

Pedagogical challenges: insights from environmental communication

Book

MILSTEIN, T., PILEGGI, M. AND MORGAN, E. (2018).
ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE.
U.K., ROUTLEDGE

Reviewed by

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Abstract

Environmental Pedagogies and Practice is divided into four sections: changing environmental pedagogies, teaching practices, examples of transformative approaches and a toolkit of lesson plans. While the book focuses on environmental communication, the chapters offer insights that are also relevant in a range of science communication contexts.

Keywords

Environmental communication

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Primarily aimed at those teaching environmental communication at undergraduate or postgraduate level, this engaging and diverse collection will also likely interest those teaching and designing curricula in related areas, such as science communication or science and society oriented programmes. As with the practice of much environmental communication, this book is overtly political and seeks to present a curriculum that helps students to challenge 'dominant Western premises of "nature" as a separate, passive backdrop or a mute store of resources' [Milstein et al., p. 2] and become 'effective agents of change' [p. 3]. In many of the chapters, authors argue for curricula or pedagogies designed to help students become change-makers and advocates for the environment; a perspective I found refreshing, particularly as these non-neutral positions can attract negative connotations in a science communication context. I do not wish to suggest that we should not critique these perspectives and positions, merely that the approaches offered by Milstein et al. [2018] provide an interesting counterpoint to positions which at times seem to argue that science communication practice that seeks particular policy or other change is somehow less desirable.

Environmental communication pedagogy and practice is divided into four sections: the first explores changing environmental communication pedagogies, providing perspectives on the ways that environmental communication courses can be transformative for learners (students and teachers). In this section, Stack and Flower introduce the concept of 'knowledge-negotiator' [p. 12] as a way of

reconceptualising the role of students in the learning process, with a view to helping students explore the role of environmental communicators in the public discourse. Through this approach, students are supported to see the complexity of issues, gaining awareness of the different perspectives that contribute to public debate about environmental issues and turning the classroom into 'a site for instruction and as a community wherein communicative exchange occurs to help students to begin to understand and negotiate environmental public discourse' [p. 13]. By engendering a deep understanding of environmental issues, students become transformative agents, able to effect socially responsible change, something many curricula in fields allied to environmental communication might also seek to engender in their students.

In part two, we are introduced to practical and diverse practices for teaching environmental communication, ranging from networked digital spaces to arts based practices. I found the chapters by Pedelty and Hamilton, and Mocatta interesting as offering practical suggestions and reflections on delivering communication courses in digital spaces. Pedelty and Hamilton, for example, stress the challenges of teaching practical performative skills (such as public speaking) in a course delivered almost entirely online (via Moodle). The move in higher education to providing blended and distance learning presents challenges in most contexts, but particularly when teaching these practical communication skills, something we have also battled in delivering online courses.¹ Mocatta also addresses the challenge of distance learning courses, in context of a professional environmental journalism course.

Having used arts-based approaches myself, I found Takach's chapter on arts-based approaches informative, particularly the discussion of the assessment that requires students to research an aspect of environmental communication covered on the degree programme and create a practical, loosely arts-based, practical communication piece (e.g. a film, poem, song, play). I have used similar approaches to assessment and found they challenge students (particularly those that have followed a largely science-based educational pathway) to think in new ways about communication, often providing transformative experiences (and some thought-provoking submissions), though I would agree with Takach that much thought needs to be put into developing a clear assessment brief and marking criteria that assess the critical content engagement rather than practical artistic skills.

In part three, the book shifts to consider examples of transformative approaches to environmental communication pedagogy, considering both credit bearing and non-credit bearing examples. Here, I found examples of students learning through community projects, an approach similar to that taken in some science shops, the use of storytelling as a means of 'transforming the identity of self and communities' [Pileggi and Morgan, p. 159] and one of the chapters I found most engaging, a study of video making in Nepal. In this chapter, Grady Walker takes a critical pedagogical approach to explore learning and praxis amongst Nepali adults participating in a video making course. Making use of the Johari Window concept, the chapter highlights the ways that critical pedagogical approaches can allow insider knowledge to emerge and through this to empower participants to see their

¹See: <https://www1.uwe.ac.uk/research/sciencecommunicationunit/coursesandtraining/professionalandshortcourses.aspx>.

environment in new ways, becoming environmental communicators (and champions) in the process.

The final section of the book offers a 'gift' to the environmental communication teacher through provision of 13 practical teaching tools. These range from exercises to challenge students own positioning and taken for granted behaviours (e.g. an 'environmental privilege walk' and a personal consumption task) to practical communications activities (e.g. using infographics, practical speaking exercises) and more analytical exercises (e.g. news media and visual analysis). The lessons offered in this toolkit could easily be adapted to a wide range of issues in science communication.

I have picked out the chapters in the book which most resonated for me. However, the wide range of topics addressed, combined with the practical approach taken throughout this collection makes it essential reading for anyone designing an Environmental Communications course. Those with established programmes in environmental or science communication will likely find gems to incorporate into their own teaching practice.

Author

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