Discourses of Hope in Sustainability Education: A Critical Analysis of Sustainability Advocacy

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Abstract: If we are to educate the coming generation about the threats to the environment and the consequences of the excesses of human actions on our planet, educators need to consider critical pedagogy as a means of engaging students in thought and action. This article examines texts from prominent sustainability advocates and researchers, analyzing how they frame sustainability on a spectrum of hope that will then enable educators to address sustainability education with a realistic sense of agency while preparing students to meet the challenges for a sustainable future. Suggestions for pedagogical applications are included for each category across the spectra of hope.

Keywords: hope, sustainability education, agency, critical pedagogy, ecopedagogy, ecosocialism
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**Beginners**

But we have only begun
to love the earth.

We have only begun
to imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
-- so much is in bud. . . .

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,
so much is in bud.

---Denise Levertov (from *Candles in Babylon*, 1982)

So much truly is in bud. With every passing day, more attention is given to the need to plan for a sustainable future. Headlines in prominent newspapers announce that we’re “Running Out of Time” or proclaim the “Human Contribution to Glacier Mass Loss [Is] Increasing.” Awareness of humankind’s impact on the earth’s bio systems and the subsequent limits to growth we must impose are underlined in news stories of falling salmon runs, diminishing shellfish populations, and grave predications about the collapse of fish populations and other species due to overfishing and loss of habitat. The will and desire to act and to intervene and change course—through conservation, recycling, and reuse—are evident at every level, from children’s clean-up service-learning opportunities to state- and city-mandated curbside recycling.

A deeper and more substantive investigation into anthropogenic climate change (ACC), however, falls to sustainability education. When we, the co-authors, consider the weight that sustainability education carries in its mission to invite students to imagine a sustainable future, we become acutely aware of the need to communicate a sense of hope for the next generation as they prepare to tackle the issues so familiar to those of us in Sustainability Education. If we are to educate them about the impact of ACC and the cascading consequences it will bring and is delivering even as we speak, we need to address the message of hope and pragmatic actions that can be taken to mitigate the changes coming our way. While the prospects for the future are daunting, the need to teach and activate positive care for the environment and for our species, and to do so by encouraging agency in our students, is a challenge we must meet if we are to reverse current trends of “paralysis by analysis” and inaction that plague us in so many areas (Brand & Karvonen, 2007; Fien & Tilbury, 2002; Fiksel, 2006). To provide a better grasp of the resources available to educators, we examine the discourses of hope in more recent works of
sustainability advocates, describing their orientations and evaluating the overall effectiveness of their arguments and strategies for infusing hope and agency in our efforts at achieving a sustainable society.

Sustainability education carries with it the responsibility of conveying information to students that contains alarming, often depressing news of the state of the world. Given the realistic evidence-based appraisal of the current depletion of resources and the inevitable impact of rising greenhouse gases on the climate, this article poses the following question: What can educators learn from prominent advocates of sustainability that will enable them to offer students a sense of hope while preparing them to meet the challenges for a sustainable future that lie ahead?

How environmental writers make the case for hope while still informing their readers of the outcomes of humankind’s actions involves walking a rhetorical tightrope. How each tackles the task while remaining true to the data is a worthy study, especially as those of us who teach consider how to mobilize youth without sugarcoating the prospects ahead or minimizing the work that must be done. What, then, can we learn from environmental writers, researchers and theorists who have sought to balance a realistic appraisal of our situation with a sense of agency and a belief in our ability to make a difference while faced with oppressive odds?

In this article we consider the works of selected advocates of sustainability, exploring several key elements they convey in the discourses on hope:

• How does each author conceptualize the moment we are in? How is our present context framed?
• Where does each author see reason to hope?
• In what ways does each author convey a sense of agency to readers?
• In what ways can educators apply these insights to sustainability education?

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

This analysis builds on the work of critical ecopedagogy theorists Richard Kahn (2010) and, particularly, Tina Lynn Evans (2012). Their fusion of critical pedagogy, ecoliteracy and sustainability-focused social change is invaluable. Critical theorists Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and Paulo Freire (1921-1997) are at the heart of critical social theory, providing meaningful conceptual frames grounded in critical consciousness and praxis.

In Critical Pedagogy, Écoliteracy, & Planetary Crisis (2010), Richard Kahn laments the marginalization of environmental education and calls for a “radical reconstruction” of ecopedagogy, work beyond that which has been important but less than interventionist and “far too facile to demand or necessitate a rupture of the status quo” (p. 11). In analyzing texts from prominent sustainability advocates, such a call for agency helped us frame the spectra of hope. In Occupy Education (2012), Tina Lynn Evans takes this call for radical reconstruction, articulating the link between Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony and the critical social theory of sustainability. Evans argues that Gramsci’s conceptualization “highlights cultural barriers to acting in opposition to entrenched systems of social power that damage the environment” (p. 41). Indeed, Gramsci’s “The Philosophy of Praxis” (1971/2010) presents a particularly rich theoretical foundation for sustainability education. Gramsci positions the importance of working out “consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world” rather than accepting “passively and supinely” an external molding of self. The starting point of this “critical elaboration” is awareness that the “self” is the product of an historical process which has “deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (p. 324). Exploring these
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Traces of beliefs and creating a subsequent inventory of sources allows the “philosopher” to work out a conception of the world through the “labour of [his/her] own brain” (p. 323). Through this labor, one is, then, able to choose “one’s sphere of activity” and take “an active part in the creation of the history of the world” (p. 323), creating a critical rather than a spontaneous philosophy through specific intellectual activity.

This process manifests itself in the messages of agency and empowerment in sustainability literature. Sustainability educators must examine the deposits of global warming skeptics and ecocrisis pessimists, as well as the theoretical perspectives across the spectra of hope. Only through this labor of the mind can students develop a critical philosophy and a sphere of activity that impacts the history of the world. They must make a choice between these contradictory conceptions if they are going to participate actively in the world. This can be accomplished, according to Gramsci, only through “awareness and criticism” (p. 324). Part of this process is the recognition that there is a historicity of thought, that these conceptions have a history. Gramsci argues that “a conception of the world is a response to certain specific problems posed by reality” (p. 324). In considering the reality of the ecocrisis, ecopedagogy asks students to determine a response, thus developing a critical and coherent conception of the world, fully aware that their conception may contradict conceptions that have been normalized.

Another Gramscian contradiction central to sustainability education is the understanding that one involved in this critical elaboration, this labor of the mind, frequently discovers a “contradiction between one’s intellectual choice and one’s mode of conduct” (Gramsci, 1971/2010, p. 326). Gramsci explains this through two processes: 1) the diffusion and fracturing of different currents of thought as they co-exist, and 2) an expression of profound contrasts in social historical order. An individual or social group may have its own conception of the world, which “occasionally and in flashes,” manifests itself in action (p. 327), but when its conduct is not independent or conscious, the group may affirm a contradictory conception because it is the norm, thus speaking/acting submissively and subordinately. Gramsci refers to this contrast between thought and action, “one affirmed in words and the other displayed in effective action” (p. 326), as the “expression of profounder contrasts of a social historical order” (p. 327). He asks that those engaged in critical elaboration realize just how necessary it is to order in a systematic, coherent and critical fashion one’s own intuitions of life and the world, and to determine exactly what is to be understood by the word “systematic”, so that it is not taken in the pedantic and academic sense. (p. 327)

This systematic, coherent, and critical ordering of one’s world conception may be considered a “philosophy of praxis” (Gramsci, 1971/2010, p. 330) and entails a criticism of “common sense,” a process of realizing that one’s thoughts have been developed, that one’s practical activity has a theoretical basis, which the “active man-in-the-mass” has “uncritically absorbed” (p. 333). Only through critical consciousness of the practical activity can one unite with others and participate in the practical transformation of the world, breaking the condition of “moral and political passivity” (p. 333). In ecopedagogy, this would entail a close analysis of the intellectual formation and application of the student’s ideas regarding sustainability. The student would have to inventory those ideas uncritically absorbed, considering where they came from, and who had the power to speak. Gramsci sees critical consciousness as the core of the philosophy of praxis: Critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political “hegemonies” and of opposing directions. . . in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one’s own conception of reality. Consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage in the process of developing a critical philosophy.
towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one. (p. 333)

Clearly, Gramsci provides a theoretical base for sustainability education, a way to help students discover powerful critical insights into their relationship with ecology and sustainability thought and action.

While the connections between Gramsci and Freire’s work with critical consciousness cannot be dealt with at length here, Freire has famously stated that he “had been greatly influenced by Gramsci long before [he] read him” (Mayo, 1999, p. 7). Kahn (2010) explains that ecopedagogy attempts to insert Freire’s theory of conscientização into an ecological politics that both “opposes the globalization of neoliberalism and imperialism” and supports ecoliteracy (p. 18). Freire’s concept focuses on the “development of the awakening of critical awareness” which grows out of “a critical educational effort” (1969/1998, p. 19). Freire lauds human beings’ creative dimension, the fact that our relationship with the world is not a passive one, that we can “intervene in reality in order to change it” (p. 4). This is significant when considering ecopedagogy, for if students realize their creative dimension in these terms, they can recognize their agency in meeting the challenges for a sustainable future. Like Gramsci, Freire sees the possibility of humans transforming reality through their critical consciousness. He calls for the “emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (1970/2010, p. 62). He names this process as one of “integration with one’s context,” resulting from “the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality” (1998, p. 4). This, Freire argues, is a deeply human activity, and it has great resonance with ecopedagogy, which asks educators to engage students in problem-posing education while engaging them in transformative action. Freire’s insistence that human beings can “humanize reality” (1998, p. 4) is at the heart of a call for ecopedagogy as a transformative response to the planetary crisis.

Humanizing reality requires critical consciousness and praxis in Freire’s theoretical perspective. Change cannot occur through propaganda or, in Gramscian terms, “an uncritically absorbed” belief. To develop critical consciousness, Freire posits a problem-posing education, “acts of cognition, not transferrals of information,” resulting in a “consciousness intent upon the world” (1970/1998, p. 60). Freire calls upon critical educators to counter the “submersion of consciousness” by striving for an “emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (p. 62). In so doing, Freire argues, students come to see reality as dynamic, a process in transformation. As Kahn (2010) reminds ecopedagogists, “pedagogies and theories evolve in their historical capacities as they meet actual challenges and reflect on their potential limitations” (p. 21). The work of problem-posing education must be grounded in critical intervention in reality. Kahn calls for ecopedagogists to “foment critical dialogue and self-reflective solidarity” (p. 28) in a focused effort to address a reality of planetary crisis.

Freire makes a distinction between activism and praxis. He cautions against activism, what he calls “action for action’s sake” (1970/1998, p. 69). Problem-posing education is a praxis, a reflection and action directed at people and their relations with the world, a reflection and action involved in an unfinished reality. Gramsci’s critical philosophy and Freire’s liberatory education provide valuable conceptual tools in the emerging areas of ecological literacy, ecopedagogy, and sustainability education.
Modes of inquiry

To analyze pivotal works within the sustainability education movement, we use the lens of critical social theory, considering the motivations for hope that each author embeds in his or her analysis of the need for a sustainability movement. The effectiveness of each author’s approach will then be considered within the many contexts of sustainability education.

To determine how the authors in sustainability discourse conceptualize the moment we are in, we turned to Purvis and Hunt’s (1993) work with discourse and ideology and George Lakoff’s (2004, 2009) and Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) theory of linguistic metaphors and framing for the analysis.

Purvis and Hunt (1993) assert that people have forms of understanding, comprehension, or consciousness of the activities in which they participate. This consciousness is conveyed through language and impacts how people make sense of and act in the world in which they live. In determining how the discourse of sustainability advocates impacts consciousness on a spectra of hope, both discourse and ideology as Purvis and Hunt situate the concepts are of value. Their notion of directionality serves as an analytical tool, a means of interrogating existing forms of social relations reproduced in the text and forms of consciousness generated in the process (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 478), in this case, hope. Ideology in this sense is an “arena of struggle” (p. 478), for there are competing ideologies. Purvis and Hunt argue that ideology is concerned with the “lived, or the experienced, rather than of ‘thinking’” (p. 479). They say, for example, that we “live in common sense—we do not think it” (p. 479). We ask how the sustainability text reproduces or questions specific ways of living, particularly how it frames sustainability action on a spectra of hope. It is the discourse that provides the “vehicle for thought, communication and action” (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 485). We ask how the text constitutes a conception of agency. What are the possibilities of agency in light of the ecocrisis? Most useful for our purpose is their discussion of Foucault’s metaphor of discourses as “‘economies’ (with their own intrinsic technology, tactics, effects of power)” (p. 488), or as Foucault (1972) expresses it, “discourse is the power which is to be seized” (as cited in Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 488). This model of discourse and ideology provides a framework for addressing the interconnections of discourses, ideologies, and institutional practices.

Purvis and Hunt (1993) do not conflate the concepts of ideology and discourse or replace ideology with discourse. Rather, their framework allows us to consider how discourses are subject to a play of alternatives resulting in an action, an embodied ideology. Discourses have ideological effects; a discourse can stand in opposition to the agenda of the powerful. It can be counter-hegemonic, raising consciousness that may or may not result in action. We consider how each sustainability advocate’s discourse positions an ideology of hope as manifested in action to transform the reality of the ecocrisis.

Action is at the center of Kahn’ (2012) Critical Theory of Sustainability: “My CST of sustainability focuses on agency as a vehicle for addressing the sustainability crisis” (p. 9). We consider that focus on agency the key determinant in creating the spectra of hope in sustainability education. Meaning, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explain, “is never disembodied or objective and is always grounded in the acquisition and use of a conceptual system” (p. 197). Their work with metaphor and framing provides an analytical tool for discovering the relationship between thought and action in sustainability discourses. George Lakoff (2004) describes frames as “mental structures that shape the way we see the world” (p. xv) and framing as “about getting language that fits your worldview” (p. 4). Like Gramsci’s thinking about common sense, Lakoff argues that “our conceptual framing is unconscious and we may not be
aware of our own metaphorical thought” (p. 73). Analyzing how sustainability advocates frame this particular moment in the ecocrisis and how that frame situates the readers as agents is the purpose of this work. As Lakoff suggests, “Awareness matters. Being able to articulate what is going on can change what is going on” (p. 74). This is directly related to the Gramscian and Freirian theoretical perspectives at the core of this paper. The conceptual nature of language plays a “central role in the construction of social and political reality” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 159) and can be interrogated as a means to help students discover powerful critical insights into their relationship with ecology and sustainability thought and action.

The Spectra of Hope

Hope comes in many forms. In this article, we attempt to show that a wide spectra of hope exists, ranging from a complete trust in technology to save us from our overreach, to comprehensive political and social solutions that posit the need for a democratic, representational socialist political system to ensure the fair and necessary distribution of resources while being mindful of the necessary balance we must maintain in our relationship with the earth (See Table 1)\(^\text{iv}\). What follows is a brief overview of technological fundamentalists, the ardent faithful who believe that our ultimate salvation lies in a reliance of technofixes accommodating our current lifestyles, and technological realists (Jensen, 2013) who argue that we will need all the tools we possess to redress the damage we’ve done. These two categories serve as precursors to an examination of spiritual hope, existential hope, the psychology of hope, ecosocialist hope, and hope in action.

Table 1: The Spectra of Hope in Sustainability Education

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Approaches to Hope</th>
<th>Selected Advocates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technological fundamentalists</td>
<td>A belief in technology as an ultimate solution</td>
<td>Roger Angel (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mark Lynas (2011)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Edward Teller (1997)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technological realists</td>
<td>The belief that we will need to rely on technology to extract ourselves from the</td>
<td>Bruce Melton (2013)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Jensen, 2013)</td>
<td>overshoot in resources and excessive GHG emissions to buy time for better, more</td>
<td>Wallace Broecker &amp; Robert Kunzig (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>difficult to achieve solutions</td>
<td>Kenny Ausabel (2012)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>James Lovelock (2009)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bill McKibben (2010, 2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual hope</td>
<td>An appeal to humankind’s need for spiritual community as a source of seeking and</td>
<td>Kenny Ausabel (2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>consciousness</td>
<td>Joanna Macy &amp; Chris Johnstone (2012)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>David Korten (2000, 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential hope</td>
<td>Accepting the facts of our situation and acting on them with a clear understanding</td>
<td>Dianne Dumanoski (2009)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of possible failure</td>
<td>James Lovelock (2009)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Authors/References</th>
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<tr>
<td>Psychology and hope</td>
<td>A fusion of psychological research into the practices of gratitude, recognition of pain, and action that enable sustainability activists to work for change while maintaining a balance in our lives</td>
<td>Joanna Macy &amp; Chris Johnstone (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope in action</td>
<td>An implementation of principles of sustainability in local communities at a grass-roots level that emphasizes reskilling of members’ abilities to deal with everyday necessities and the relocalization of community resources and investments</td>
<td>Rob Hopkins (2008, 2012, 2013)</td>
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Technological Fundamentalists and Technological Realists

Technological Fundamentalists and Technological Realists frame technology as the solution to ecocrisis, thereby marginalizing the agency of the individual. Solution-based strategies for evading the consequences of anthropogenic climate change are often proposed as stop-gap measures to avoid catastrophic tipping points for global phenomena (Schellnhuber, 2011). Robert Jensen (2013) introduced the term *technological fundamentalism* to characterize “a form of magical thinking that promises a way out of the problems that the extractive/industrial economy has created” (p. 46). Jensen explains that for technological fundamentalists, the solution to climate change lies in the ability to maneuver ourselves out of the current dilemma through technological innovations (p. 46), heedless of the unintended consequences that Jared Diamond (2005), among others, warns against in the implementation of any technological innovation. One clear example can be seen in the introduction of automobiles as a solution to improve transportation and create a cleaner environment while ignoring the impact of emissions (Diamond, 2005, p. 506). Most prominent among the technological fundamentalists are advocates of geoengineering (Angel, 2007; Crutzen, 2006; Teller, 1997) who maintain that we can circumvent the systemic rethinking of our industrial culture by coming up with a “quick fix,” a technological solution that will confirm business-as-usual as a viable pathway. But as Dianne Dumanoski (2009) points out, “[f]ocusing narrowly and simplifying, as is the modern wont, short-circuits thinking about the systemic nature of our dilemma” (p. 132). A systemic analysis would necessarily go beyond singling out fossil fuel consumption and carbon emissions and force humankind to reconsider our relationship to the planet we live on and its limited resources (Steffen, 2007). Dumanoski’s definition of geoengineering, as “deliberate planetary-scale manipulation of the Earth’s metabolism to counter the unintentional disruption caused by humans” (2009, p. 131), is enough to give anyone pause. For in recognizing the Earth as a living system.
system with a planetary metabolism (Lovelock, 2009), the enormity of our hubris in seeking to manipulate that fine balance becomes all too apparent.

Technological fundamentalists have been with us for some time. Through their advocacy during President Lyndon Johnson’s Science Advisory Committee (1965) for distributing reflective particles on the ocean surface to reflect solar radiation back into space (Dumanoski, 2008, p. 132), in Edward Teller’s proposal to inject particles into the stratosphere to block some of the incoming sunlight (Teller, 1997), in arguments for fabricating “artificial volcanoes” to disseminate sulfate particles into the upper atmosphere to simulate volcanic disruptions (Crutzen, 2006), and launching mirrors into space to reflect sunlight away from the earth (Angel, 2007), technological fundamentalists have rarely been understated.

Still, the line between technological fundamentalists and technological realists—pragmatists who champion our technological sophistication as a necessary tool for avoiding climate change disasters (Jensen, 2013)—can be difficult to discern. Wallace Broecker and Robert Kunzig (2008), well known for their credibility as climate scientists, have advocated for “sky mining,” a form of carbon sequestration that extracts carbon from the atmosphere, as the next inevitable step to mitigate excessive carbon dioxide as the main driver of ACC. Foregrounding his discussion of carbon sequestration with a detailed summary of the 2013 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s report, Bruce Melton (2013), in his article “Climate Change 2013: Where We Are Now—Not What You Think,” argues for a pragmatic solution to runaway climate change by invoking the work of Broecker and Kunzig (2008). He quotes Fixing Climate, Broecker’s biography, to propose a solution to a dire situation: “If you extract a certain amount of CO2 from the air, you could replace that same amount by burning a fossil fuel without harming the planet” (quoted in Melton, 2013). Thus, sky mining is promoted as a viable stop-gap measure to buy time in addressing rising CO2 levels in the atmosphere. As a source of hope, however, sky mining, as with all geo-engineering solutions, evades issues of resource depletion, species extinction, the acidification of the oceans, and a host of other consequences to climate change. More importantly, it ignores the social, political, and economic systems we need to set in place to reconcile our relationship with our home planet.

**Spiritual Hope**

Perhaps the first association made in many people’s minds when the topic of hope is broached is that of spiritual hope. Those sustainability advocates in the spiritual hope spectrum frame sustainability concerns as a call for a move away from the notion of ever-expanding progress. Emblematic of those advocating for hope in spirituality is John Michael Greer, who, in his books The Long Descent (2008) and The Ecotechnic Future (2009), argues that our salvation lies in the understanding and use of both the pragmatic and the spiritual as the keys to achieving the paradigm shifts that must occur in a resource-depleted, post-peak oil world. Greer suggests we turn to myth and the spiritual metaphors that give birth to them. As Greer sees it,

> The crux of the problem . . . is that human thought is mythic by its very nature. We think with myths as inevitably as we see with eyes and eat with mouths. Thus, any attempt to bring about significant social change must start from the mythic level, with an emotionally powerful and symbolically meaningful narrative, or it will go nowhere. (2008, p. 207)

In thinking through our options, Greer (2008) counsels,

> If something constructive is to be done about peak oil and the rest of the predicament of industrial society, . . . yet another round of reasonable plans will not do the trick. The
powers that must be harnessed are those of myth, magic, and the irrational. What remains to be seen is whether these will be harnessed by a new Gandhi . . . or a new Hitler. (p. 208)

Greer argues that Western civilization has already replaced 2000-year old myths originating in Christianity with another de facto religion that acts as our guiding societal myth: “the religion of progress, the established church and dogmatic faith of the modern industrial world” (2008, p. 209). The church of progress has its own dogma, its apostles, and of course, its own vision of heaven, that “of perpetual improvement toward a Promethean future among the stars” (p. 210). For this reason, Greer notes, “It’s impossible to make sense of the predicament of the industrial world, . . . without recognizing the sheer intellectual and emotional power of this vision” (p. 210).

The solution lies, then, in this frame, as a matter of replacing our misguided belief in ever-expanding progress with a renewed celebration of human potential and ability. Those writing within this spectrum of hope clearly challenge the hegemony of big business, situating the individual at the center of a renewed and renewable existence. Honoring “the body-mind disciplines” is one such strategy, as deindustrialization forces us to reclaim the gifts and the abilities we possess. As Greer puts it, “If we have the imagination to let go of the monkey trap that fastens us to a purely technological approach to life, we can see these traditions [that celebrate our innately human gifts] as resources rather than irrelevancies” (2008, p. 201). Identifying those myths that have come down to us from various spiritual traditions for the narrative wisdom and strength they embody can help enlarge our students’ appreciation for the many stories told over time to help us meet the challenges of difficult times.

**Pedagogical strategies.** A wealth of strategies for exploring spiritual hope can be found in *Spiritual Ecology* (Vaughan-Lee, 2013), an edited collection of reflections from spiritual leaders across the religious spectrum that points the way to some of the many possible spiritual paths concerned with honoring the sacred in everyday life. Reflective writing on passages from texts like this one would then allow students to explore their own spiritual roots and positions. Environmental activism is also alive and well among interfaith organizations and can serve as useful outlets for organizing around spiritually respectful principles and actions. The Interfaith Coalition for the Environment (ICE) appears in many local and regional iterations with activities and opportunities for organizing around issues of spirituality and sustainability that educators can tap into, as a resource for local public speakers and as opportunities to study the impact of spiritual themes on sustainability efforts.

**Existential Hope**

For some, the spiritual is insufficiently theorized and irrational and does not frame sustainability in a comfortable metaphor. Perhaps the most straightforward approach to hope in sustainability studies lies in adopting an existential hope—clear-eyed and honest—that acknowledges the damage done and realistically assesses the impact that all systems, including those that are human-initiated (political, economic, cultural, and social), contribute to the current situation. This requires describing the situation as it exists, with ecological overshoot firmly established by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment reports commissioned by the United Nations (Hassan et. al, 2005) and published with the input and analysis of over 1,300 scientists across the globe. Their conclusion, that we are depleting natural resources at least 20 percent more quickly than they can regenerate, leaves no doubt that technofixes, regardless of the
promises they hold, are inadequate to the task of achieving a sustainable world. The need to contract, to reduce our demands on the environment we inhabit, will require world governments to reverse course (Assembly, 2012). Exponential growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as a measure of economic health, must be abandoned. Instead, they argue, we need to reduce our impact and reconfigure our economic systems to support life and eliminate the threat to the delicate balance of the planet.

One of the most eloquent synthesizers of current scientific research on sustainability is Dianne Dumanoski, journalist and author of *The End of the Long Summer* (2009). Through the metaphor of summer as a period of climate equanimity, Dumanoski frames the issue of climate change as the end of an era of favorable climate ranges, the “summer” that has been conducive to humankind and its civilizations. What we face, she warns, is the response of planetary systems whose scope and processes we do not understand. In eloquent prose, Dumanoski analyzes the various metaphors adopted to represent our relationship to the earth in this new “planetary era” (2009, pp. 215-246). Metaphors such as *stewardship*, with its implications of dominion and care, or of a *partnership* with the Earth, of dynamic and creative interactions akin to jazz, that Caroline Merchant (2005) suggests, misrepresent our relationship to forces over which we have little control. For though we have tipped the balance and set into motion a series of reactions we have little understanding of, we have neither control nor equality in our favor.

Instead, Dumanoski (2009) advises the path of “accommodation” that Rachel Carson describes in *Silent Spring* (1962). In place of the hubris of ownership and control, Dumanoski counsels “caution and humility in our interactions” (p. 243) with systems over which we have little control. And to those who continue to advocate for “exponential economic growth” required of our current economic system, Dumanoski cites British political conservative John Gray (1993), who notes the current ideological direction of economic theory in its support of such a path as “a wholly unrealizable fantasy,” dangerous in its implications but even more so in the difficulty we have in reining in those who continue to pursue it” (as cited in Dumanoski, 2009, p. 244).

Dumanoski (2009) warns that hope is a precious commodity, not to be squandered with unworkable fantasies and hubris. Instead, she writes, “hope will sustain us only if it is clear-eyed” (p. 250). In the midst of overwhelming challenges, “[i]n the struggle to continue the human journey, [those who will be living in that uncertain future that lies ahead] may live lives enlarged by a shared sense of great purpose, leavened by imagination, and enriched by the creativity that survival has always required” (p. 252). Therein lies the hope she envisions, that the sense of purpose will outweigh the enormity of those challenges. Dumanoski’s “honest hope” follows a rational path, a vision grounded in the “stormworthy lineage” (p. 95) of mankind, in our adaptability to change and our ability to discern reality. She believes if we confront the reality of the consequences of our actions, in precipitating anthropogenic climate change, unfiltered by delusions of technofixes and unlikely saviors to our dilemma, we may rise to the occasion, seeing clearly the situation we’ve created and acting to mitigate and adapt to a situation long ago determined by the bargain we made in our industrialized society.

Echoing her optimism is James Lovelock, in his book *The Vanishing Face of Gaia* (2009), in which he warns of irreversible changes within earth’s biosphere as a result of runaway global warming. Lovelock holds out hope that we will continue as a species, predicting mass migrations, with our “wandering species” electing to seek out cooler climates in the face of global warming.
Discourses of Hope in Sustainability Education: A Critical Analysis of Sustainability Advocacy

Pedagogical applications. Researching and establishing both the accepted factual basis for ACC and the controversies circulating around that information, including an identification of the vested interests and implied worldviews and ideologies of those discussants, can form the bedrock of an existential approach. Worth remembering, too, is that existential hope has the power to prevail even in the face of crisis and insurmountable odds. Case studies of other historical situations in which social awareness of an issue was low, despite the overwhelming evidence of social injustice, inequity, and the need for action, can serve as vital examples of the resiliency of an existential hope. The abolitionist movement, women’s suffrage, the franchise for African Americans and the concomitant fight against Jim Crow laws, the Civil Rights movement, and especially those movements to recognize scientifically-proven dangers to health, such as the unmasking of tobacco’s addictive and health-compromising qualities, as well as documentation surrounding the history of climate change denial (Oreskes & Conway, 2010)—all support the existentialist hope of prevailing against politically-inspired and/or corporately-funded vested interests, despite overwhelming odds. The Howard Zinn Project, Rethinking Schools, and Teaching Tolerance contain numerous examples of collective historic struggles that seemed doomed to fail but in the end prevailed. At the more local, grassroots level, Paul Loeb’s *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time* (2010) chronicles the power of local organizing with an emphasis on the role that inspired activism plays in building community, increasing civic engagement, and connecting with friends and neighbors to create change. Loeb’s website ([http://www.paulloeb.org/weblinks.html](http://www.paulloeb.org/weblinks.html)) provides links to numerous outlets for getting involved and learning about channeling the activist within. Of particular value are the “Social Gateway Sites,” including Campus Compact ([www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)), Idealist ([www.idealist.org](http://www.idealist.org)), Servenet ([www.servenet.org](http://www.servenet.org)) and Volunteermatch ([www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)). Asking students to investigate, join, and participate in a local group can become service-learning opportunities, reinforcing their agency and choice in responding to ecocrises in their areas.

The Psychology of Hope

In addressing the needs of activists seeking to avoid burnout and renew their commitment to a sustainability-focused mission, Joanna Macy, a Buddhist scholar and peace activist, addresses the issues of hope and the need for a worldview that acknowledges our interconnectedness with all of life. In her book *Active Hope* (2012), co-authored with Chris Johnstone, Macy uses narrative structure as a frame for conceptualizing change. Macy and Johnstone argue that the stories we live by and affirm in our everyday actions and worldviews reveal the expectations we hold in the roles we assign ourselves and others and in the plotlines we see ourselves enacting in our lives. Those who subscribe to the Business-as-Usual narrative, for example, accept the commonsense ideologies of the dominant Western establishment—that economic growth is the only means of maintaining our way of life, that nature exists to fulfill human needs, that consumption is the key driver of well-being, and that we need not look beyond our own prosperity to question the disparities that other people experience in their access to food, shelter, and health care. Macy and Johnstone argue that such a narrative is unsustainable. Our interconnectedness cries out to us in the many resounding events we witness around us—in the growing desertification, melting ices caps, warming temperatures, extreme weather events, and economic and social upheaval that take place as a result of these ever-shifting conditions, such as the displacement of Carteret and Maldives islanders and hundreds of thousands of other environmental migrants due to rising oceans, hurricanes, typhoons, and other turbulent weather (Biravan & Rajan, 2010).
These events comprise the elements of the second narrative, that of the Great Unravelling, a term coined by David Korten (2006, p. 21) to capture the impact of the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2007; Steffen, Crutzen & McNeill, 2007), the geologic era in which human impact became undeniable in shaping global climate-influencing events. In place of boom and bust, Korten (2006) and Macy and Johnstone (2012) after him propose that we examine elements of our social structures and systems as possible causal factors in overshoot and collapse (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 19). With diminishing resources, including depleted fish stocks, decreasing oil well production, and shrinking fresh water availability, to name just a few, the specter of overshoot and collapse have become difficult to deny.

While the Great Unravelling as a narrative frame can lead to despair and a sense of hopelessness, the conscious acknowledgement of the reality of overshoot and its consequences logically affirms, Macy and Johnstone argue, the third narrative frame, the Great Turning (Korten, 2006, cited in Macy & Johnstone, 2012). Characterized by a greater awareness of the damage we have wrought as part of the industrial corporate culture, Macy and Johnstone divide the three dimensions of growing awareness into “Holding Actions,” “Life-Sustaining Systems and Practices,” and “Shifts in Consciousness” (pp. 28-33). Holding actions entail protective practices and policies for local areas and habitats. As they point out, “Vital as protest is, relying on it as a sole avenue of change can leave us battle-weary or disillusioned. Along with stopping the damage, we need to replace or transform the systems that cause the harm” (p. 29). To do so, Macy and Johnstone maintain, we must commit to transforming our everyday system through a commitment to a life-sustaining culture; through our everyday actions, from what we eat and wear to the products and vendors we choose to patronize and support. By doing so, they assert, “we shape the development of [a] new economy” (p. 29).

Concomitant to this shift in practices is the shift in consciousness, as we acknowledge our participation in “a larger landscape of what we are” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 31). We participate in the Great Turning, Macy and Johnstone explain, when we attend to those changes in consciousness that enable us to act with an awareness of our interconnectedness to all of life on earth:

By strengthening our compassion, we give fuel to our courage and determination. By refreshing our sense of belonging to the world, we widen the web of relationships that nourish us and protect us from burnout. (p. 32)

In all our actions, we affirm interconnectedness by participating in the cycles and processes of the world. By becoming aware of that vital interdependency we share with every living creature and the earth, we become attuned to the rhythms of life and learn to live respectfully on the earth. These shifts in consciousness, accompanied by practices and protest, give birth to a new narrative, one that is life-affirming, thoughtful, and respectful of our place in the world—interdependent and interconnected in ways beyond our understanding.

By setting out three distinct narratives—continued self-absorption and mindless consumption, despair at a world gone amok, and conscious mindfulness of our place in the world as a part of the whole—Macy and Johnstone (2012) remind us of our agency in these times. The story we choose and the meanings we commit to inevitably contribute to our sense of purpose. As Macy and Johnstone point out, “A great story and a satisfying life share a vital element: a compelling plot that moves toward meaningful goals, where what is at stake is far larger than our personal gains and losses. The Great Turning is such a story” (p. 33).

As part of the Great Turning, Macy and Johnstone (2012) offer a means of spiraling through the stages of growing awareness in ways that sustain and nurture those involved in the
movement to a new eco-activist consciousness. As they point out, “[a]ny situation we face can resolve in a range of different ways—some much better, others much worse. Active Hope involves identifying the outcomes we hope for and then playing an active role in bringing them about” (p. 37). The process they propose is The Work that Reconnects, a “fractal-like continuum” of motions in consciousness. In the first stage, Coming from Gratitude, we build a reservoir of awareness and appreciation for life and its many gifts. As Macy and Johnstone put it, “[c]oming from gratitude helps build a context of trust and psychological buoyancy that supports us to face difficult realities” (p. 38) when we honor the pain we experience as part of our growing awareness of the reckless, irresponsible acts of humankind and their resulting damage to earth’s systems and its inhabitants.

This growing awareness becomes Macy and Johnstone’s (2012) second stage, Honoring our Pain. Acknowledging our grief and deep connection to a sense of loss at these changes goes against social programming and the numerous denials in mainstream media representations of the state of the world. For by all accounts derived from corporate, pro-growth sources, there is no cause for alarm or for grieving for the damage done to the earth. Thus, by bearing witness to anthropogenic climate change, in its many manifestations, we honor life and affirm the reality of what is (p. 38). This leads to the third stage in The Work that Reconnects—Seeing with New Eyes (p. 38). In affirming the reality of anthropogenic climate change and all that comes with it, we open ourselves to new insights and sources of knowledge and wisdom. This includes a renewed and deeper relationship and commitment to our co-existence with the earth and all it contains.

The final stage in The Work that Reconnects is that of Going Forth (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 39). Acting with an expanded understanding of ACC and gratitude for those allies that support us, Going Forth involves “clarifying our vision of how we can act for the healing of our world, [and] identifying practical steps that move our vision forward” (p. 39).

This cycle of coming from gratitude, honoring our pain, acquiring fresh insights and tools, and acting on that knowledge becomes a means of renewing and deepening our hope for a sustainable future. Moreover, it is a process that everyone, from the first-year college student to the experienced sustainability advocate, can benefit from.

**Pedagogical applications.** Macy and Johnstone’s (2012) method for addressing self-renewal—The Work that Reconnects—can be readily applied to the classroom in charting a path to psychological balance and hope. *Active Hope* (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) contains numerous “Try This” activities that engage students in reflecting on, among other things, gratitude for their experience of life, writing a letter to the future, and role-playing a seventh-generation descendent. Typically used in workshop settings, these exercises can provide opportunities for positioning that enable students to develop a positive self-renewing commitment to sustainability in many contexts.

**Ecosocialism**

Ecosocialism as a systemic response to planetary crisis increasingly appeals to many seeking a holistic response to ACC (Klein, 2014; Speth, 2008) and holds out substantial hope for collective and socially equitable solutions. Existential hope has historically been framed in such a way that it fails to offer a systematic analysis of and solutions to the many factors contributing to ACC. And yet, an existential recognition of the current state of affairs is necessary if we are to reconfigure our economic systems to support the environment. Ecosocialism kindles the hope of agency in recommending a redistribution of power to the people:
by converting private property into public wealth and substituting co-operation for competition, [ecosocialism] will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism and insure the material wellbeing of each member of the community. It will, in fact, give Life its proper basis and its proper environment. (Wilde, 1971, p. 4)

While Wilde (1971) addresses these comments to “[s]ocialism, Communism, or whatever one chooses to call it” (p. 4), ecosocialism has emerged to embody the promise of a more holistic respect for life through its recognition of the interconnected web of our environment with our economic system, social practices, and institutions.

Derek Wall, in The Rise of the Green Left (2010), argues for an ecosocialist framework thoroughly democratic and participatory in its formation:

Ecosocialist policies must be based on what works ecologically; although this might seem a rather obvious point, . . . current environmental policies, particularly as regards climate change, are based primarily on what works for the existing capitalist economy, not what is beneficial to the environment or humanity. (pp. 52-53)

Indeed, capitalism as an economic system seems determined to take us to the brink of environmental collapse. One apt metaphor for our headlong rush towards a point of no return has been suggested by Richard Smith (2011, 2014), who likens globalized capitalism to a train chugging steadily to the edge of an abyss. Scientists counsel us to get off the train and to drastically reduce the GHG emissions we have been producing for the past 150 years, ever since the large-scale extraction of oil began in Pennsylvania in 1860 (Smith, 2011). Capitalism drives the train, and the captains of industry, instead of helping us slow down our perilous progress to an undesirable destination, urge us to double our efforts and drive the train faster: More productivity! Higher Gross Domestic Products! More consumption! Smith questions the motives of such a train ride:

As our locomotive races toward the cliff of ecological collapse, the only thoughts on the minds of our CEOs, capitalist economists, politicians and most labor leaders is how to stoke the locomotive to get us there faster. Corporations aren't necessarily evil. They just can't help themselves. They're doing what they're supposed to do for the benefit of their owners. But this means that, so long as the global economy is based on capitalism and private property and corporate property and competitive production for market, we're doomed to a collective social suicide - and no amount of tinkering with the market can brake the drive to global ecological collapse. (para. 4)

Smith, in his characterization of the capitalist-inspired and driven leaders of what has become the dominant global economic system, argues that as long as we are on capitalism’s train, we are headed toward a train wreck. The hope that Smith identifies lies in the logical simplicity and transparency of the recognition that capitalism is incapable of applying those restraints that would save humanity from creating an unlivable environment. Smith’s discourse directly questions the ideology of capitalism, challenging the readers to an agency in opposition to a normalized way of thinking.

In his article “Green Capitalism: The God that Failed” (2014), Smith lays out the many reasons why a capitalist-driven “green” economy will never truly address what must be done to avert the looming situation. “Green capitalism” and other market-based initiatives, Smith argues, are doomed to fail, and a sustainable economy is inconceivable without sweeping systemic economic change. The project of sustainable capitalism based on carbon taxes, green marketing, "dematerialization" and so forth was misconceived and doomed from
the start because maximizing profit and saving the planet are inherently in conflict and cannot be systematically aligned even if, here and there, they might coincide for a moment. (para. 4)

For while individuals may wish to avert the capitalist train wreck, capitalism as a system, in making CEOs and their governing boards wholly accountable to shareholders for increasing the profitability of their corporations to the exclusion of any other consideration (Speth, 2008), contains within its internal structure the logic of planetary self-destruction. Instead, Smith recommends a more thoughtful self-reflexive path—that of democratic socialism.

This solution, a democratically-shared ownership and responsibility for the earth, has been explored by others, among them Joel Kovel in his Enemy of Nature (2013), James O’Connor in Natural Causes (1997), Löwy and Canepa (2005), and, of course, the journal Capitalism Nature Socialism.

In “An Ecosocialist Manifesto” (2001), Kovel and Löwy introduce ecosocialism as an emerging synthesis of socialist critique and ecological awareness. Ecosocialism, they argue, provides a bridge for critical awareness and action grounded in the recognition of the indissoluble interrelationship between global capitalistic economic systems and the ecological crises precipitated by the logic of capitalist ideology:

Acting on nature and its ecological balance, the regime [of] global capitalist expansionism, with its imperative to constantly expand profitability, exposes ecosystems to destabilizing pollutants, fragments habitats that have evolved over eons to allow the flourishing of organisms, squanders resources, and reduces the sensuous vitality of nature to the cold exchangeability required for the accumulation of capital. (p. 1)

Like Smith (2007), they argue for an awareness of the incompatibility of a global capitalist system with the necessary transformations to our economic systems that would enable all nations to recognize the “limits to growth” (Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2004) that would preserve habitable, sustainable systems. They point out that “[t]he goal, rather [than a call for imposing hardship and scarcity], is a transformation of needs, and a profound shift toward the qualitative dimension and away from the quantitative” (p. 2). Instead of focusing on the accumulation of consumer goods, people participating in an ecosocialist economic system would be able to focus on the quality of their relationships and lives within genuinely democratic systems of governance.

David Korten in his books The Post-Corporate World: Life after Capitalism (2000) and The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community (2006) discerns hope for the future in a metaphor of capitalism as a cancer devouring the earth and its inhabitants. He urges his readers to extricate themselves from participation in corporate-led activities: when we spend time with family and friends, he tells us, affirming connections with spirit, we starve the cancer of the corporation (2000). Korten sees this moment in time as an evolutionary step in which life seeks to become conscious of itself. As those of us immersed in the industrial capitalist system step forward to take up the challenge, Korten predicts, the possibility of an evolutionary shift may yet emerge—one that we have the option of choosing and one that we could conceivably botch. His hope is that we will develop “planetary consciousness” (p. 279). As he explains in his epilogue to The Post-Corporate World,

That we are positioned to take this step at the precise historical moment at which it becomes imperative for our survival that we do so, is for me a source of awe and inspiration. It is as if a wise and caring intelligence beyond our knowing, having seen to it
that we have the preparation necessary to our success, now leaves us to choose for ourselves whether to accept or reject the responsibilities—and to bear the consequences of our choice. (Korten, 2000, p. 279)

Korten believes that the fact that we have emerged with the capability to form a global network of compassion and knowledge at the same time that the exigency of the moment requires a level of cooperation and understanding within the family of humankind serves to frame the moment in a unique sense of urgency and one ultimately of hope. While other cultures in the past and present have succeeded in creating sustainable lifestyles in harmony with their environments (Diamond, 2005), the scale of anthropogenic climate change precipitated by industrial capitalist culture has created a sense of urgency and the need for concerted action. While it is questionable to see industrial capitalist culture as a product of evolutionary progression, the possibility of responding to our self-made dilemma, especially as a result of our global economic system, through a heightened planetary consciousness does give us cause for hope.

Ecosocialist proponents frame the process of arriving at viable solutions toward an ecologically-grounded and democratically-governed participatory socialist framework as an evolving journey. David Wall (2010) in The Rise of the Green Left, uses the frame of “making the path by walking it” (p. 69):

[H]ighly detailed blueprints for ecosocialism are counterproductive; the blueprint will grow organically through debate and participation. We will make the path by walking it.

The key task is to build an ecosocialist movement as a means of slowing and reversing the capitalist assault on the planet. (p. 69)

Likewise, Joel Kovel (2007) in his Enemy of Nature, writes, “In truth, we are all groping toward a transformative vision wider and deeper than any yet subsumed under the labels of past [social and political] struggles” (pp. 197-8). The similarity to the Freirean concept conscientização, of coming to critical consciousness and thereby participating in the shaping of one’s world, emphasizes the importance of awareness and action as a process of transformation.

Pedagogical applications. Unmasking the inadequacy of the business-as-usual narrative (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) can occur through an examination of the contradictions that arise between historical and scientific fact and mainstream media’s environmental coverage. Within a Freirean framework, students can engage in both problem-posing and problem-solving, identifying those contradictions among the various communities who vie to define and thus control their understanding of the situation. How, for instance, can we reconcile the need to conserve resources and reduce consumption with the messages that bombard us in the daily advertising we view and the retail shops that surround us? What alternatives to a consumer lifestyle can we create that would still affirm what we value, such as relationships with family and friends, creative activities, and meaningful projects?

Problem-posing can also flourish by making use of the multitude of sites available on the Internet that argue for solutions to the various cascading dilemmas inherent in ACC and thus serve as an ideal means of piercing the veil of consumerist propaganda. By asking students to identify the contradictions and problems that they themselves experience in their interactions with media, institutions, and individuals, we can facilitate an empowering critical pedagogy while helping to advance a narrative of sustainability.

Helena Norberg-Hodge’s documentary film The Economics of Happiness (2011) provides vivid illustrations of the impact of global capitalism on local communities. Her work with the Ladakhi people in the Kashmir region of India stands as an effective case study of the
changes experienced there following the incursions of transnational corporations into the lives of once-isolated people there. Students can use the documentary as a point of departure to examine the impact of global capitalism in other parts of the world, including in their own communities, and thus engage in the same critical consciousness evident in the film by articulating their own critical awareness of the discrepancies between the promises made by capitalism’s multi-billion dollar advertising efforts and the realities evident in daily headlines of inequality and inequitable distributions via capitalism throughout the world. *Capitalism: A Structural Genocide* (Leech, 2012) provides numerous examples of the unjust distribution of goods as a result of capitalism’s hegemony. Stephanie Black’s documentary *Life and Debt* (2001) brings those insights to life by exposing the disastrous consequences of economic policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on the people of Jamaica.

**Hope in Action**

Concomitant to any hope of successfully negotiating the challenges we face in adopting sustainable lifestyles is the need for action. In the spectra of hope, hope in action is critical to avoiding the arrested development that occurs when we fail to find a way forward that affirms those principles and plans that enable positive action. For many proponents of sustainability, hope lies in the actions we take on a local, regional, or community level. Robert Jensen (2013) argues that hope is earned: “Hope is not something we find, but is something we earn. No one has the right to be hopeful until they expend energy to make hope possible” (p. 70). He cites Wendell Berry’s emphasis on pragmatism and local determinacy as a means of constructing a realistic sense of agency in an interview with Wes Jackson:

> [Y]ou’re not under any obligation to construct a hope for the whole human race. What you are required to do is to be intelligent. And that means you’ve got to have an array of examples you want more or less to understand. Some are not perfect, and others are awful, and to be intelligent you’ve got to know why some are better than the others. (Yates, 2013, p. 71, quoted in Jensen, 2013, p. 71)

This emphasis on local and collective hope in action can be seen most clearly in the Transition Movement (Hopkins, 2008, 2012, 2013), a phenomenon Hopkins describes as “an emerging and evolving approach to community-level sustainability” (Hopkins, 2008, p. 134), or to borrow a phrase from Jeremy Leggett, “scalable microcosms of hope” (Hopkins, 2008, p. 134), whose advocates seek to relocalize the skills, talents, and investments of community members in order to build a more sustainable future.

Transition Initiatives have been taken up by communities of all sizes, including “cities, boroughs, valleys, peninsulas, postcodes, villages, hamlets and islands” (Hopkins, 2008, p. 134), and are grounded in four fundamental agreements:

1) That life with dramatically lower energy consumption is inevitable, and that it’s better to plan for it than to be taken by surprise.
2) That our settlements and communities presently lack the resilience to enable them to weather the severe energy shocks that will accompany peak oil.
3) That we have to act collectively, and we have to act now.
4) That by unleashing the collective genius of those around us to creatively and proactively design our energy descent, we can build ways of living that are more connected, more enriching and that recognize the biological limits of our planet. (p. 134).

Using these principles, transition groups strive to bring people together to increase community
resilience and to develop the ability to respond to shocks of all kinds by operationalizing those principles derived from permaculture and other sustainability efforts. They distinguish their efforts from environmental groups through their emphasis on groups of people coming together to transition to more sustainable practices holistically, as opposed to a single issue approach. The steering group, locally self-organizing and soon dissolved, seeks democratic participation in the formation and shaping of each Transition Initiative. Within the Transition Movement, local action can take the form of gardening groups, local currencies that bring the exchange of wealth back to the community, water conservation and storage efforts, seed sharing, and other small group efforts (See www.transitionnetwork.org).

Embedded in the Transition Movement are the seeds of what some see as an ecosocialist revolution. As one participant of the Totnes Transition Team in the documentary Transition Towns pointed out, transition to a more locally self-reliant community can only be determined by those within the community. While coordination across regions will undoubtedly prove helpful, local knowledge and engagement within communities is the key. For others in the documentary, what emerged as most significant was the hopefulness of taking action, implementing sustainable practices within their communities, and in the process, forming networks of support and validation for a way of living that celebrates interdependence, with each other and with the natural world. Still in its formative stages, the Transition Movement promises an exciting platform for sustainable, local, democratically determined experiments in living and visioning a more sustainable future.

Pedagogical applications. A pedagogy of hope involves not only envisioning a sustainable future but immersing students in the identity work that comes from authoring a self-identified narrative in response to difficult questions and challenging times. How, for instance, does one disinvest from a consumer-driven lifestyle when participation in the latest fashion rage is often a marker for being part of the group? The answers may be found in collective, community-building solutions that advance a narrative that engages both identity and the need to belong and to act with a purpose. Students can write their own hypothetical Transition initiative by accessing the tools available on the Transition Network’s ingredients page (http://www.transitionnetwork.org/ingredients) where the visioning process for a sustainable community comes alive, with considerations ranging from “coming together as groups” and “inclusion and diversity” to “creating a space for inner transition.” These activities are consistent with Paulo Freire’s profound insights on activating liberatory pedagogy (1970/1998) which rest on the power of naming the world in ways that are authentic to participants’ experiences.

Authoring a Way Forward

The positions across the spectra of hope ask us to consider sustainability education through a frame of agency. Creating a new world ethos, an ethical way of living in the world in respectful and sustainable ways, requires a major analysis and revision of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. What sense we make of our lives and who we are in the world of our imagining—in a future that is sustainable and not simply full of wishful thinking about never ending profits and resources upon which we glut ourselves—calls upon us to understand the stories being told and to tell new stories about who we are, what our dreams are, and how we see ourselves living in the world. Replacing the dreams of endless affluence filled with non-stop consumption will be challenging. Imagining a sustainable future calls for a vision of ourselves in relationship to each other and the world in new ways—restrained in our consumption, respectful
in our use of resources, taking on the role of steward but also of worshipper of the world’s great gifts to us. Jensen (2013) argues that

[w]hatever the limits of our predictive capacity, we can be pretty sure we will need ways of organizing ourselves to help us live in a world with less energy and fewer material goods. . . . [W]e will need to recover a deep sense of community that has disappeared from many of our lives. This means abandoning a sense of ourselves as consumption machines, which the contemporary culture promotes, and deepening our notions of what it means to be humans in search of meaning. We have to learn to tell different stories about our sense of self, our connection to others, and our place in nature. The stories we tell will matter, as will the skills we learn. (p. 72)

Several of the theorists and educators on whom we’ve grounded our analysis confirm this approach. Both Kahn (2010) and Evans (2012) see education at the center of learning to tell different stories. They fuse critical pedagogy, ecoliteracy and sustainability-focused social change in ways that challenge students to make meaning of their own lives, reconceptualizing their agency in a time of planetary crisis. Kahn situates the call for critical pedagogy as a way to address the power of the term crisis itself: "[W]hile the term crisis is utilized in a colloquial fashion to connote ideas of uncontrollable mayhem and danger, it should rather be understood as a diagnostic philosophical concept that indicates the need for personal critical deliberation toward the possibility of affecting meaningful change" (p. 4). Evans call upon college educators to help students engage in that deliberation by practicing, "a critical pedagogy of sustainability that includes involving students in service projects," by designing college courses and programs to combine critical studies with "participation in transformative and transdisciplinary community action" (p. 223).

Simon Dresner, author of Principles of Sustainability (2010), likens the project of reconceptualizing our existence on earth as an undertaking on the same scale as the Enlightenment—a radical rethinking of our most basic assumptions about business as usual and everyday life. In his introduction, he maintains that the present reexamination of the very fundamental assumptions we make about how to go about our lives is, in itself, a momentous leap that we wait to make:

[T]he present debate about sustainability is part of a wider re-evaluation of many of the modernist values that have been passed down to us from the Enlightenment. It is the ideas of the Enlightenment that inspired Western culture’s optimism about science and progress. For a long time, that optimism appeared to be amply borne out. Only in the last few decades has widespread doubt set in about the direction that our path of development is taking us. (p. 5)

Whether we choose to follow the path of intentional, mindful reimagining of our possibilities as a culture and society rests on the work that we as educators engage in. Whether we find hope through rational actions and Dumanoski’s “clear-eyed vision,” or through Greer’s myth-inspired beliefs and allegiances to life, we must involve students in a “critical elaboration” (Gramsci 1971/2010) of their thinking of the ecocrisis and sustainability, rejecting the myopic vision of business-as-usual and embracing membership in a larger whole. How we impart agency to a younger generation matters.

Despite Thich Nhat Hahn’s (2012) misgivings about hope as a deferment of the present moment, we need to acknowledge that how our situation is framed matters to those we teach. The scenarios we construct for possible futures can provide a means of organizing our efforts, from whichever perspective students find most acceptable, whether it be through a spiritual,
psychological, existential, or ecosocialist frame or a selective combination of the above. The clarity of those possible futures can be a useful point of departure for our own pedagogies in sustainability education. Looking into the future is a necessary and useful exercise for our students in that it confers agency and choice to them as actors on a local, regional, and global level. The tendency to dive into despair and then give up, renouncing positive action because of the hopelessness of the situation is all too common, all too possible. A pedagogy of hope, into which emerging awareness, acceptance, and action can be successfully integrated, is available to us as educators, if together with our students we claim the courage to do so.

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ii Science Daily, August 14, 2014.
iii Gramsci considers “everyone a philosopher” because everyone has a specific conception of the world found in language, common sense, and popular religion (p. 323). He narrows this definition, however, when he says, one cannot be a philosopher, without a “a critical and coherent conception of the world” (p. 324).
iv Within the scope of this article, not all of the adherents listed in the table will be discussed; nor is this list complete.
References


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