

Facing the ecological crisis: Teacher education and the ecology of the heart

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Common blue. Image by Alison MacKenzie

The truth is... I don't know how to teach in the face of the ecological crisis.

I don't think anyone does. And yet, it is the heart of my work. I am a teacher educator working at a major Scottish university, hired for my 'expertise' in matters relating to ecology and sustainability education. It is also my passion.

The ecological crisis is about matters of life and death, and about how we – you, me, our students, our species – answer to its call. It poses existential questions filled with complex emotions that teachers seldom stir when teaching maths or modern languages. Are we then in the purview of therapists and monks, not educators? Who knows. But even if we steer past such heavy topics, they unavoidably spill into the classroom. Our students encounter the ecological crisis in media and social worlds, and in the air and water around them, and they bring big feelings into our teaching spaces.

The ecological crisis invokes heavy fears with heavy demands; its trends and facts surface one's personal mortality, but also that of loved ones, our species and others, and indeed the very home we share. Not just fear, but guilt and shame at our complicity in the destruction, grief at what has been lost, anger and blame, confusion and exhaustion. As the ecological crisis magnifies, my students will likely increasingly feel these and other so-called 'dark' emotions, as will their pupils. Not so dark, some say: as educators, we can help pupils appreciate the beauty, mystery, and wonder of the natural world, fostering gratitude, humility and a desire to care. Indeed. But increasing sensitisation to the astonishing beauty of what may

be slipping away also accentuates these painful emotions. We cannot love without opening ourselves to heartbreak (Martusewicz, 2014).

I notice some common responses to the ecological crisis in my students and colleagues, and especially in myself. One response denies its magnitude, explicitly in words or implicitly in action. Another dwells in it hopelessly. A third focuses on solutions. For many teacher educators, the third seems the only positive option. But things are not so simple. For starters, clinging to being 'part of the solution' can be its own kind of denial. Sometimes sitting in difficult and confusing spaces is needed to become clear about what ways forward are significant and which are superficial. But advocating we spend time dwelling in hopelessness is no answer either, especially because doing so can be its own kind of denial. Abstract terror can paralyse, preventing people from committing to real others with real stakes and suffering. Denial, for its part, is not always denial: sometimes people need to forget the horror and watch some silly comedy – perhaps to engage the horror again tomorrow.

From an ecological point of view, it does not make sense to malign one response and advocate another. What matters is what might happen when different responses interact together and with concrete conditions in the world. The very same response might contribute to healing or destruction depending on context. There is an ecology of the heart, which can be just as disrupted as those in fields and forests (Bateson, 2000), and indeed is intricately connected with them (Affifi, 2023).

This intuition does not tell me what a healthy ecology of the heart looks like, nor how to get there. It may also be wrong. Nevertheless, it leads me to an interest in what happens when a person identifies and opens to that suffering that uniquely calls them (Macy & Brown, 2014), and I try to work with my students in this space. When so found, the heart can ground our flights of denial, and give significance to the solutions we devise. If we listen, it might provide some valuable guidance. This is not to say the heart is automatically 'right' in what it cares about; like any perspective it can be biased or parochial. But a real investment into caring is expansive, because what we care for is interconnected with its world, our care grows outward with our investment.

That people can feel pain when bearing witness to suffering is beautiful; it is more beautiful still when people are guided by this vulnerability. I try to invite my students to see and feel this too, but it requires openness, trust, and support. It asks for skills that teacher educators, myself included, often lack and indeed which I sometimes resist.

Here are a few things I do:

I try to draw attention to prevalent short-circuits that diminish attention from the heart's call, like the inference it is not 'worth' putting energy into caring for a species or ecosystem presumed to be doomed (Affifi, 2020). Such thinking reduces the ecological crisis to a resource allocation problem and undermines why people care in the first place. We ease into the ecology of the heart by watching, reading, and discussing accounts where tensions between attending with the heart and head play out. At some point, I might share stories of what I love and suffer with. I want to express myself, but make an effort not to reduce these experiences to performances. I might meditate into my suffering prior to talking about it with students, especially when I find myself getting absorbed with how it might land. I might ask my students to recount times they have cared for something destined to die, and whether it was worth it. Or I might quietly pay attention to what pulls my students and make offerings when circumstances feel right.

Sometimes, my invitation frightens some students and they choose not to receive it. I then struggle with whether I should pull back, or reach my hand out in some other way. Other times, my cares and their own touch one another. Students sometimes tell me magic happens when our concerns seem to mutually validate one another in their relatedness. If social, cultural and biological destruction and violence are deeply intertwined, work in one may contribute to healing in the others. With this broader view, it is possible to see each other's calling as woven together in a broader shared purpose.

The ecological crisis is urgent, but perhaps it is asking us urgently to slow down, become more tentative, pay better attention and care better.

That seems part of what it is asking of me. Am I alone? I offer this little essay as an invitation to those who yearn to face the ecological crisis together, wholeheartedly alive. Come find me. We can do this work together. 🌱

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