

Neohumanism and Education for Sustainable Development

Marcus Bussey
Regional Sustainability Research Group
University of the Sunshine Coast

The confluence at this gathering of thinking about neohumanist futures, particularly as they relate to educational responses to world crises, and education for sustainable development is worth reflecting on. There are lots of overlaps with these two concepts. Both are interested in development; both are trans or even post disciplinary; both redefine meaningful human activity; both link local and global, self and society, inner and outer in transformative praxis; and both are pragmatic systems approaches to issues of social process and purpose. This paper takes an informal approach to such overlaps and uses the paper Marilyn Mehlmann has included in the conference proceedings entitled "The Blind Men and the ESD Elephant" (Mehlmann 2008).

One way of entering into this area of thought is to examine the statement Sarkar made repeatedly that "**Life is an ideological flow**" (Sarkar, 1978, p. 53). This does not mean we live ideologically, as in following a coherent philosophical system such as Marxism or poststructuralism, but that we live ideas – that ideas construct our sense of self, our purpose and meaning, and form the coordinates of our journey through life. It is common in futures work to ask people: "Whose future are you living?" (S. Inayatullah, 2008) Another way to construct this question from Sarkar's perspective is to ask, "Whose ideas are you living?"

It is also worth noting that the idea of neohumanism was something Sarkar thought **we could begin to live**. He thought this because he saw on the one hand philosophies that were purely abstract and out of touch with the material sphere of human existence; on the other hand there were materialist philosophies that rode rough shod over humanity's tender longings and inner worlds. Neither provided a whole picture of humanity. Neohumanism is a form of pragmatism that seeks to combine both inner and outer, subjective and objective, realities. It does so by performing a form of synthetic rationality and offering, as Sarkar notes, "a perennial source of inspiration for the onward movement of society" (Sarkar, 1982, p. 4).

The recognition that we live ideas is a powerful thing. Look around you – everything you see that is 'man-made' was an idea before it

took physical form; all these things form specific conceptualised constructs, interact and morph into hybrid forms. Even looking out the window you might see a bird or a tree; these too are wound into the fabric of our world by ideas about the natural, the nonhuman. If we value the tree is it so because of its monetary value, its shade, its capacity to house birds and squirrels, its beauty, its fruits, etc?

When thinking about engaging neohumanist educational futures thinking in an attempt to unpack the question Marilyn asks at the end of her paper on the blind men and the elephant Sarkar's point is a good place to start. Marilyn's question was: **Can we educate ourselves to think creatively and freshly about those choices, and about how sustainable choices can be reflected in complementary economic, social and environmental solutions?** As education of any kind is about the subjective-objective interface we need to carefully unpack the *idea* of education, acknowledge its complexity and its paradoxes, as well as its purposes, which are multiple. We need to ask: Whose idea of education are we living? This work is essential in understanding the layers of meaning Marilyn's question touches on.¹

Returning to my point about ideas. When we say that education is about the subjective-objective interface I mean it is about how we build bridges between our subjectivities and reality. These bridges take the form of ideas. Ideas in this context are procedural, not abstract entities. Ideas do things. This is a point Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari make: concepts have effects (G. Deleuze, & Guattari, F., 1994). The implications here are important. Firstly, who controls ideas controls people – this is the domain of Foucault's biopolitics (Agamben, 1998; Foucault, 2002; Hoy, 2005). Secondly, to educate for sustainable development requires us to develop new ideas (categories) to deal with the world. Thirdly, neohumanism by spanning the east-west divide offers new ideas, transcivilisational categories, to rethink our present and future (Giri, 2006). Perhaps in this meeting we can make some progress in relation to developing new categories and strategies for making pragmatic use of these.

Creativity & Ethics

Before we look at this question further we need to ask, what is creativity from a NH perspective? Marilyn's question hinges on this word, another idea, so it is worth exploring. I would argue that amongst other things creativity from a neohumanist perspective is process over product; a holistic encounter with open vistas; a

¹ I have made a start on this in Chapter 1 of the book *Neohumanist Educational Futures*.

rejection of habit and conditioning; a spiritual tool for unlocking our humanity; a potentiality to be fostered not legislated; a diminution of ego-separateness; a commitment to paradox and humour; and most importantly love, joy and hope. This is important because if creativity is seen as a thing, ie reified, and something that can be taught and measured it is immediately limited. It seems to me that neohumanist educators and educators for sustainable development share what Maxine Greene called a rejection of "the anaesthetic in our experience" (Greene, 2001, p. 148). This rejection of experience does not mean that neohumanism or ESD is not grounded in empirical reality, rather it means that both offer qualitatively different responses to it than those proffered by mainstream institutionalised educators and administrators.

Now Marilyn says in her paper that "if ESD is about any one thing, it is about transdisciplinary systems" (P. 1); I open a chapter of *Neohumanist Educational Futures* with the following statement: "Neohumanism is an ethical approach to human systems" (Marcus Bussey, 2006, p. 80). When we introduce ethics to any context we immediately enter into a discussion about **choice** – which is another central feature of the question Marilyn has posed. Furthermore, human systems suggest the non-linear, the personal intersecting with the collective, the historical and the future, the relational and tangential. It is very much like that space described by Deleuze and Guattari as rhizomic (G. Deleuze, and Guattari, Felix, 1987). Such systems are inclusive of, but not to be reduced to general systems theory, complexity theory and chaos theory. Human systems may generate disciplinary boundaries but always within the context of the flux of process. Thus the transdisciplinarity of ESD can be thought of as one possible expression of a neohumanist ethical stance. It situates meaning making in the educative context of individuals in community. They are in community because not only does ethics introduce a discussion about choice it also introduces the other (Buber, 1970; Butler, 2004; Levinas, 1996), with whom we may make these choices but also for whom our choices have implications.

Economics

So, to return to Marilyn's question: can we educate ourselves to think creatively about how we choose to relate to each other and to the rest of the world? Here she frames this in a call for redefining economics arguing implicitly, as I read it, that it should be returned to its radical orientation of the management of the household, home, and family. When thought of globally, and neohumanistically, this family, this home is the planet and all its inhabitants. Neohumanism with its emphasis on holistic solutions that break

down divisive sentiments and fosters a sense of 'universal family' has much to offer, both philosophically and practically, to thinking about this question. It also links us with Sarkar's thinking about Prout and proutist economics, which is a subject always closely identified with neohumanism². One of the goals of proutist economics is "to bring about equilibrium and equipoise in all aspects of socio-economic life through totally restructuring economics" (Sarkar, 1992, p. 98). This restructuring, mirroring Marilyn's call, is a multifaceted project. Central to it is the concept of economic democracy which has as its concern "the universal well-being of all – including animals and plants... (and) the unique value of humans and non-humans alike" (ibid: 237). This is a core goal of education for sustainable development, one explicitly based on a new accounting of value (Eisler, 2007).

This rethinking of economics places our feet firmly on the ground as it is the locality that drives sustainable action rather than national, international or transnational governmental and corporate interests. In a sense educators responding to this challenge are social entrepreneurs. As Shalom, Bloch and Glaser point out:

"Social entrepreneurs are individuals who show an ability not merely to criticize a given social or communal problem, but to identify a solution, find partners to help in its implementation, and ultimately generate the desired social change. In some cases they have the ability to turn a crisis into an opportunity" (Shalom, 2007, p. 156)

Both ESD and neohumanist educators have recognised the unsustainability of current social practices and are now seeking collective solutions to the nexus of problems facing humanity. Both are working to create a new language based on a set of ideas that are both familiar and strange. Hybrid forms³ such as the concept of economics based on love and compassion, and education which unlocks an individual's potential rather than replicating an out dated – and unsustainable – citizen, become real alternatives to an impoverished set of functional ideas and practices that are now harmful to planetary welfare.

Transcending Boundaries

Marilyn mentions this concept a couple of times in her paper. It has a real resonance with me, not only because it is the title of a book on Sarkar's thinking (S. Inayatullah, & Fitzgerald, Jennifer, 1999),

² Neohumanism is the subjective approach of Sarkar's philosophy while Prout is the objective adjustment found throughout the whole practical engagement with the world.

³ See the work of Hazel Henderson www.hazelhenderson.com

but also because it is at the heart of what Neohumanism is trying to do.

The conceptual map, Table 1, Marilyn provides for ESD is also relevant for neohumanist work in education and for our collective need to identify educational responses to the current multilevel crises threatening the planet.

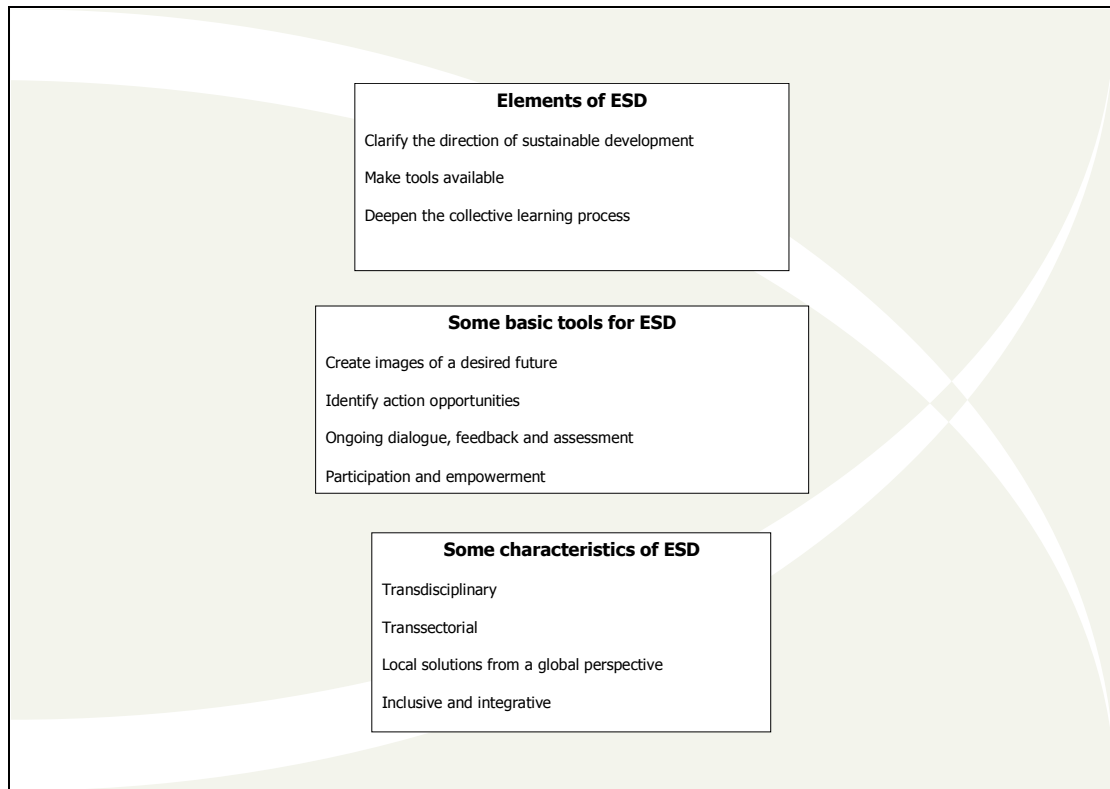


Table 1: Marilyn's Map

To expand on these categories from a neohumanist perspective is a useful process and can generate multiple responses. Firstly it is recognised that ESD and neohumanism share a common goal – though ESD is more specifically focused than neohumanism. Neohumanism proffers a redefinition of humanity, or to be more precise, of human purpose, and is thus more ambitious in this regard. ESD however encourages its participants to own their changes and responsibilities and therefore engages transformative action from the ground up. In Table 2 I offer some suggestions for how ESD and NHE interface.

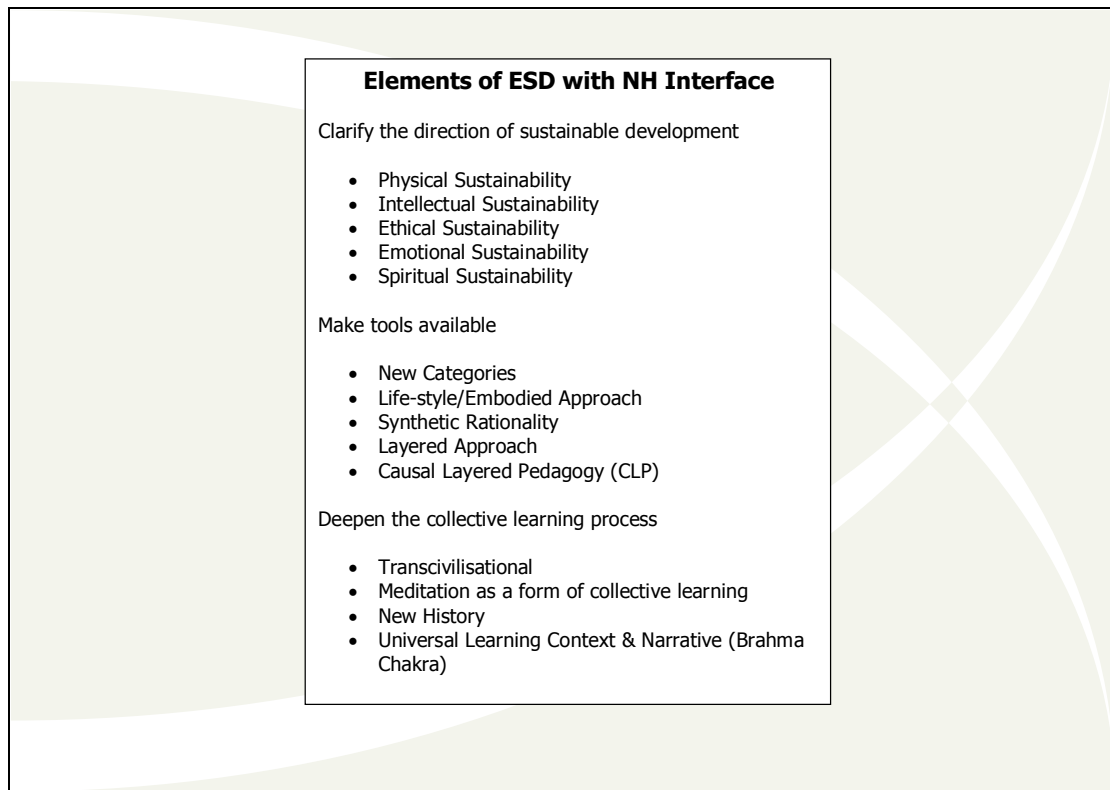


Table 2: ESD and NHE Interface

Firstly, neohumanism engages a layered approach to human existence. I have interpreted this in the realm of sustainability as five categories of sustainability (Marcus Bussey, 2002, 2008). As a teacher I find this to be a useful way of thinking about learning processes with children and their families. Secondly, it is clear that NHE also offers a range of specific tools that broaden and strengthen the ESD process. Causal Layered Pedagogy is one new tool I am developing and will be trialling over the next two years. I provide an extended outline of this with this introductory paper.

When we expand the tools area following Marilyn’s map NHE futures can also be seen to make a clear contribution. Some possible applications are detailed in the Table 3.

Some basic tools
Create images of a desired NH future
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory Futures • Anticipatory Futures • Inclusive Futures • Transformative Futures
Identify action opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local (self-family-community) • Social Pedagogy
Ongoing dialogue, feedback and assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning Communities • Economics of Heart • Action Learning Cycles • Creativity quotient • Causal Layered Accounting
Participation and empowerment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconfiguration of Agency-Structure

Table 3: Some Basic Tools

Neohumanism acts as a utopic (Marin, 1990) through which preferred futures can be developed but not fossilized into an utopian vision that silences dissent and is already oppressive and dead to human beings before it is begun. All utopian visions, including that of capitalism, have proven to be violent and oppressive (Nandy, 1987). A utopic privileges the process of achieving a good society, a *eutopia*, over the desired goal or terminus. Such a vision is collective and participatory. It is in participatory action that ESD and NHE are in deep agreement and if we were to pick one thing to focus on at this meeting it is this element. ***Any educational response to the crises of our time must be inclusive and participatory.*** We, here today, need to keep working towards inclusive action for change and transformation.

In Table 4 I explore what NHE might bring to Marilyn’s map of the characteristics of ESD.

Some characteristics of ESD with NHE Interface	
Transdisciplinary – Post Disciplinary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From knowledge <i>administration</i> to knowledge <i>emancipation</i> • Mimetic transformation
Transsectorial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchy of purpose – nested identity results from mission • Manage within the unmanageable • Microvita and multi-dimensional (rhizomic)
Local solutions from a global perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple readings of this dialectic – personal-collective; subjective-objective; hierarchy of purpose
Inclusive and integrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthetic rationality • Communal individuality • Holonic inclusivity • Synergy • Mystery

Table 4: Characteristics of ESD with NHE Interface

This expanded table allows us to see some of the unique possibilities NHE brings to this engagement. New categories – such as *microvita* – are introduced that allow us to think about energy, social evolution and cultural process in qualitatively different and less functional ways than we generally find in much thought about education, and education for social revitalisation (M. Bussey, 2009 available on www.futuresevocative.com).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the points of overlap and potential synergy between ESD and NHE. As people are the fundamental ingredient of the entire educational and social process, it is argued that it is in developing participatory human capacity that we should start to approach any understanding of how education can respond to the challenge faced by humanity and the planet at this time.

Such capacity cannot however be developed in a void. It needs an ideational context in which to flourish, one that nurtures and fosters a strikingly different vision of human capacity. NHE offers such a vision and can, I believe, meet the need Marilyn identifies early in her paper of clarifying the scope and direction of sustainable development. It does this by offering new categories to think-act by, a unique set of procedural tools to augment the already rich tool

kit of ESD, and by offering a holistic and grounded picture of human potential and the relational scaffold that makes this image coherent.

References

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Buber, M. (1970). *I and Thou* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bussey, M. (2002). Sustainable Education: Imperatives for a Viable Future. In *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*. Oxford: UNESCO.
- Bussey, M. (2006). Neohumanism: Critical Spirituality, Tantra and Education. In S. Inayatullah, Bussey, M., & Milojevic, I (Ed.), *Neohumanist Educational Futures: Liberating the Pedagogical Intellect* (pp. 80-95). Taipei, Taiwan: Tamkang University Press.
- Bussey, M. (2008). Embodied Education: Reflections on Sustainable Education. *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability*, 43(3), 139-147.
- Bussey, M. (2009). Mapping Time: Cartography at the Limits of World History. *Social Evolution & History*, forthcoming.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London & New York: Verso.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1994). *What is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, G., and Guattari, Felix. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). London & New York: Continuum.
- Eisler, R. (2007). *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Foucault, M. (2002). What is Critique? In D. Ingram (Ed.), *The Political* (pp. 191-211). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Giri, A. K. (2006). *New Horizons of Social Theory: Conversations, Transformations and Beyond*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education*. New York & London: Teachers College Press.
- Hoy, D. C. (2005). *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Inayatullah, S. (2008). Mapping Educational Futures: Six Foundational Concepts and the Six Pillars Approach. In M. Bussey, Inayatullah, S., & Milojevic, Ivana (Ed.), *Alternative Educational Futures: Pedagogies for Emerging Worlds*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Inayatullah, S., & Fitzgerald, Jennifer (Ed.). (1999). *Transcending Boundaries: Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar's Theories of Individual and Social Transformation*. Maleny, Australia: Gurukula Press.
- Levinas, E. (1996). *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Marin, L. (1990). *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*. Amherst, NY:: Humanity Books.

- Nandy, A. (1987). *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sarkar, P. R. (1978). *Ananda Vacanamrtam Part 1*. Calcutta: Ananda Marga Publications.
- Sarkar, P. R. (1982). *The Liberation of Intellect: Neohumanism*. Calcutta: Ananda Marga Publications.
- Sarkar, P. R. (1992). *Proutist Economics: Discourses on Economic Liberation*. Calcutta: Ananda Marga Publications.
- Shalom, Y. B., Block, E. & Glaser, Y. (2007). Educators As Social Entrepreneurs: A Different Approach to Teacher Training. *The International Journal of Learning*, 14(7), 155-161.

*Spelling?