

If a Tree Falls and Everybody Hears the Sound: Teaching deep ecology to business students

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Abstract

This article will discuss the role of environmentalism in environmental education (EE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) in the context of ecopedagogy. Ecopedagogy calls for the remaking of capitalist practices and seeks to re-engage democracy to include multispecies interests in the face of our current global ecological crisis. In this article, the written reports by international business students on the documentary film *If A Tree Falls* about a radical environmental movement will be discussed. The aim of this article is to reflect upon the question of whether confrontational questions posed by radical environmentalism can move students to re-examine certain central assumptions within their own society and education. The analysis of students' individual writing assignments after viewing the film is placed in the context of the discussion about the aims of education in relation to environmental advocacy. This case study seeks to provide an example of how environmental advocacy and the objective of pluralistic education can be combined as mutually supportive means of achieving both democratic learning and learning *for* environmental sustainability.

Keywords: ecopedagogy; education for sustainable development (ESD); environmental advocacy; environmental education (EE); radical environmentalism

Introduction

Environmental advocacy and environmental activism have an ambiguous place within environmental education (EE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) since any advocacy can be seen as being at odds with democratic education. Supporters of open, democratic and pluralistic education (e.g. Jickling, 2000; Wals and Jickling, 2002; Öhman, 2008; Öhman and Östman, 2008; Wals, 2010; Van Poeck and Vandenabeele, 2012) reflect on the philosophical problems of addressing universally sustainable responsibilities and values in ESE (Sund and Öhman, 2014). Sustainable development or more generally sustainability is often framed in terms of uncertainty and many values attributed to the enterprise of teaching *for* the environment or *for* sustainable development are contested. Thus, democratic learning was proposed as both a process and to a large degree an end goal of EE and ESD, and environmental advocacy was seen as something that may, in its most extreme form, lead to totalitarianism and

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indoctrination (Jickling, 1996; Wals and Jickling, 2002; Breiting, 2009). Democratic learning and openness were seen as necessary prerequisites of learning for sustainability.

Some educational researchers and practitioners have argued, however, that we need to move beyond advocating democratic learning as a goal, and teach students to be prepared for effective participation in our society: 'we must teach them theory and method that *is* effective' (Cherniak, 2012:30). In fact, scholars working within the ecopedagogy have argued for the need to re-engage more radical environmental discourses in order to disrupt the power hegemonies established by the neoliberal capitalist form of democracy. Ecopedagogy opposes and simultaneously calls for the remaking of capitalist practices and seeks to re-engage the 'earth democracy' or democracy that expands beyond one species participation, in the face of our current global industrial crisis (Kahn, 2010). Herbert Marcuse (1964; 1965; 1966; 1972), the critical theorist working in the period between the 1960s and 1970s, has emphasized the potential of the radical movements to act as transformative catalysts in society, especially through the means of educational pedagogy. In his earlier work, Marcuse (1964) has argued that "advanced industrial society" created false needs, which resulted in the necessity for economic growth, continuous accumulation, and rise in consumption. In his 1965 essay, *Repressive Tolerance*, Marcuse has questioned how academic freedom or indeed more generally, true democracy can be achieved by promoting superficial openness to all ideas, both within and outside of educational contexts.

In *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy and Planetary Crisis: The Ecopedagogy Movement*, Richard Kahn (2010) reformulates Herbert Marcuse's critical theories of society and supports the kind of education that seizes the power of radical environmental activists and supports the earth democracy in which multispecies interests are represented. Kahn supports Marcus' idea that "academic freedom" or the acclaimed goal of representing in which "both sides" of academic issues must be represented in classrooms, departments, and educational events, results in repressive tolerance. This tolerance impedes action on matters worth acting on and to gain further ideological space for right-wing, corporate and other conservative-value agendas (Kahn, 2010: 11). This idea is echoed by Bansel (2007) who argues that while neoliberal ideology embracing pluralism pretends to be open and democratic, this superficial pluralism masks the internalized hegemonies of the global markets. What is more frightening, is that such apparent pluralism masks the actual exclusion of non-human planetary citizens from the democratic process, and removes the blame from the human agency in the destruction of the environment. According to Kahn, the re-imagination of a pro-life politics in which human and nonhuman beings are considered as equal moral agents represents the great anti-capitalist challenge.

The destruction of habitats and threats to biodiversity resulting from the expansion of human population and consumption is rarely addressed in a way that confronts students with the necessity to consider moral implications of such destruction. Authors supporting a more goal-oriented perspective in EE and ESD have proposed that rekindling of moral responsibility

(Kronlid and Öhman, 2013) and passionate engagement (Sund and Öhman, 2014) were preconditions of learning for sustainability. This moral engagement can be evoked by a number of didactic and pedagogical strategies, including exposure to alternative and even radical ideas (Jickling, 1996). The need to repoliticize and even radicalize environmental education has been expressed (Sund and Öhman, 2014). Kahn (2010) explores the idea of confrontation with these radical ideas as one of the means to move education beyond the amorphous bounds of 'anything goes' relativism (Wals, 2010) and toward a more passionate – and compassionate - involvement with the subject of ecocide and planetary ecological crises. In the face of expanding zoöcide, Kahn reflects, to think that that incorporation of non-human interests in educational practice or into wider democratic systems could occur without widespread rebellion and, ultimately, revolution, seems naive. As Marcuse (1966) remarked: "In defense of life: the phrase has explosive meaning in the affluent society" (p. 20). Today radical sustainability politics such as practiced by the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) seems determined to prove Marcuse right (Kahn, p. 137).

The case study reported in this article reflects on one experiment in such confrontation. This article will examine student reactions to the documentary film shown as part of Sustainable Business (minor) to undergraduate students of International Business Management Studies (IBMS) of The Hague University of Applied Sciences (HHS). The documentary film *If a Tree Falls* about the ELF, a radical environmental organization, was shown to students in order to elicit their comments on the subject of environmental activism in the context of business education. The aim of this article then is to reflect upon the question of whether confrontational questions posed by radical environmentalism can move students to re-examine certain central assumptions within their own society and education. The analysis of students' individual writing assignments after viewing the film is placed in the context of the discussion about the aims of education in relation to environmental advocacy. Finally, this case study seeks to provide an example of how environmental advocacy and the objective of pluralistic education can be combined – not necessarily one in service of the other, but as mutually supportive.

Placing radical environmentalism in the context of education

In analyzing the influence of (radical) environmentalism on the development of critical eco-pedagogical studies, and particularly the work of Herbert Marcuse, Kahn (p. 138) reflects:

To my mind, Marcuse is one of the preeminent philosophers of education in modern times, not only because he lived as well as propounded a radical theory of education as a centerpiece of his social critique and political plan of action, but because his educational theory was essentially linked to the ecological problem of human and nonhuman relations due to his understanding that education is a cultural activity, and that in Western history such culture has systematically defined itself against nature in both a hierarchically dominating and repressive manner.

Kahn (2010:140) further reflects:

With the scale of suffering so nearly unimaginable and the politics of counterrevolution so fully in effect at the present, Marcuse might well highlight the marginal political and cultural actors, such as the Earth Liberation Front, who work to educate society as to the gravity of the consequences of their political economy and provide the hope of alternative relationships in and with the world. Without a doubt, in turning earth warriors into leading pedagogues (who, though, as this chapter has declared, nevertheless stand in need of their own education as educators), the Marcusian spirit has moved far afield from the most contemporary educational discourse, even in ecological and environmental education.

The ELF is an international underground movement and a loose-knit organization that originated in the United Kingdom in 1992 and became active in North America in 1996 (Long, 2004). The group used to maintain an official website where it posted press releases. A common set of core guidelines, expressed by Craig Rosebraugh, an activist advocating for social and ecological justice in his book *Burning Rage of a Dying Planet: Speaking for the Earth Liberation Front* (2004), including inflicting economic damage on those profiting from the destruction and exploitation of the natural environment; revealing and educating (*sic!*) the public on the atrocities committed against the earth and all species that populate it; and taking necessary precautions against harming any animal, human and non-human. ELF has been responsible for well over \$100 million in property damages since 1997 (Liddick, 2009).

On December 7, 2005, one of the largest arrests of environmental activists was made as part of the FBI operation Backfire. Among those arrested and charged in federal court on multiple counts of arson and conspiracy was Daniel McGowan. A terrorism enhancement was applied to his sentence, and McGowan was sentenced to seven years imprisonment, and released on parole in June 2013 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_G._McGowan).

In 2011, Marshall Curry and Sam Cullman released a documentary *If A Tree Falls: A Story Of The Earth Liberation Front*. Drawing from striking archival footage and intimate interviews with ELF members, as well as the prosecutor and detective who were chasing them, and victims of arson attacks, *If A Tree Falls* explored the tumultuous period from 1995 until early 2001 when environmentalists were clashing with timber companies and law enforcement, and focuses on the period of house arrest of Daniel McGowan who is awaiting his sentence. The story preceding this documentary is described on the website of the film by Curry:

The story dropped in our laps. My wife was running a domestic violence organization in Brooklyn and came home from work one day and told me that four federal agents had entered her office that afternoon and arrested one of her employees—Daniel McGowan. I knew him a little bit through her, and we were shocked because he didn't seem on the

surface like the kind of person who could be facing life in prison, charged as an “eco-terrorist.” He had grown up in Queens, had been a business major in college, and his dad was a New York cop. But here he was, in chains. Whenever my preconceived notions are proven to be wrong, I get curious. Sam and I wanted to figure out what had happened—what was the path that had brought him to this place. So we decided to find out (<http://www.ifatreefallsfilm.com/faq.html>).

The methodology

The written assignments which, among others, included reactions to the film, were written by two consequent cohorts of students following Sustainable Business minor in December 2013 and in May 2014. The film was shown as part of the Guest Speakers and Company visits module – one of the five modules of the course aimed at raising students' critical awareness of the sustainable business. In a sense, the film could be seen as an introduction to the anti-business course, and the type of ‘material’ that is used to provoke extreme reactions that can extend beyond immediate objectives of the minor (acquiring of necessary business-related competencies, as other courses within IBMS do).

The 68 students (38 males, 20 females) were between 22 and 24 years of age. The majority of the students were Dutch, followed by German, Austrian, French, Moroccan, Bulgarian, Pakistani, American and other predominantly European or North African nationalities. The students’ educational background included first and second-year standard business courses, ranging from branding to marketing to commercial economy and finance. While the scope of this article does not allow for the detailed description of all five modules of the minor (which typically lasted for 12 weeks of the semester), the focus here will be on just one component of a single module – a reflection provoked by the 1.5-hour viewing of the film. The students were asked to write individual reports summarizing the film. The written reactions to the film are presented below (original grammar and spelling retained).

Reactions to the film

In describing their reaction to the film, many students have reported being shocked by the intensity of confrontation and emotions displayed by the activists, as this Austrian female student testifies:

The dramatic film-clips of the fires, caused by the ELF members, evoke shocking feelings. Same with the incident of Eugene (Oregon), where the police crushed a peaceful demonstration. This demonstration was about cutting down landmarked trees and was conducted by friendly people climbing on these trees. The police totally overacted and used violence (tear gas and pepper spray) to get them down again. This behavior was unacceptable and showed the spectators that not only the ELF used force. This example

promotes a kind of understanding for the ELF. You understand why they felt ignored, frustrated, angry and why they eventually proceeded to economic sabotage by destroying symbols of environmental abuse....

A French female student felt touched by and sympathetic to the activists' cause and emotions displayed in the film:

I found this documentary very touching and well done. It was interesting to go into the group and see how they think and how far they are ready to go to change things. I personally agree with their actions. Even if I think that violence is not the answer to solve problems, the documentary showed that by practicing non-violent actions, problems were not even considered. By burning facilities, the ELF made his point without hurting anybody.

Many students were moved by the story of Daniel McGowan. A French male student sums up his reaction:

I found this documentary really, really interesting... [Daniel McGowan], son of a police officer, after graduating from a business school he briefly worked for a PR company, after realizing all the damages done to the earth he became an environmental activist who was often arrested during non-violent demonstration fighting against the large scale pollution of earth due to companies and governments that are doing nothing to prevent the damages. Because he felt that nonviolent actions did not get any attention from the American government, The Earth Liberation Front started to burn down some places like a slaughterhouse, a 4x4 dealership or a timber company. For them, it was the only way to be in the press and to be heard by society. ... It was very interesting to see how far those people were ready to go, always without harming people but with strong violence. But my opinion is that they needed to do something big to attract attention to their message, even if I do not think that violence is a good tool to create attention and give a message. But, the issue is that the government did not listen to them before and was violent when the earth activists were completely nonviolent. Some images were shocking; to see those cops spraying pepper gas on pacific people and sometimes even put directly on the eye a pepper solution is impressive. Even if I do not caution what the Earth Liberation Front has done, I understand the fact that they have been fed up by the government response to their demands.

Reacting to the same causal chain of violence, a Bulgarian male student noted:

The scene that I personally found most provocative was showing a police confrontation with the members of the front. The camp of the group was placed in a forest that was about to be cut down, because of the building of a new corporate parking lot. The police officers from Eugene doused the protesters with pepper spray and tear gas as they run out

of the area. This confrontation pushed the Liberation Front to more radical actions such as burning down several timber companies across the country, S.U.V.'s and a 12 million dollars ski lodge in Vail, Colo.

This violence has sparked more engaged reactions. A Dutch male student reported being both fascinated and conflicted by the film:

The movie...fascinated me and left me with mixed feelings about the Earth Liberation Front. I tend to agree with their message that we are, in fact, destroying the environment and bring our planet to decline. The actions shown at the beginning of the video, in which roads and trees were being blockaded by protesters, are ways of protesting I approve, though I believe in a more constructive way of protesting. However, I cannot approve of the placing of bombs, in order to destroy the businesses themselves, as much as any type of violence.

Even though the way the targeted companies operated did a lot of damage to the environment, it does not mean their buildings have to be destroyed. Besides disagreeing with their use of violence, I think that it is not going to be a solution to the problem of deforestation. Even if blowing up an office will destroy a business, another will come in its place since the demand for wood is not going to diminish directly as a consequence. It may lead to higher costs for the lumber industry in the actual country, leading to higher domestic wood prices and a decrease in local demand. But that would only mean that wood would be imported more, meaning a different forest will be cut down instead, adding to the environmental costs of transportation.

This is how one Pakistani male student has expressed his mixed emotions:

If three falls were the only lecture I attended last year so I know it and was one of the most mind-blowing documentaries that I ever saw... It is like the world is the hand that feeds us and we are just biting on it. With all that said this movie slash documentary takes you from the beginning before these activists became who they were before the crimes. Humanizing them because after seeing some of the things that people do you get the feeling that you would have done the same... Because protesting was not enough they started to burn companies that were involved in projects that would cause deforestation. I don't blame them if people would have just paid attention to their cries, not of it would have happened. People were tearing down trees that were hundreds of years old, think about it you just deleted a hundred years and to get that back you have to plant a new tree and wait a hundred years. A whole and even more than a lifetime... ... I salute the man the whole reason this documentary was made he knew he has made a mistake and is serving his sentence as every single group member should be doing but no they decided to put all the heat on him just because it got real. Those people are the reason why I have

trust issues, but I hope he gets out and if I am not mistaking he is supposed to get out this year. This has taught me the difficulties we face when your priority is not someone else.

The ambiguity was also reflected in the reaction of a Latvian male (2) student:

However, there is also the flip side of these actions. The ELF was fighting to protect the environment at the same time with the burning and this "eco-terrorism" actions made a lot of pollution in the air. It was one of the largest domestic terrorism pollutions in the history of the US. Another bad aspect is that many people lost their jobs. They were working in these companies to feed their families, but after these attacks they become unemployed. Moreover, in my opinion, some of these ELF group participants were only there because they can take part in these actions. Not everyone was really fighting or save the environment from these companies. For some of them, it was only for fun.

In the end, it is not normal that so many people had become terrorists in such a development country United States. Maybe someone is going to say that that is only "eco-terrorism", I would say that it is our future. We have to start thinking about saving our resources and environment because nothing is inexhaustible. And if so many people are joining such activist group as ELF that means people care. Even if they are terrorists, they were fighting for a better World.

A Latvian male student has reacted:

Honestly, throughout the Sustainability minor undertaken currently I have realized what traces of ecological waste everyone creates just with our existence and it makes me sick. The corporates have very small ethics and governmental control on wrongdoing, so any initiative for eco-activist groups is the last straw to hold on knowing that something might change in the future.

Some students have posted a number of questions, both quoting the ones formulated by the film-makers, and their own arising from viewing the film:

“Do crimes against property in which no one is killed or injured constitute acts of terrorism? That is one of two nagging questions that run through Marshall Curry and Sam Cullman’s thoughtful documentary... This is a moral question that, I guess, every serious environmentalist has asked himself at one time or another. As the world's natural resources and habitats are consumed around us, how far should we go to stop it? If a corporation won't take no for an answer and is dead set on deforesting countryside's or fracking near your home or detonating the mountains you live on for coal, is anything more than peaceful, legal recourse justified? (German male)

In reflecting upon some of these questions, this student further writes:

... We are offered a step-by-step look at how non-peaceful radicalism is bred. The filmmakers have the sense to back the story up well before the founding of the ELF, when the eventual members were all involved in peaceful protests that were broken up, sometimes brutally, by the police. For instance, the activists are shown erecting a peaceful blockade on a road that will be used by loggers to clear-cut a forest. After successfully blocking the operation for about a year, the Parks Department comes in and removes the protesters, albeit nonviolently. The forest is subsequently destroyed. Then, some of the same environmentalists are shown attempting to save some trees from being razed to make way for a parking lot, via the method of climbing up and sitting in them. The police disgracefully shove, pepper sprayed and arrested the peaceful protesters, the trees were cut. So what do you do? Well, the majority of us would keep fighting peacefully. But the few folks that formed the ELF, borne out of those frustrating failures, started a campaign of property destruction that captured headlines around the nation. They burned logging operations to the ground, vandalized the Bureau of Land Management, and destroyed part of a ski resort that had reneged on environmental promises. Sometimes, they were enormously successful; they forced at least one logging operation to close its doors. Sometimes, they misfired: they destroyed a farm they believed to be planting gene-manipulated crops. It wasn't. During the entire 15-action run, they never physically harmed a single human being...

Latvian male (2)

One of the activist group members was saying: "Sometimes when you see the things you love being destroyed, you just want to destroy those things." That was a very simple answer, on the question of why they did all these actions.

Eventually, I can understand these people who tried to protect the environment and to stop those companies business.... Companies are thinking only about profit and how to satisfy shareholders. They don't care about other circumstances as far they getting profit everything is going very well. In this case, companies don't care about forests and horses they were only looking forward to doing business in these areas. Moreover, even after ELF tried to stop these businesses the companies were protected from the police. Of course, that wasn't the best way how to fight against these companies but these activists just didn't say any other option how they can stop them. Citation from the movie was: "When you're screaming at the top of your lungs and no one is listening. What do you do?" This activist group only saw one option how to fight against them, other people maybe could find another but for the most part of the civilization, it's just don't care. Even the government is protecting these companies, not the environment.

A German male has reflected:

The documentary "If a Tree Falls" deals with the question if environmental violations justify crimes against property in which nobody is injured or killed. ... Fortunately, during the entire 15 attacks, they never physically harmed any human being. Furthermore, the film does not editorialize, and it certainly does not romanticize the activists or their actions. I think that is very important for the movie's credibility and helped me to understand what their motivation was. I think it was very helpful to demonstrate how people change by the example of Daniel McGowan because he reflects many adolescents.

Finally, I asked myself how would I react on environmental violations? If for instance, a company is deforesting countryside, fracking near your home or detonating the mountains I live on for coal. Is then anything more than a peaceful, legal resource justified to stop them? I don't think so because otherwise, we will end up in anarchy. Violence, even if only against objects such as buildings, should never be the answer to violence.

Reflecting on the lessons learned from the film, a Danish male student writes:

I know that the police are doing many good things for the citizens. The problem is that some powerful people control their system and if people are not supporting or living, as they want them to do, they get arrested. Even if they are not making any harm or damage to other people, as the protesters did with the trees. So it also made me reflect on our system and the people in charge.

In thinking about what type of 'system' and 'people in charge' the activists portrayed in the film address, students have also reflected that the same receiving audience can be contacted by peaceful means, through media and 'technology' as this Pakistani-English male student reflected:

Personally, I do not believe that violence and destruction are necessary in the current age of technology however it is becoming increasingly difficult to be heard by governments of modern times. Ethics and the environment is becoming a huge topic on the political agenda, this is as a result of the increase in the information that the population is able to gather.

Almost all students have reflected on the question of whether Daniel McGowan, the main protagonist of the film, deserved his punishment. As this German female student has put it:

The fact that Daniel McGowan got this harsh punishment surprised me deeply. For me, there is no justification for that. He and his fellow group members did not kill people. They harmed others financially but never hurt a person. Sure, they shouldn't have burned down the buildings. But anyways, it is completely out of proportion how jurisdiction and police acted. I can only guess why the judges decided as they did. I think they were afraid of imitators and wanted to make an example to prevent people with the same mindset as the ones participating at the ELF from doing things as the ELF did.

Generally, most students recognized that the questions addressed in the film are very complex and morally charged. The Austrian female student quoted above has reflected:

One of the most upsetting scenes shows on the one hand how 500-year-old redwoods are cut down and harvested. On the other hand, a lumber executive says that for every tree cut down six new and young trees are planted, making their business sustainable. But it still hurts to see these centuries-old forests being reduced so ruthlessly.... In the end, I think this case ranges in a grey zone. I don't really want to say who was wrong and who was right because each of these opposed statements has true cores. It is just "*no decision about black and white, it's not that simple.*"

Echoing this sentiment, a German female wrote:

Like always, there are two sides of the medal. You have the claims of the environmentalists and on the other side, you see the injured party and the interests of the government. I think the movie maker really tried to give every party involved a voice and made it possible for everybody to display his arguments and motivations in order to investigate how it was possible that the ELF radicalized itself so drastically and translated their slogan "Earth First" into action. Even skeptics acknowledge that 95% of the wood in America was cut down in the last centuries and that is what the ELF criticizes over and over again. But even when the ELF is angry about the fact that the deforestation still is going on there is absolutely no justification that they burn down the companies that are responsible for the deforestation. They did not only burn down those companies but also slaughterhouses and other facilities responsible for harming the environment.

Furthering this thought, the Latvian male student quoted above wrote:

What was... new for me in this documentary was the dual role of the agencies that are expected to support wildlife and ensure that there is continuous benefit for both – people and the environment. In real life, the case is not exactly taking that shape. It shocked me that most of these protectionist agencies in the U.S. see the woodland as a crop growing land. So, everything that grows in the area under the agency's supervision is a land to be exploited for human needs. Clearly, one of the main crops that are produced by wildlife is a tree, which is also one of the main reasons for the existing oxygen. Cutting trees and reducing the number of trees on earth reduces oxygen levels that are so vital for every one of us. This escalated the people's participation in environmental protection....

In my perspective, demolishing buildings while not hurting people physically is not terrorism. This new, wrongly named shape of eco-protection escalated and became an active way to make changes. Even though I do not believe in such radical ways of achieving things, I understand the reasons for radical actions. Most of the governments and businesses look at nature as a resource for profit generation. In result, businesses

reshape the nature in the way that is most convenient for them, while governments offer permission to do so because that means that there will be a potential to generate income for the leading party in the region. In addition, leading governments have free access to reshaping the land and use natural resources in a way they want themselves. There are very few restrictions, but even with those can be changed and permission to do things with land can be allowed. 'Simple' people play a very little role in the decision making of such events like de-forestation, which some selected groups make very angry...

Honestly, after watching the documentary I had a feeling that I understand every one of the 'terrorists', and would like to support them with handing in a gallon of gas to fire up the part of the system that is the real terrorists. The whole movie represented the loopholes in public's perception of what is good and what is bad and how the media, regulations and overall actions taken by the leaders of U.S. are blindfolded for their own benefit. The destructive ways of doing business these days should be muted and new ways should be implemented where substitution of the natural, non-renewable resources should be found and used for the profit generation. Currently, the world is divided between large corporations resulting in economic disparities, ecological degradation and continues poverty. The system does not work and change is required.

A Bulgarian student quoted above did not share this support of tactics, but did feel sympathetic to the activists:

The other scene I found interesting showed the movie visit to Daniel's sister house. It was during the time he was under house arrest. Mr. McGowan had to say goodbye to his family. But instead of paying attention to that he was explaining that even though he was sentenced to prison he does not really regret his actions and the causes he made together with the front. Daniel was explaining that the companies the front burned down were money machines, responsible for destroying the natural resources and turning them into profit. In his opinion, he was not a terrorist, but fighter against the governmental terrorism, that causes damage to the forests and the species living there. ... In conclusion, I would like to say that we all have to learn how to live sustainably and not damage the environment in order to save it for the next generations. However, I think that Daniel's way of fighting for this cause is not the right way to choose. It is good to be naturally protective, but harming and damaging private property should be punished by law.

A similar sentiment that private property should be respected is expressed by Columbian male student:

Personally, I think the movie was very engaging at the beginning. It seemed to be an interesting group, who could make a notorious voice in the future. However, the lack of leadership and clear directions made that their objectives dissolved completely. I do not agree with their actions since I believe private property should always be respected, in all

forms. What happened, was a totally different purpose of what was intended at the beginning. Finally, their actions contradicted their motivations as well. In a sense that their actions were not sustainable at all, neither in society neither for the natural environment.

A German student quoted above concluded his essay with a reflection on different stakeholders in the film:

In my belief, the government has to control the business and we, as a stakeholder can influence them with our purchasing behavior. Furthermore, I think most environmental activist groups and organizations immediately and vehemently renounced the actions of the ELF at the time. However, it underlined the great need for more accessible public forums for a grievance to avoid violence in both ways.

A Dutch male student quoted above also thought of productive ways to move forward:

I think it should be better to put all the energy that is spent on “fighting the system” in more constructive ways to solve the problems, for example by making the way lumber is gathered more sustainable, for example by replanting trees. Even though the trees being cut down are a few hundred years old, this would lead to a slower decrease of forest ground.

At one point in the video, Suzanne Savoie states the message of a protest, saying consumer America is destroying the world. I think this statement might be applicable to the entire developed world. This is also the heart of the problem. The high demand for wood and the inefficient use of it without any regard to nature is the reason so many trees need to be cut down in the first place.

Bad or not, the actions lead to more publicity on the matter. Even though it generates a lot of negative attention, it may lead to more extensive public knowledge on the matter. Firstly, more public knowledge may lead to a bigger interest on the political level, which might eventually lead to stronger regulations about the preservation of forests, assuming the country has a properly functioning democracy. Secondly, a higher common knowledge on the consumption of wood may lead to more responsible consumption, by showing what the results are of the high demand, and the simple fact life gets cheaper if you cut down on unnecessary expenses and waste.

Even if such aggression may get more media attention than more peaceful protests and campaigns, it is clearly not the best way to solve the problem in the long term. However, when looking at the motivation for violence, some questions can be raised on who started it. When looking at *If a Tree Falls*, the protests shown in the beginning are peaceful, and the arrest of the protesters does not seem unnecessarily aggressive (referring to the arrest of the protesters on the wall, blockading the route to the forest). However, as protests

continue in different locations, police interventions seem to be more aggressive, including wildly excessive use of violence. A clear escalation is shown, leading to the start of more radical and aggressive protests. In conclusion, I think the violence used by the government led to the existence of violence amongst the protesters. However, this still doesn't justify the use of violence from the protesters, who could have chosen to protest in more creative and peaceful ways.

Reflection on reactions

While the scope of this article does not allow us to reflect on other assignments and learning outcomes of the minor sustainable business (some of these findings are reported in Kopnina 2013, 2014; 2015) a number of observations can be made. A number of overlapping themes can be identified in the segments above. One of the themes is the perception of complexity and ambiguity that students express. Partially, this complexity can be summed up through a number of dualisms or dichotomies that students note in their descriptions, e.g. 'there are two sides of the medal', and partially it is the realization that there are more than two different sides, e.g. '*no decision about black and white*'. While the realization that there are many different sides (potentially, a pluralist position) hinges upon the students' appreciation of and respect for different positions of stakeholders (activists, victims of arson, police, etc.); the dualism necessitates the need to take sides, to make a decision. This decision can be expressed simply by whose side one is on, or by the question of whether McGowan's prison sentence was fair or not, or whether the acts by ELF can be called terrorism. In this sense, it is both recognition of plural perspectives and the need to choose sides that the students felt (without the lecturer's specification) that their writing assignment should reflect upon in relation to this film.

Complexity reflected in student reactions is also summed up by Marshall Curry in the Frequently Asked Questions section on the website of the film (<http://www.ifatreefallsfilm.com/faq.html>):

A number of people have complimented the film's "balance"—what do you think of that?

I appreciate what people are saying, but I actually don't think the film is *balanced* as much as it is *complex*. I think there's a problem with the "he said/she said journalism" that we see too often in the media when they present issues that are clear cut as if they are controversial, they don't fact-check, and they treat "both sides" of every argument as if they have equal merit. To me, that's not balanced, that's laziness. The media should be a referee, and a good referee does not call the same number of fouls on both sides. A good referee calls fouls when he sees fouls. If we had discovered as we were making the film that Daniel was a monstrous sociopath, the film would have depicted him that way. And if we had discovered that he was a blameless saint, the film would have depicted him that

way. We didn't show the different points of view because we were trying to be balanced, or were afraid of taking a stand. We showed them because we believed there was real complexity there.

Students have certainly shown awareness of this complexity as well as their ability to honestly, critically, and passionately express their opinions. Considering the fact that the students were following a Bachelors in Business, their reactions to the film are all the more valuable because they show not just the potential of one documentary to stimulate business students to appreciate complexity, but also their ability as human beings to be both responsive and resilient to radical questions relevant to larger societal and ethical questions. Student reactions also show their ability to take sides and not be 'lazy' in their assessment.

Another theme that the students grappled with was finding alternatives to what the majority of them disapproved of – extreme violence. While some students have offered general thoughts, e.g. 'I believe in a more constructive way of protesting', many also felt that there was no easy solution: 'Personally I do not believe that violence and destruction... however, it is becoming increasingly difficult to be heard by governments of modern times'. Part of the difficulty with addressing the situation that begot violence was the fact that the agency of harm or the culprit was elusive – in one case, it was seen as a 'system', in another case 'American government', but also the 'big companies', the police, and even the entire 'consumer America'. The multiplicity of culprits makes the very 'problem' (in a sense that these students were used to identifying a 'business problem' and solving it) not only elusive and multifaceted but also hard to pin down to a single constituency. Perhaps one reason why an agency of harm is so elusive – while students are well able to identify various stakeholders involved in it – is that it masks the false needs created by the advanced industrial society, identified by Marcuse (1964), and cannibalized or marginalized alternative discourses (Bansel, 2007). This brings us back to the question posed at the beginning of this article, namely, the reason why ecopedagogy may be best suited for both oppositions to and simultaneously for the remaking of capitalist practices.

Another issue that the student reactions evoke is their appreciation of the very cause that ELF fights for. While clearly not all students are supportive of this cause, and especially of the methods to achieve the results, most reports were very clear that they recognized the protestors' identification of the problem – 'damages done to the earth', the forest, and the trees. In order to re-engage the 'earth democracy' or democracy that expands beyond one species participation, environmental activists have been seen as the agents of change – albeit weak and failing.

Returning to the authors supporting plural and a more goal-oriented perspective in EE and ESD, the analysis of student writing assignments indicates that both pluralism – in a sense of offering different perspectives and allowing individual opinions and differences – and a more instrumental approach to education – in this case, exposing students to radical environmental ideas – serve to make students both more involved, aware, and active. While it might be too much to say that the film alone has rekindled moral responsibility (Kronlid and Öhman, 2013) or stimulated

passionate engagement (Sund and Öhman, 2014) in the quest for sustainability, the student reactions to show that something of a mental, emotional, and ethical shift might have been triggered by the film.

Since the aim of this article was to reflect upon the question of whether confrontational questions posed by radical environmentalism can move students to re-examine certain central assumptions within their own society and education, the answer is (predictably) reassuringly positive. These central assumptions are identified by students as being normative workings of the ‘system’ that they were used to before the film (and some other parts of the minor courses not discussed in this article) have ‘shocked’, ‘touched’, or ‘moved’ them.

Finally, we need to recall Kahn’s reflection that in turning earth warriors into leading pedagogues, the Marcusian spirit has moved far afield in ecological and environmental education. However, Kahn (2010: 140) concludes, ‘this may well be not because of the naïveté or insufficiency of the educational projects and political goals mounted by the earth or animal liberation movements, but rather because present versions of academic eco-literacy are themselves seriously, and perhaps gravely, depoliticized’. Thus, indeed, there is an urgent need to repoliticize environmental and sustainability education (Sund and Öhman, 2014) in the spirit consistent with the passion and commitment for the earth democracy and for ideals worth learning about.

Conclusion

The analysis of students’ individual writing assignments after viewing the film presents an interesting case of using radical ‘messages’ within the aims of (environmental) education in order to trigger both student’s engagement and critical thinking. This case study provides an example of how environmental advocacy and the objective of pluralistic education can be combined as mutually supportive means of achieving both democratic learnings in which students’ individual opinions are seen as extremely valuable, and simultaneously provide an example of the type of ecopedagogy that supports learning *for* environmental sustainability. The role of environmental advocacy can be crucially important if the interests of all planetary citizens – and not just one species- are to be taken seriously. The plurality of predominantly anthropocentric perspectives is not enough to push the bounds of conventional wisdom, but adding more radical ideas could not only enrich educational pluralism but equip students for more transformative thought and action. The analysis of students’ writing assignments has revealed their ability to both engage in democratic learning, and to start appreciating – or at least recognizing – alternative perspectives that threaten – or promise to (depending on one’s point of view) challenge the status quo. The way forward from Kahn’s analysis would be in an investigation of the effectiveness both of radical environmentalism, democratic learning and of environmental knowledge for its position in the ongoing subordination of nature. As one student has simply summarized, what can be gained from such knowledge is ‘that we all have to learn how to live sustainably and not damage

the environment in order to save it for the next generations'. Recognition and understanding of a radical perspective can lead students to see the forest behind the (falling) trees.

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