London Environmental Education Forum (LEEF): Reading Group

Social learning frameworks for community environmental education

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Chapter summary

Environment education often focuses on young people. However, the importance of environmental learning as a tool to foster community well-being, whilst under researched, presents great opportunities particularly for those living in cities. In this chapter, Krasny and colleagues introduce two theories of social learning as useful frameworks to explore and analyse community environmental education: community of practice and cultural historical activity theory. Through three community programmes the authors illustrate how social learning frameworks might be used to better understand the ingredients that serves to enable successful community environmental practice.

What is community environmental education?

Community environmental education, Krasny and colleagues propose, 'prioritises wellness above environmental outcomes'. On initial reading this statement might be considered problematic, in that human well-being trumps environmental well-being. Possibly, however, as benefits for the environmental, such as landscaping, planting, are to achieve successful well-being outcomes, perhaps the centrality and importance of the environment here is under-played. Rather, both the environment and human well-being serve one another. That said, Krasny and colleagues align community environmental education with youth and community development, a research field that focuses on 'people'.

Community environmental education research is in its infancy, emerging out of North America. Understanding the term 'community' is important and will change in shape dependent on context. The author's set out that they use the term to mean: local, that is a neighbourhood, shared interested, such as organic food production and the feeling of belonging. Community wellness is tricky to qualify but interestingly here the authors include the necessity of the environment to be a key ingredient. Community wellness is defined as 'social, environmental and economic conditions that support health and quality of life, including the presents of healthy green spaces, food and water, and opportunities to engage in healthy activities with others'.

How might theories of learning be used by environmental educators to build wellness?
Krasny and colleagues propose that because building connections among people is critical to achieving community wellness, theories of learning emphasising how learning occurs through interactions are crucial so that the learning process and outcomes might be better understood.

To this end the authors set out two learning theories:
1) Community of Practice: Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal work proposed that a community of practice is a place where people had a common interest, or common purpose, and cultivated a common repertoire. Often such values and behaviours are tacit, that is they are embody and learnt whilst being in the setting rather than read or just heard.
2) Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT): Engestrom's (1987) seminal work proposed that humans change or learn when they engage in a particular cultural and historical context, and in doing so change that environment. The learning occurs within an 'activity system' consisting of goals, tools, rules, objects, subjects, community and the division of labour. Once identified, understanding the interaction of these elements is key.

Both theories offer environmental educators frameworks enabling focused programme development. In particular, CHAT can serve as a tool that can direct the identification of particular important elements required for programme success. For example, it encourages the explicit articulation of goals, participants, resources and anticipated behaviours. Elements that are crucial but can be under explored.

Questions for environmental educators
- What do you think the purpose of community environmental education programmes are? Do you agree with Krasny and colleague's definition?
- Could you analyse a programme you have worked on using one of the theories of learning? What challenges are there in doing this?
- How might the theories of learning be useful frameworks when developing a programme proposal or evaluation?