is the most important environment we inhabit. Finally, because solving environmental problems required diverse cultural perspectives and strategies, sustainability is closely linked with cultural and linguistic diversity. According to the UN's Sustainability Development Goals, environmental solutions require global coordination and problem solving. By assuring access and culturally diverse expression, media literacy can also have a positive impact on environmental sustainability.

Growing a Solution: Green Cultural Citizenship

In general, there are two ways to look at the issue of media and environmental sustainability. First, it is necessary to encourage and advocate for a healthy media ecosystem that is socially just and environmentally sustainable. This means that the negative environmental impacts of media are not disproportionately borne by the poor or developing nations, and that ultimately media technologies are produced more sustainably for the benefit of all populations. Secondly, there is the broader issue of the ability of young people to critically engage unsustainable cultural, social and economic practices perpetuated by media. To encourage environmental sustainability it is necessary to expand our understanding of citizenship to incorporate ecological issues. To this end, green cultural citizenship is intended to unite sustainability with citizen engagement.

The following is an outline of the key components of green cultural citizenship and how they tie into the UN's Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) plan for action:

- Develop an awareness of how media are materially interconnected with living systems. As mentioned, media usage contributes to a variety of environmental problems, including biodiversity loss, water and soil contamination, CO2 pollution, and the health of workers. This corresponds directly with the SDGs to ensure food security; healthy lives and wellbeing; sustainable water management; sustainable and modern energy; urgent action to combat climate change; and the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems.
- Recognize media's phenomenological influence on the perception of time, space, place and cognition. This links directly with the SDG of healthy lives and wellbeing.
- Understand how media systems and communications technology are interdependent with the global economy and development models, and how the current model of globalization impacts livings systems and social justice. This ties into many SDGs, including: ending poverty; gender equality; sustainable economic growth; resilient infrastructure and sustainable industrialization; reducing inequality between countries; and promoting justice and peace.
- Analyze how media form symbolic associations and discourses that promote environmental ideologies. In particular, this relates to the SDG to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- Become conscious of how media impacts our ability to engage in sustainable cultural practices and to encourage new uses of media that promote all of the SDGs.

It is important to recognize that my understanding of green cultural citizenship entails key assumptions derived from technoliteracy and ecopedagogy. As conceived here, technoliteracy is not the same as learning how media technology works, but, rather, explores why communication technology exists and for what purpose. Ecopedagogy calls for shifting from an anthropocentric perspective rooted in mechanism towards a more ecocentric worldview based on ecological-centered awareness.