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Environmental literacy: What does it really mean?

The definition of the term *literacy* has expanded well beyond what was generally understood as ‘the ability to read and write and to communicate with written or printed symbols’ in recent years. The definition has now evolved to include the concepts of internalizing information in order to make daily decisions based on real-life experiences and relates to notions such as adult literacy, computer literacy, visual literacy, cultural literacy, and so on. Environmental literacy has emerged as an important dimension amongst these *literacies*.

According to Wrigley (1993), practitioners in innovative adult *English as a Second Language (ESL)* programs have realized that [any kind of] literacy education is most effective if it is tied to the lives of the learners and reflects their experiences as community members, parents, and participants in the workforce. This social context is also true for developing environmental literacy in all sectors of society.

Disinger and Roth (1992) suggest that environmental literacy is essentially the capacity to perceive and interpret the relative health of environmental systems and take appropriate action to maintain, restore, or improve the health of those systems. Roth (1992) is also of the opinion that

“Environmental literacy should be defined . . . in terms of observable behaviors. That is, people should be able to demonstrate in some observable form what they have learned — their knowledge of key concepts, skills acquired, disposition toward issues, and the like”.

Environmental educators have often cited creation of an environmentally literate citizenry as one of the goals of environmental education. Some of the international conventions have declared that

“The goal of environmental education is to develop a world population that is aware of, and concerned about, the environment and its associated problems . . . (The Belgrade Charter, 1975)”.

A similar statement about the aim of environmental education, according to the Tbilisi Declaration (1977), is

“ . . . to succeed in making individuals and communities understand the complex nature of the natural and built environments . . . to participate in a responsible and effective way in anticipating and solving environmental problems . . . ”

The citizenry addressed in these definitions includes learners from all sectors of society who can be approached through many channels, more specifically formal and non formal education programs. The challenge for educators is to provide meaningful educational learning experiences that help raise awareness in order to foster environmental ethics that will have long lasting impacts. If environmental educators succeed in developing methods to inculcate this, than we can rightfully hope to influence future policies and measure through positive and environmentally-focused decision making by these groups.

Developing environmental literacy has become a major task for our society. Different sectors of our society such as community, schools, media and workplace can support this as an on-going venture. The responsibilities of environmental educators thus include development of an environmentally literate society capable of internalizing issues and making decisions based on real perspectives. There are a number of educational resources available that can help the educator in understanding the concepts behind environmental literacy.

Where are the resources?

Following is a list of some resources available for educators on *Environmental Literacy* available in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Eisenhower National Clearinghouse (ENC) collections. To read about these resources and learn where to get them, search the ERIC or ENC collections on line or at a local library or university. On line, the

databases can be accessed by typing

<http://eelink.umich.edu>

Page down to EDUCATION AND INFORMATION directory, EDUCATION directory, ASKERIC or ENC, and click on either home page. You will then be able to search ERIC and ENC databases by following the appropriate pointers.

Print Resources

From ERIC

Wrigley, H.S. (1993) *Innovative Programs and Promising Practices in Adult ESL Literacy*. ERIC Digest. Washington, DC : National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education (ED 358747).

This digest describes some of the promising practices in the ESL literacy field that were observed at the 9 project sites visited by the researchers. This national study, conducted by Aguirre International, also involved an extensive review of literature and an examination of 123 description of ESL literature.

Disinger, J.F. and Roth, C.E. (1992) *Environmental Literacy*. ERIC/CSMEE Digest. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse for Science, Mathematics and Environmental Education (ED 35120).

This digest focuses on the fact that renewed interest in environmental education affords an opportunity to reconsider and highlight the interrelationships between environmental education and environmental literacy and to define the latter so it can be a useful term and concept.

Roth, C. E. (1992) *Environmental Literacy: Its Roots, Evolution, and Directions in the 1990s*. U.S., Massachusetts: ERIC Clearinghouse for Science, Mathematics and Environmental Education (ED 348235).

This report discusses the progress in the development and clarification of the term "Environmental Literacy" and suggests ways in which the term may be used to advance the fields of environmental education.

Orr, D.W. (1992) *Ecological Literacy: Education and Transition to a Postmodern World*. SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought. U.S., New York: ERIC Clearinghouse for Science, Mathematics and Environmental Education (ED 377036).

The essays, written between 1984 and 1989, originate in the conviction that ecological crisis represents, in large measure, a failure of education. They deal with the question of what the limits of earth have to do with the content and process of education and with the way knowledge is defined. Subsequently, they are based on a belief that a reformed education is an essential part of a solution to the crisis described.

From ENC

United States Forest Service, Intermountain Region (1994) *Investigating Your Environment* [Print Materials]. Ogden, UT: U.S. Forest Service (ENC 002687).

The complete edition of *Investigating Your Environment* is designed to assist teachers in expanding their repertoire of teaching strategies and activities that focus on environmental issues. The activity-based material helps students collect, analyze, and interpret information, and make environmental decisions.

Wyoming Environmental education Task Force (1994) *Environmental Literacy: goal statement only* [Print Material]. Cheyenne, WY: Wyoming Department of Education (ENC 002865).

This one page statement from the state of Wyoming gives five goals for an environmentally literate high school graduate.

Children of the World in association with the United Nations (1994) *Rescue Mission Planet Earth: a children's edition of Agenda 21* [Print Materials]. New York, NY: Kingfisher Books (ENC 002855).

This book, written and illustrated by children, is designed to help young people understand Agenda 2. Children's views, ideas about the environment and the future of the Earth, and suggestions for ways young people can get involved in changing the world are presented. Activities dealing with air, water, land pollution and the environment, along with addresses for additional information and material, are also provided at the end of the book.

The National Energy Education Department Project (NEED) 1992. *The Museum of Solid Waste and Energy* [Print Materials] Reston, VA: Need Project (ENC 002627).

The NEED Project is dedicated to educating students and teachers about energy and environmental issues. This activity booklet, designed for grades 5 to 9, describes a cooperative learning activity in which students work in small groups to study solid waste and energy topics. A teacher knowledge and opinion survey is also included.

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