RCE's: Strengthening Learning for Sustainability through Networks in Africa!"
By: Dr. Jim Taylor

"We are only as good as the people we work with!"

Overview: Jim Taylor provided a key-note speech at the Africa RCE conference in eSwatini which took place from the 5th to 7th August 2019. The following notes summarise the presentation, which included input from the audience.

Learning Networks are Key

We are only as good as the people we work with! This means that networks are key to strengthen our professional work! It is for this reason that the RCE networks have become so well-known and effective across Africa! As noted by Wenger (Wenger, et.al., 2011) in his work on Communities of Practice a shared purpose is key. Here learning for sustainability, or Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), has become an important underlying theme. Other networks that connect with the RCE's include the Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa (EEASA - founded in eSwatini in 1982) as well as the SADC-REEP a capacity building network established by SADC, with the support of Swedish Sida and implemented by the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA).

Course Activated Learning Networks

Many young professionals from eSwatini have undertaken course activated learning over the past two decades. Initially adapted from the Gold Fields course this course process was accredited by the SADC-REEP and Rhodes University. It has transformed ESD in eSwatini. Indeed at least 15 ESD professionals, present at this conference, benefitted from or contributed to (as Tutors) the course processes! In particular Co-Learning and the development and implementation of an innovative 'Change Project' by all participants was the hall-mark of the courses.

Leap-frogging: the African way

Leap-frogging is a term used to describe a process of jumping forward, over some processes that are normally followed, but can be superseded. African countries without land-lines, for example, may leap-frog straight to mobile phones without having to develop a land-line phone system. Other examples including capturing sunlight energy at a local level without relying on a national grid. Lesser-developed countries do not have to follow the same development pathway that industrial nations follow and can, where possible, seek to avoid the detrimental effects that industrialisation has on the environment and planet as a whole. Such processes may prove more sustainable and climate friendly in the longer term!

Many people feel that lesser-developed countries should strive to become so-called first-world countries. This is not a wise idea. First-world countries usually have a high carbon footprint and contribute a great deal to climate change risks. Many have depleted their own natural resources as well as their life-giving biodiversity. Biodiversity is largely intact in Africa and should be conserved, going forward, rather than by blindly following the 'industrial development' that has been so destructive of life-support systems in most first-world countries. By leap-frogging to less destructive and more sustainable industrial processes Africa can avoid much that is going wrong elsewhere in the world.

A further example of leap-frogging occurred at the World RCE conference in Barcelona where a number of sessions were conducted as a live process, through the internet. Perhaps surprisingly the

African delegate participation was higher than that of other continents! This was due to the social media linkages that African delegates had developed which were more rapid and effective than more traditional email based processes!   Bheki Thusi of eSwatini led this process and connected people to the sessions through social media! Mobile phone banking and money transfer is also better developed in parts of Africa than in so-called highly developed countries.

ESD and sustainable living can become the ultimate leap-frogging example where people of eSwatini live in more sustainable ways than rich people in first-world countries. A further, recent example, is GEO-ODK (Object Driven Knowledge) which includes live data processes developed and maintained through cell-phones and saved in the cloud (Graham and Taylor, 2018). Such data captures water and sanitation issues, solid waste risks and these are GIS linked. GEO-ODK data bases are free to use, all can contribute to them, and they are easy to access.

We should all seek to strengthen leap-frogging examples as we strive for a world that is more sustainable, more inclusive and more gentle on people, plants and animals.

African Heritage

In Africa natural and human developed heritage is sadly on the decline. Forces of colonialism, modernism and so-called progress are contributing to this decline. The wisdom of the past, or indigenous knowledge, is neglected and many RCE's in Africa are seeking to turn this situation around. In particular RCE Makana and RCE KwaZulu-Natal have many projects that seek to protect and care for indigenous knowledge processes (O'Donoghue, et. al., 2019; Pesanayi, O'Donoghue and Shava, 2019).

Communities and societies in Africa may be economically poor and suffering great hardships but the ability of people to work together and support each other in challenging times is unprecedented. The Nguni[1] tradition where people of a similar age are considered to be brothers and sisters, the elderly are considered to be the parents of all people younger than they are, and young people are regarded as the children of older people, is an example of this. Where such traditions are respected the social fabric remains strong. This is because no one would wish to harm others who are considered members of one's family. The tradition that it takes a village to raise a child is one outcome of this indigenous knowledge. It is important, in the RCE movement, that helpful indigenous knowledge practices, or the wisdom of the past, is therefore fore-grounded and mobilised. We need to use the best approaches that modern times offer along-side the best practices from the past.

Indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage, such as in the example above, are often still intact in the vicinity of the KwaZulu-Natal RCE. The child-headed households near Howick, where children who have lost their parents take care of each other, benefit from this powerful knowledge. In many instances such families survive and obtain food and nutrition by exploiting and applying indigenous knowledge while harvesting nourishing *imbhiba* (Three striped field-mice) and *imifino* (wild spinach) (Kaschula, 2008).

Co-Engaged Action Learning

By applying co-engaged, action learning pathways of learning (O'Donoghue, Taylor and Venter, 2018) change for a more sustainable future becomes an enabling process where participants are

---

[1] isiZulu, the most widely spoken language in KwaZulu-Natal, like isiSwati, is a language in the Nguni cluster of languages.

part of the processes of change rather than being acted upon through awareness raising or communicated messages. The co-engaged learning pathways, which support action learning processes, are helping overcome the weaknesses of top-down awareness raising or communicated messages from those who believe they know to those to whom they would like to deliver their messages. Indeed communicated processes are not proving very effective in bringing about change for a more sustainable future (Kemmis and Mutton, 2012). Kemmis and Mutton continue to point out that 'practice architecture' or learning processes that are based on real-life practices are more likely to be effective than learning that is of a more theoretical nature. In this sense practice architecture is mutually supported within action learning processes.

In the past, and still in some situations today, technologies are researched and developed in order to solve biophysical, social and health problems. The assumption is made, as in the case of cholera outbreaks and the HIV-AIDS pandemic, that one can discover what is going wrong, develop a more informed response and then 'communicate' this response to all concerned. Unfortunately, meaningful learning and enduring social change does not come about through such simplistic, 'cause and effect' orientations to learning and change (Taylor, 2014). For enduring social change to occur, people need to become actively involved, and co-engaged, in their own learning.

Co-Engaged Action Learning (Taylor and Venter, 2017; and O'Donoghue, Taylor and Venter 2018) is an applied and practical orientation to learning in which inter-linking features of; 'tuning in' or preparation, 'field-work,' 'information seeking,' 'reporting' and 'action taking' are applied. These processes become useful orientations to support learning that is engaging, co-engaging, meaningful and longer lasting. During the cholera outbreak at Eshowe, KwaZulu-Natal in the year 2000, for example, advice on how to avoid the disease was communicated to members of the public. Although helpful it was only when more engaged learning processes were used, during which bacteria could be identified using a simple community health kit, proved more meaningful than simply the communication of clear messages (O'Donoghue, 2005). Similar findings were revealed in the cholera outbreak in Harare in 2011 (Mandikonza, Musindo and Taylor, 2011).

Concluding thoughts

The people of eSwatini have often led the way in terms of learning through mutually supportive networks such as the RCE movement. As outlined above eSwatini has also led the way in course activated learning and this has built the capacity we see around us.

Leap-frogging: the African way, is a further insight that is proving innovative as the world struggles towards more sustainable living. Indeed we live in a world where the modern or new ways are simply not working and not serving a future, healthy society. The world will do well to look to more indigenous practices and African heritage for a key to a better, more healthy, sustainable, and less climate change risk world. Finally, the above notes outline how Co-Engaged Action Learning is a helpful and effective approach to social change that can help us realise the enormous potential we see throughout the African RCE network.

References

Graham, M. & Taylor, J. (2019) *Development of Citizen Science Water Resource Monitoring Tools and Communities of Practice for South Africa, Africa and the World.* WRC Report No. TT 763/18, Pretoria.

Kaschula, S. (2008) Wild foods and household food security responses to AIDS: evidence from South Africa. Science+Business Media, LLC 2008 *Popular Environment.* Springer, New York. DOI 10.1007/s11111-008-0068-7

Kemmis, S. & Mutton, R. (2012) Education for sustainability (EfS): practice and practice architectures. *Environmental Education Research*, 18:2, 187-207. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2011.596929

Mandikonza, C., B. Musindo and J. Taylor (2011) Cholera in Zimbabwe Developing an Educational Response to a Health Crisis. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, Vol. 5(1) (2011):17-25.

O'Donoghue, R., Taylor, J. and Venter, V. (2018) How are learning and training environments transforming with Education for Sustainable Development? In Leicht, A., Heiss, J. and Byun, W. (eds) (2018) *Issues and trends in Education for Sustainable Development*. UNESCO, Paris. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002614/261445E.pdf

O'Donoghue, R. (2005) Cholera in KwaZulu-Natal: Probing institutional governmentality and indigenous hand-washing practices. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 22: 59-71. EEASA.

Pesanayi, T., O'Donoghue, R.B, and Soul Shava, S. (2019) Think Piece: Situating Education for Sustainable Development in southern African philosophy and contexts of social-ecological change to enhance curriculum relevance and the common good. Southern African Journal of Environmental Education Vol. 35.

Taylor, J. (2010) Education for Sustainable Development: Perpetuating Myths or Bringing about Meaningful Change? *Global Environmental Research*. United Nations University, Japan. pp187-192.

Taylor, J. and Venter, V. (2017) Towards a Sustainable Future: Action Learning and Change Practices. In *African Wildlife & Environment*, Vol: 64; pp 37-40. WESSA, Bryanston.

Wenger, E, Trayner, B. and de Laat, M. (2011) *Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: a conceptual framework.* Ruud de Moor Centrum, Rapport 18, The Netherlands.