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Mary McAvoy, Peter O’Connor

Drama for climate change education

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Anna Lehtonen
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Climate change is an immense and acute issue, a part of wider ecological and sustainability crises. It is a huge challenge to address in education due to the emotional human aspects related to the pressure people are under to make critical changes in current lifestyles and to bring about transformations to post-carbon societies.

When the continuity of life is threatened by climate change, it is natural to experience challenging emotions and anxiety. People have a psychological need to find personal and creative solutions to the ambivalences and contradictions that arise between environmental values and actual lifestyle choices (Lertzman, 2015). However, the issue of climate change has a way of provoking the denial of personal responsibility, stereotypical and black and white thinking and inner contradictions, all of which can exacerbate attitudes and conflicts between people with different value-perspectives. In order to avoid maladaptive coping strategies and the bypassing and denial of personal responsibility and of the significance of the issue, collective encounters, support and safe and respectful space for self-reflection are essential.

Multiple skills, capacities and competencies have been regarded as essential in sustainability science, CCE (climate change education) and related fields in order to promote effective climate mitigation and change related to transformations to sustainability. Arjen Wals (2015, 11) has introduced relational sustainability competences as contextual and emergent properties that refer “to a way of knowing, doing, being and transforming in action that leads to a temporary outcome that is considered the most sustainable given what we know, value and strive for at that moment in time while working on sustainability challenges in a concrete setting”.

Wals (2015, 11–12) names four interrelated categories of relational sustainability competences: learning to know, to critique, to change and to be and care. First, people need to have both conceptual, systemic knowledge and sustainability literacy and have to learn to know the dynamics and the content of sustainability and adopt an integral view (Wals, 2015). Traditional, abstract scientific knowledge is not enough to motivate for change (e.g. Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Second, people need to engage in critical thinking as an essential sustainability competence, and critique should focus on questioning hegemony and routines and on becoming aware of normativity, disruptiveness and transgression. Competencies associated with the third category—learning to change—include leadership, entrepreneurship and
innovation skills that involve unlocking creativity, the utilization of diversity, the appreciation of chaos and complexity, adaptation, resilience, empowerment and collective change. Last but not least, Wals (2015) points at the essentiality of developing ethical, existential and normative skills referred to as learning to be and care. Traditional, abstract scientific knowledge is not motivating enough to drive change (e.g. Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). People need to find the knowledge personally meaningful through experiences that involve connecting with people, places and other species, in order to cultivate passion, values and meaning-making. Relational moral positioning and the consideration of ethics related to planetary boundaries and limits are also needed in the face of current sustainability crises (Nurmi, 2020).

According to research (e.g. Heras & Tabara, 2014), drama can address core relational sustainability competences (Lehtonen et al., 2020). In my doctoral dissertation (Lehtonen, 2021), I experimented with various methods and practices of drama and explored how it is possible to address the core issues of climate change education through drama. I conducted drama classes in a forest, applied improvisation practices for future education (Lehtonen, 2012) and facilitated performance-making with young environmental school conference participants (Lehtonen & Pihkala, 2021). I argue that drama can serve as an interconnecting creative and activating, holistic and collective approach to climate change education.

Drama can promote the development of relational sustainability competences (Wals, 2015) by offering an interconnecting space within which participants are allowed to be different. Intensified embodied awareness and emotional engagement in creative collaboration and reflective dialogue, being differently in drama, can promote a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of sustainability issues, raise critical awareness and motivate action (Lehtonen et al., 2020). Drama can also elevate complementary understandings of human issues and widen the perspectives of various stakeholders on climate change through, for example, process drama (Lehtonen et al., 2020). Furthermore, drama is emotionally engaging while allowing distancing and can make visible human experiences including issues related to eco-anxiety (Lehtonen & Pihkala, 2021). It enables teachers and students to address difficult questions and contradictions often neglected in normal schooling. Drama activates participants and allows them to practice actions, try out various responses and question prevailing behaviour and attitudes. Hence, drama is one approach that may promote the resilience that is needed in the reality of climate change (Brown et al., 2017).

I present a performance narrative that exemplifies how drama creates space for the critical questioning of social norms, as participants step into the shoes of insane shoppers and are awakened to issues of overconsumption. This performance was created in a short performance workshop for 14–15-year-old participants at a school climate change conference in 2016. In this performance, called “Awakening”, young people experienced an epiphany in the midst of a hysteric shopping situation, the setting of which was similar to a big ‘Black Friday’ sale. The incentive for awakening remained a mystery. The performance ultimately called for students to reflect upon what causes people to change and to think critically about what we really need.

In the beginning of the performance, before the young actors enter the shopping mall, they act having fun in the woods. They have picnics, take selfies and throw rubbish into the bushes. Then, they take their fun to a shopping mall on a ‘Black Friday’. In the middle of the hectic, passionate moments of this famous day of discount prices, when students in role as sellers and customers are shouting and rushing, suddenly everything freezes and stops.

Sellers wonder what happened and the young customers start to critically question their insane shopping: “Why do I need three phones? My old phone is still working OK”. “Why
do I need three pairs of Converse sneakers?” “These shoes are not even the right size for me. I already have many pairs of similar shoes”. “My wardrobe is already full of clothes. I don’t need any new clothes, I already have good, old ones”. After this moment of awakening, the young people go back to the woods and collect the garbage they had thrown.

According to Wayman (2009), the question of climate change education is: “How can we engage learners in processes that are both liberating and empowering?” Wayman goes on to suggest that “we need to find ways of facilitating learners’ abilities to name and frame their own ideas and concerns about our future, and their positionality and potential for change” (95).

We can all be key actors on the stage of climate change. It is time to ask: What do we think about our end? How can we unleash the full human creative potential to create more sustainable and hopeful social realities? What kind of reality do we want to promote together, and how can we achieve this reality through our lives?

References


