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Layers of Learning

Vare P (2001) Paper presented to OISCA Conference, Tokyo, Japan, October 2001

Ask the person sitting next to you to recall a period or a moment in their life when they learned something - something that has stayed with them until today. (Not now, I've only got 15 minutes but) if time permitted, I would ask you to do this – because having asked many groups in 3 continents, I am confident that your answers would support our case.

In response to this question of '*a good learn*' [displayed on screen], most of us would choose *an experience*, a happening in our lives, as something that was most instructive. The next most popular choice would be parents, friends or others who fall into the category of *known and trusted* people. The few remaining cases would relate to learning from *other human beings*. With *mass media* lagging behind. This is because dialogue is critical in learning for change. The most natural learning sources involve two-way traffic - between and among people but chiefly between our senses and our environment.

Another characteristic of our life-long 'environmental' learning is that it is not a planned affair. Each of us has enjoyed and endured a unique combination of learning events. So what should be the response of the would-be environmental educator to this unpromising, haphazard situation?

The first thing I must say for Living Earth Foundation, is that we DON'T give people solutions and then expect them to change. Too many environmental education programmes have disappeared down that blind alley. Instead we facilitate processes through which people make their own discoveries. Given the idiosyncratic nature of environmental learning, this requires a strategic approach. From the gamut of learning sources we can draw out five educational functions that apply to our programmes.

The most significant function is *building competence* through *learning by doing*. This experiential learning is the only way in which we can be sure that we know we have learned because we have lived the change. The second function is *deepening understanding* by *learning through dialogue* – a process that relies on building trust. Thirdly we have *accessing information* in many forms. Where possible we develop books, posters, radio shows with the people who will use them – in this way we build experiential learning into our materials production. Our fourth function is *raising awareness*, an area where mass media can play a key role. Finally we have *public relations*. The home page on our website, our leaflet and newsletter – they tell the world that we exist and why.

This strategy aims to build up layers of learning where each function operates in a synergistic relationship with the others. It also overcomes troublesome, artificial divides by linking community development and capacity building with more familiar 'educational' activities such as materials production and awareness raising.

This five-part strategy is one thing that makes our programmes distinctive. Our other trademark is *the way* that we build our programmes.

It's not enough for NGOs, businesses and government agencies to work towards the ill-defined goal of sustainable development with each sector ploughing its own furrow. In fact I would say that it's profoundly un-ecological for us to work in this way.

Living Earth Foundation sets out to build partnerships between corporations, governments and civil society to develop long-lasting solutions to environmental problems. We combine experience and skills from different players in society that do not normally interact. And we don't just suggest this as a patently good idea - we *do* it.

It's not easy. If you thought there might be a clash of cultures between professionals from Western countries and villagers in sub-Saharan Africa, believe me that's nothing to the culture gap that exists between multi-national oil companies and small environmental NGOs operating from the same city.

Living Earth assists corporations in demonstrating their corporate social responsibility through effective, participatory sustainable development projects. I mention this in relation to experiential learning because that's exactly what it is. We are learning about tri-sector partnerships by *doing* them – as indeed are our partners at many levels within their organisations. Our challenge as a learning organisation is to find the space to *reflect* on our experience – and then to do things differently as we complete each experiential learning cycle.

So what do we actually do? Well, ideally the answer would be, "*As little as possible*."

We started 'not doing it' in Cameroon in 1988, working with teachers in cluster groups to develop the first environmental education textbook in the country – *their* book. We have developed others in this way since. National competitions and events in the UK have raised awareness of issues while encouraging schools, communities and local authorities to work together on practical projects – *their* projects.

In 1998, Shell International approached Living Earth to help them with a local difficulty in Nigeria – many of you may remember the unholy mess they found themselves in at that time. Their own 'top-down' community development work was often interpreted as 'bribing the chiefs' and didn't really improve public perceptions of the company. Living Earth established an environmental education programme focused on community-based management of natural resources in the Niger Delta. It took a long time for Shell Nigeria to acknowledge that we were doing things differently from them but now that's changing. Only last week I was in the Niger Delta training twenty Shell community development workers in participatory development.

We are currently working in Ukraine, Venezuela, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, the UK and Cameroon – and it's to Cameroon that I wish to turn for an example project where we are working with local communities to establish legal status for their Community Forests.

We don't undertake forest inventories or draft legal documents on their behalf. We help communities to find out who does this – or if appropriate, where they can get the required training. We don't even write to the authorities, they do it. We don't set out to teach about the forest - they know more about that than we will ever know. We don't tell them who should be on their committees – (although we may advise and explain government regulations concerning gender and ethnic balance).

We are there to listen, to discuss, to share information and to encourage. We build up the necessary skills, knowledge and self-confidence to forge binding agreements with the government on the sustainable management of their forest. This involves working out who talks to whom and working through existing trusted networks, it involves workshops, meetings and a wide range of participatory appraisal techniques from community mapping to time-lines to semi-structured interviews. We develop awareness materials such as posters, theatre and radio shows with local communities starting with their analysis of the situation and following the process through to their own productions. In this way the critical understanding which is required to distil an issue into a message is not lost to a designer or producer in a far away city but us retained in the community, forming the reflection component of the experiential learning cycle.

At the end of this project we hope to slip away unnoticed, the community having done it for themselves. This is experiential learning *en masse*.

You may notice that I have not mentioned *values*. We feel that to 'teach' values is to step onto the short, slippery slope to indoctrination. Any self-respecting human being will resist being indoctrinated - and we actually like self-respecting human beings - they represent our goal. But while we don't teach values - we do hold them. We exemplify them. We add them to the mix. For example, our belief in the fragility, the rarity, the intangible worth of Cameroon's rainforest is not always understood by those who grow up surrounded by it. But these are views to be discussed and demonstrated - not preached.

If I can identify the single greatest challenge facing our programmes, it is the *unlearning* that has to be done in the face of years of top-down development. Communities, corporations, our own field staff have all grown up with a view that people need help in the form of 'things'. They also believe that telling people what to do is the answer – often without first finding out what 'those people' already know. It's understandable because for so many of us, this is our experience of society. Working with – and trying to change – the connotations of 'education' is a struggle we face every day.

I hope there is time to mention a school-based programme. It took place in Venezuela although we are now doing something similar in the UK (a clear case of the South teaching

the North). It was a twelve-month Certificate course concerned with establishing school-community links through environmental projects. The course wasn't centred on lectures although they played a part. It was built around practical project work that brought the school and their local community together.

Course participants (teachers and community members), had to research, plan, implement and evaluate hands-on practical projects, all the while maximising opportunities for stakeholder participation throughout the project cycle. Living Earth's partner, Fundacion Tierra Viva, who ran this programme didn't lay a finger on the local projects – they didn't provide any 'thing' but a learning opportunity.

I was there last year. I saw playgrounds where there had been rubbish tips. I saw school gardens and improved buildings where before, the rate of vandalism and made such things impossible. A group of teachers who had completed the course told me excitedly about how they had been helped by local people and how the pupils reacted so well to doing something *real.* I asked them to stop a moment and tell me what they thought *they* had learned, now that some months had passed since the course ended. They agreed that one of the teachers had spoken for all of them when she replied:

"*I can't say exactly what we have learned from this experience – but what I know is that* we *used to feel defeated by this environment and now anything is possible*."

Paul Vare, 26/9/01

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