Chet Bowers
Title: The Relevance of Eco-Justice and the Revitalization of the Commons Issues to Thinking About Greening the University Curriculum

Abstract
This essay presents the argument that in light of the ecological crisis, the global spread of market liberalism, and the loss of linguistic diversity, educational reformers need to become aware of the importance of the world’s diverse cultural and environmental commons to reducing the adverse impact of these global trends. There is a brief discussion of how the current efforts to promote educational reforms based on constructivist theories of learning contribute to the further undermining of the cultural commons. But the main focus of the essay is on the characteristics of the cultural and environmental commons, and the role that universities need to play in helping students to understand the sources of self-sufficiency and local decision-making that are characteristics of the commons. It is also suggested that curricular changes at the university level need to be introduced that enable students to recognize the ideological and technological forces that threaten to further undermine the commons.

The globalization of the Western techno-scientific-industrial culture is accelerating the rate of changes in three areas that are vital to the future quality of life on this planet. They are: (1) the loss of linguistic/cultural diversity that plays such an important role in maintaining biodiversity; (2) the loss of intergenerational knowledge that represents cultural alternatives to an individually-centered, consumer dependent lifestyle; and (3) the further degradation of natural systems—potable water, topsoil, fisheries, climate change, spread of toxic waste—on a scale that now makes it impossible for several billion of the world’s people to escape the ravages of disease and poverty. As all three areas of change have been so widely reported and documented it is unnecessary here, given this audience’s level of awareness, to present the supporting evidence again. What is less well recognized is the way in which the achievements of the Western techno-scientific-industrial culture, and there are many, are major contributors to these life-threatening changes.

The Western media and now the increasingly widespread use of computers have reinforced the Western myth that modernity requires abandoning cultural traditions that do not support the individual, consumer-dependent lifestyle that is needed by the industrial approach to production and constant innovation. In addition to providing the knowledge base for bringing more aspects of the environment and human experience under the control of the industrial process, science has also contributed to undermining the mythopoetic narratives that
were, for many cultures, the foundation of intergenerational knowledge about how to live less environmentally destructive lives. And with the “demystification” of these narratives, the mythos of capitalism, with its emphasis on material gain and on viewing the environment as an exploitable resource, have filled the void.

In many parts of the world there is a growing awareness that the Western technoscientific-industrial culture is not the cutting-edge of a life-force called “progress,” but a cultural construct that is the most dominant colonizing force in the world today (Sachs, 1992; Shiva, 1993; Batalla, 1996). Resistance to this process of colonization is taking many forms, with the most visible being the resistance to having their mythopoetic narratives undermined by Western assumptions and materialistic values. Less visible, at least in terms of the popular media, are the many groups that recognize the connections between the introduction of Western technologies (e.g. the Green Revolution, the terminator seeds), the international institutions and treaties such as the World Trade Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the decline from a subsistence existence into the poverty and misery that accompanies the degradation of the environment and the disruption of local economies. Even workers in the West are not immune from this process of economic and technological globalization. With millions of jobs now being “outsourced” to countries with lower wages, and with workers continuing to be displaced by automation, an increasing number of people are facing an uncertain future.

One of the ironies of our times is that educational reformers are promoting constructivist theories of learning as the basis of teacher education in many Western and non-Western countries. Constructivist based educational reforms can now be found in countries ranging from South Africa, Peru, Brazil, Japan, Thailand, to Uzbekistan. As the promoters of these reforms have not questioned the varied assumptions that Dewey, Freire, and Piaget took-for-granted, they do not recognize that they are complicit in the process of globalizing those aspects of the Western mind-set that are ecologically unsustainable. The profound differences in cultural knowledge and value systems are either viewed as irrelevant or, worse, as the source of cultural backwardness (Dewey, 1920, 1929; Freire, 1973, 1974). Viewed from the perspective of Western educational reformers the challenge is to educate youth in these diverse cultures to construct their own knowledge and guiding values—which would free them from the restrictive traditions of their own culture. In addition to assuming that their
respective one-true approach to inquiry (experimental inquiry for Dewey, critical reflection for Freire, and the genetically governed development of rational thought for Piaget) will lead to more democratic and individually responsible societies, these theorists and their current followers did not take account of the ecological crisis. They were also unaware of how their highest values were also the basis of the Industrial Revolution—which their current followers continue to ignore even as they criticize the capitalism.

As the assumptions of these “fathers” of constructivist learning theorists are examined in a forthcoming book titled “The False Promises of Constructivist Theories of Learning: A Global and Ecological Critique,” I will focus here on an ancient cultural practice and its supporting assumptions that represent an alternative to the three world transforming trends now being accelerated by the globalization of techno-scientific-industrial culture. I would also like to suggest that the revitalization of this ancient tradition, along with the supporting assumptions that take varied forms of cultural expression, should be the central focus of educational reform at the public school and university level in both Western and non-Western countries.

This ancient practice, which was called the commons in pre-Roman Britain, is closely related to what the early Greeks referred to as “oikas,” which we now call “ecology.” Just as the early Greeks understood oikas as the management of the household upon which the life of the community depends, what is now referred to as the commons also involves the sustainable management of the household—which includes the natural systems. The commons, as practiced over the time span of human history, represented what is shared in common and upon which life depends: water, fields, woodlands, animals, plants, air, and so forth. The commons also includes the symbolic systems of the culture—language, narratives, expressive arts, technological knowledge, norms governing moral reciprocity, and so forth. The commons still exist today, even in our most technologically dependent urban areas. But it has been significantly reduced in scope by another practice that was introduced in earlier times.

Perhaps a better way of representing the introduction of this practice, which was called “enclosure,” would be to say that it was imposed—as it involved the privatizing and monetizing of what previously was freely available to everybody in the community as long as certain rules of reciprocity were followed (The Ecologist, 1993). While one of the primary goals of the Western techno-scientific-industrial culture is the further enclosure of the
commons, there are still aspects of the natural and symbolic world that still have not been brought under the control of market forces. But they are fast disappearing. For example, what remains of the public airwaves are now being taken over by media-oriented corporations, while the gene-lines of plants and animals are now being patented and industrialized, potable water is increasingly becoming a commodity controlled by transnational corporations, and even our behavior is being electronically encoded as data and sold as a commodity to corporations that want to target a specific audience (Mander and Goldsmith, 1996). The ethos that holds that all aspects of the commons should be monetized and brought into the market can be seen in how, in the United States, it is possible to purchase over the internet the social security number of another person. The current price of this bit of data is twenty-six dollars.

The suggestion that the ancient practice of the commons needs to be revitalized and made the focus of educational reform will be criticized by many educational reformers as the yet another expression of romanticism. These are the same educational reformers who dismiss any suggestion that we can learn from the indigenous, more ecologically-centered cultures as the expression of romanticism and thus not to be taken seriously. The charge of romanticism, especially as it is thrown around by critical pedagogy theorists is really a marker that signifies a major area of silence in their own graduate students (Roberts, 2000). In not having considered how the knowledge systems of different non-Western cultures represent human/nature relationships as interdependent, and in not being aware of how many of these cultures have avoided letting the market oriented relationships become the dominant characteristic of their daily life, these theorists dismiss any references to what is a major void in their own ethnocentric education as the expression of romanticism. The dismissal of the need to learn about and from cultures that represent the majority of the world’s human population is really a power play that fits Friedrich Nietzsche’s description of ressentiment where a weakness cannot be acknowledged, and the source of the threat must be dismissed by claiming to uphold more enlightened values (Nietzsche, 1967).

Revitalizing the commons—that is, the non-monetized aspects of daily life—is not a matter of going back to an earlier period of cultural existence. Thus, it is not a quixotic journey back in time to simpler patterns of social existence. Rather, it involves local communities taking democratic responsibility for the quality of the air, water, soil, plants, animals, and every other aspect of the bioregion they share and depend upon. It also involves
renewing the intergenerational knowledge of healing, agricultural practices, mentoring in the arts and building skills, use of locally adapted technologies, growing and preparing food, ceremonies, and so forth. In short, it involves becoming aware of, valuing, and renewing the non-monetized natural and symbolic systems that we depend upon for enhancing the quality of human health, relationships, activities, and need for aesthetic expression.

If the criticism of romanticism were to have a basis in reality, it should be directed at the academics who critique capitalism but provide no suggestions of what the alternatives would be. Their romanticism is in their recommendation that various forms of process thinking will lead to progressing beyond the limitations of capitalism. For Dewey, the process was “reconstructing” experience through the method of experimental inquiry --which happens to be the basis of problem solving within the techno-scientific-industrial culture--(1920, 1929); for Freire and his many followers, critical inquiry not only represented the highest expression of human potential but would also lead to overcoming the oppression of previous generations (Freire1974); and for Giroux, when teachers take on the role of “transformative intellectuals” (even in Islamic cultures such as Pakistan) the reign of social justice will begin (1988 and 2002). Other educational theorists put their faith in the progressive nature of “dissipative structures” and a Tielhard de Chardin interpretation of evolution (O’Sullivan,1999, Doll, 1993). What is common to all of these romantic educational theorists is that their various vocabularies are now encompassed in the popular phrase “transformative learning.” This phrase equates change with progress in the same way that the recent advertising campaign of McDonald’s reinforces in the mind of the consumer that “everything’s changing”

The current emphasis on transformative learning is especially ironic because it is based on many of the cultural assumptions that underlie transformative capitalism. I share their critique of capitalism, or what we prefer to call the techno-scientific-industrial culture. Global capitalism, now promoted by neo-liberals who are mistakenly referred to as conservatives, as well as international institutions such as the World Trade Organization, are forcing billions of people that previously led a subsistence and thus relatively self-sufficient existence into becoming transformative learners. That is, they are having to learn how to meet the most basic requirements of daily life as corporations enclose more aspects of the commons they previously relied upon. And just as the educational theorists from Dewey to the present
represented their various approaches to transformative learning as overturning intergenerational knowledge (habits) as the source of backwardness, the dynamics of enclosure also undermine what remains of the intergenerational knowledge that served as the basis of community self-sufficiency. The peasant farmers in Mexico and India, to cite just two examples, are finding that the intergenerational knowledge of their communities can no longer be relied upon as the subsidized farmers in the United States flood Mexico with the more cheaply produced corn and, in India, water is turned into a commodity that requires a larger percentage of the peasant’s already meager income (Batalla, 1996, Shiva, 2003). The traditional skills that were the basis of a subsistence existence are no longer useful when the industrial process of production and consumption are introduced. As Ivan Illich pointed out years ago, traditional skills cannot be the basis of earning a living in the new money economy (1978). The outsourcing of industrial production to non-Western countries truly become examples of the “dissipative structures” that Bill Doll and Donald Oliver celebrate as those moments of creative and progressive transformation (Doll, 1993, Oliver, 1989). But the transformative learning that follows the further enclosure of their commons does not lead to the upward and progressive social developments promised by Western educational theorists. Instead, transformative learning becomes a matter of survival in the impoverished and overcrowded slums on the fringes of the world’s cities. And the transformative learning that results from becoming unemployed in American towns and cities, where there is even less in the way of intergenerational knowledge of how to live outside a money economy, similarly does not follow the upward path envisioned by the educational theorists.

The emphasis that Dewey, Freire, and the more contemporary theorists place on transformative learning is flawed in a number of fundamental ways. Their indifference to the need to reconcile the basic assumptions that underlie their various interpretations of the one-true mode of inquiry with the knowledge systems of other cultures is a major weakness—especially since they all represent themselves as advocates of democracy. However, the weakness that I want to focus on is their Enlightenment bias against all traditions—and thus their inability to frame the discussion of the role of critical inquiry within the context of transformative capitalism. With the globalization of techno-scientific-industrial culture, the question that should be the focus of critical inquiry is “What needs to be conserved in this era of ecological uncertainties?” This is the question, when asked at the local level of different
cultures, that leads to resisting the forces of enclosure. In terms of North America, it might take the form of resisting the building of shopping malls, turning the local water system over to a corporation, allowing developers to build on wetlands and corporations to cut-down what remains of the forests. Asking what needs to be conserved could lead to a critical examination of how to protect the gains made in the area worker rights, the privacy of citizens from having their activities electronically encoded and sold to corporations that want to target them as potential customers, and the hard-won civil liberties that are now being threatened by extremist and reactionary groups who also claim that they possess the one true approach to knowledge. A critical approach to asking what needs to be conserved in this era of ecological uncertainties and the further monetization of the commons might also lead to asking how to reclaim urban spaces for community gardens, play grounds, and sites for the community arts. For indigenous cultures, it may mean working to restore their traditional lands, and turning the educational process over to their own communities. How to re-connect the present generation with the intergenerational knowledge that represents a group’s cultural heritage may take the form of resisting the industrial approach to entertainment as well as food production and consumption. It might also involve examining how thought and communication are being enclosed by the computer, which involves both the reinforcement of the industrial cultural ideal of the autonomous individual and a further integration into a money economy.

The revitalization of the commons is place and culturally specific, and both are now under siege from the techno-scientific-industrial culture that does not recognize regional boundaries or cultural differences. Most importantly, the revitalization of the commons is being practiced by environmentalists and people who are working to strengthen the mutual support systems within communities. It is also being practiced in different regions of the world where the process of industrial enclosure are being resisted, such as the reaction against the privatization of the water system in Bolivia and against the many ways in which the industrialization of agriculture are being promoted in Third World countries. On the whole, I think these sites of resistance and affirmation are being overwhelmed by the corporate controlled media, by the uncritical acceptance of the Western idea of modernization and development, and by the neo-liberal policies of government and international institutions that view the expansion of markets as the expression of progress.
The need to revitalize the commons, and thus to restore a better balance between the monetized and non-monetized aspects of daily life, is essential for another reason that I shall only touch briefly upon. The expansion of techno-scientific-industrial culture is already overshooting the sustaining capacity of natural systems. And with the continued drive to further automate the production process, and to “outsource” work to the regions of the world with the lowest wages (thus bringing these cultures into a consumer-based economy), there are fewer opportunities to earn the money required to be a consumer. For example, how many assembly-line workers in Third World countries can afford to buy the Western products they help to produce? As there are no signs that these trends will be reversed, the revitalization of what remains of the commons represents the only hope for people to meet basic material and expressive needs that they cannot afford to purchase in the market place. A strong case can be made that relying upon mutual support systems, local producers, mentoring in a variety of arts and skills, work that is returned rather than paid, and the collective resisting of the further enclosure of the natural environment will lead to a better quality of life than is experienced when dependence upon consumerism requires unfulfilling work and social relationships. Getting this message across to the larger public that has been indoctrinated in public schools and universities, by the media, and by the behavior other people who equate consumerism as a sign of individual success and social standing, is exceedingly difficult.

And this is where educators need to make a contribution, just as they contributed to questioning the taken-for-granted attitudes toward patriarchy. Instead of emphasizing one of the various constructivist approaches to knowledge (Dewey, Freire, and the more recent transformative learning theorists) they need to help students understand the many ways in which different cultures acquire, encode and renew their knowledge and values. Understanding these cultural differences should be framed in terms of how they live within the sustainable limits of natural systems, and how they maintain a balance between market and non-market activities and relationships. How these cultures are being impacted by the globalization of the techno-scientific-industrial culture of the West also needs to be considered. Their approaches to addressing social justice issues also needs to be examined as part of becoming culturally informed.

In terms of Western approaches to teacher education, and to graduate educational studies programs, it is being suggested here that we begin to think in terms of how the
classroom can be used to address eco-justice issues—which we think provides the political, moral, and educational framework that affirms cultural practices that represent alternatives to a technology, consumer dependent lifestyle that is at the root of the ecological crisis. Addressing eco-justice issues within specific bioregions and cultures will help students recognize what needs to be renewed and carried forward, and what needs to be resisted. This is far different from the vague promises of freedom and democracy that the critical pedagogy theorists, as well as other constructivist educators, rely upon to give legitimacy to their emphasis on a process approach to learning—which never takes account of the knowledge systems of different cultures and, with the exception of Edmund O’ Sullivan and a number of his followers (O’Sulllivan and Taylor 2004) does not address the cultural roots of the ecological crisis.

The destructive impact on the commons and on cultural diversity by the consumer dependent lifestyle that is promoted by transformative capitalism should also be a central focus of an eco-justice oriented pedagogy. As we begin to think about the educational implications of eco-justice, it becomes immediately clear that there are at least four eco-justice issues that can be addressed in the curriculum of the public schools and universities. These include: (1) the need to challenge the assumptions and practices that are the cause of environmental racism; (2) the need to understand the ideological, economic, and technological forces that lead to the domination of the South by the North—and to recognize how the revitalization of the commons represents an alternative to the history of Western economic colonization; (3) the need to understand the many ways in which the commons can be revitalized, as well as how the techno-scientific-industrial forces continue the process of enclosure; (4) the need to help ensure that the prospects of future generations are not diminished by the greed and self-centered hyper-consumerism of this generation, and (5) the need to act politically in ways that promote earth democracy.

An eco-justice curriculum will require a radical shift in educational priorities—and by extension, in what is studied in teacher education programs and graduate education programs. Learning how the languaging processes of different cultures reproduce the thought patterns and values of previous generations is essential to understanding that individuals, even when engaged in critical inquiry, are not autonomous thinkers. More specifically, students in teacher education programs as well as those pursuing a higher degree in education need to
understand the connections between the metaphorical nature of language, the assumptions encoded in the root metaphors that gave conceptual direction to the Industrial Revolution (and now the process of economic and technological globalization), and the assumptions that constructivist theories of learning are based upon. If we are concerned about how the Western project of cultural colonization is undermining the commons, both here and in other parts of the world, then educators need to ask whether the cultural assumptions that underlie various interpretations of constructivist (transformative) learning contributes to resisting the process of globalization—or contributes to it by indoctrinating the next generation to accept a world monoculture as the outcome of natural selection as well as the idea that critical reflection is highest form of human expression as Freire and his followers would have us believe.

An eco-justice curriculum should also focus on the cultural differences between monetized and non-monetized activities and relationships—with the examples taken from the experience of local cultures. The implications of both types of relationships need to be examined in terms of their impact on what remains of the commons—as well as on how the commons can be revitalized. The ways in which science is now being used to bring more aspects of the cultural and biological worlds under the control of industrial culture also need to be considered. And this should include considering the difference between science and scientism, and how the latter is being used to give legitimacy to an ideology that supports not only the process of globalization but also the subordination of humans to machines (Bowers, 2003). As I have suggested elsewhere, educators at all levels need to understand that technologies are not culturally neutral, and that they mediate individual experience in ways that affects relationships, ways of knowing, and are at the center of the question of the whether a technology is the source of community empowerment or marginalization (Bowers, 2000).

One of the primary purposes of an eco-justice curriculum is to reduce the current level of dependency on consumerism, which is one of the major contributors to environmental racism, the exploitation of the resources of other cultures, and puts the prospects of future generations at risk. Reducing the dependence upon consumerism will not happen simply by telling people that it far exceeds what meets the needs of people. It will only be reduced as people participate in community activities that meet the need for self-expression, socially meaningful relationships, and the development of talents and skills that contribute to a larger
sense of well-being. And this is where the classroom can be a site for clarifying which ideas and values justify individually-centered and exploitative relationships, and which ideas and values strengthen community and the viability of natural systems. In most family and social settings, there is little interest or background knowledge that lead, for example, to discussing the nature of the commons and the many ways in which it is being enclosed. Similarly, there are few sites outside of the classroom where there can be a discussion of the cultural mediating characteristics of technology, and how Western technologies differ from indigenous and ecologically informed technologies. Unlike the various constructivist learning theorists who never ask the question that can lead to resistance to the further enclosure of the commons by industrial culture, an eco-justice approach to education makes the question of “what do we need to conserve in this era of ecological uncertainties?” the central consideration. The questions about the cultural non-neutrality of science, technology, the industrial approach to production and consumptions, the legitimacy of using a theory of evolution, the cultural reproduction characteristic of language, the nature of the commons, and how a knowledge of natural systems should inform our design and use of technologies, and so forth, all turn on taking this question seriously. In effect, this question rather than the pursuit of transformative learning, reconstructing experience, critical inquiry, and the outcomes of dissipative structures should be the main concern of educators. I think the cultural record of dissipative structures is mixed and thus find the entire effort to justify any aspect of the educational process on this latest expression of scientism to be highly problematic. Similarly, the supposedly empowering aspects of the ideas of Dewey, Freire, and the other transformative learning theorists also need to be questioned in terms of their contribution to renewing the commons and thus to addressing eco-justice issues. Hopefully, as educational reformers begin to understand the connections between the globalization of the techno-scientific-industrial culture of the West and the ecological crisis, they will recognize that their emphasis on change does not provide an adequate basis for resistance. It is also hoped that they will begin to recognize that resistance is in revitalizing the non-monetized aspects of the commons, and that it will be place-based and take many different forms of cultural expression.

A Suggestion for Involving Faculty and Students in a Dialogue on the Revitalization of the Commons as an Anti-Globalization Strategy, and on Educational Reforms
One of the ironies that characterizes what is learned in Western universities is that while at the level of local communities there are many networks of mutual support and intergenerational sharing that contribute to sustaining what remains of the local commons, students are not likely to encounter the language necessary for thinking about the importance of the commons—much less even being able to recognize that the aspects of community life they take for granted are examples of the commons. This generalization can easily be checked for accuracy by doing a survey of what the students understand about the nature of the commons, how it is being enclosed, and the practices in their local communities that help to sustain the commons. But proving the accuracy of my criticism of the silence and marginalization that undermines the students’ ability to recognize how their future prospects are integrally tied to the revitalization of the commons is not the main point here. Rather, what we should be considering are the questions that should be asked about the nature, importance, and future prospects of revitalizing the world’s diverse commons. As a survey of what faculty understand about the nature of the commons, as well as its importance to an ecologically sustainable future, will reveal a similar silence and marginalization of any in-depth examination of the commons in their own education, a starting point that will help faculty recognize the many areas in their courses where the issues surrounding the commons can be introduced would be engage in an interdisciplinary faculty/graduate students dialogue on the connections between revitalizing the commons, the multiple threats of globalization, and the educational reforms that will strengthen the commons as sites of resistance.

The following is thus meant as one possibility for initiating an examination of the many forms of interdependence within the commons, the ideological and economic forces that are enclosing the commons, and how different cultural approaches to sustaining the commons are being impacted by economic globalization. The following themes can be organized under the categories of Threats to the Commons and Revitalization of the Commons: Possibilities, Obstacles, and Double Binds.

I. Threats to the Commons

1. The Commons: In the Past and Today
In addition to introductions and a general discussion of the expectations of the participants, an overview of the commons as they existed in the past and exist today should be presented. This should be followed by an introduction to the nature of enclosure as well as to the different forms it is now taking. It would also be important to raise the question of whether local, state, and the federal government can be stewards of a modern form of the commons. The latter question is especially important to ensuring that the discussion of the commons remains focused on today’s realities and not on a romanticized interpretation of the commons of pre-industrialized England. The purpose of the introductory discussion is to establish a shared understanding of the commons, as well as the nature of enclosure.

2. Ways in Which Today’s Industrial Culture Contributes to the Enclosure of the Commons

The discussion should focus on the nature of industrial culture as well as on the connections between the enclosure of the commons, the ecological crisis, and the spread of poverty as more of everyday life is dependent upon monetized relationships and the meeting of needs. One of the purposes of this discussion is to obtain a clearer understanding of the current extent of enclosure in the dominant culture, and the way various forms of enclosure that undermine the intergenerational knowledge that represent alternatives to a consumer-dependent lifestyle.

3. Threats to the Commons of Indigenous Cultures: the WTO, and the Western Science, Technology, and Educational Approach to Development

The focus of this discussion should shift to a consideration of how the World Trade Organization undermines local economies and democratic decision-making. It should also take up the issue of ethnocentrism and hubris that prevent many promoters of economic development from recognizing how their scientific and technological approaches to development undermine the commons of indigenous cultures. The
connections between conserving the diversity of the world’s linguistic/cultural communities and conserving biological diversity should also be considered.

4. Ideologies that Support and Undermine the Commons

This discussion should be centered on how the nature of the commons—diverse in terms of culture and bioregion, dependent upon the renewal of intergenerational knowledge of non-monetized alternatives to self-sufficiency as individuals and communities, patterns of moral reciprocity rooted in the cultures’ mythopoetic narratives, etc.—raises the question of whether the Western ideologies of market liberalism (now mislabeled as “conservatism”), libertarianism, Marxism, and social justice liberalism support or undermine the commons.

II. Revitalization of the Commons: Possibilities, Obstacles, and Double Binds

5. Role of Language in Reproducing the Ideology Underlying the West’s Industrial Culture

This discussion should address such topics as the myth of language as a conduit in a sender/receiver model of communication; how the metaphorical nature of the languaging process encodes and thus reproduces at a taken-for-granted level of awareness earlier culturally specific, pre-ecological ways of thinking; and how the prevailing root and iconic metaphors continue to reinforce the mindset of the industrial culture that is now being globalized. This discussion should also focus on the root metaphors that foreground the characteristics of the commons.


The myth of technology as a neutral tool and, at the same time, the expression of Western progress needs to be discussed in terms of how it undermines the commons.
The major focus of the discussion, however, should be on the implications of how computers transform intergenerational knowledge into an abstract text, and on how automation marginalizes various forms of craft knowledge—and thus the role of work in sustaining the commons.

7. How the High-Status Knowledge Promoted by Western Universities Undermines the Commons

The nature of high-status knowledge, how it reinforces the mindset that is needed by a consumer, technology dependent culture, as well as the forms of knowledge that are relegated to low-status (and thus marginalized or entirely silenced) are central to the question of whether universities reproduce, in the name of progress, the cultural patterns and processes that are further enclosing the commons. How the high-status knowledge promoted by universities is the basis of the sustainability discourse that is now used by market liberals and institutions, and how it differs from the commons discourse will also be considered.

8. Social Groups, Policies, and Activities that Contribute to Sustaining the Commons

This discussion should focus on the range of activities, social groups, and local and national policies that contribute to the non-monetized aspects of community life—including the conserving of natural systems. In effect, this discussion should have an ethnographic focus that highlights the aspects of the commons that are alive and well in the students’ own community—and in other communities.

9. Educational Reforms

This discussion has many possibilities that range from the double binds in the university curricula to constructive alternatives. The focus may be on how professors reproduce with only minor variations the culturally specific, pre-ecological ways of
thinking of their own professors—as well as on the absence of theory that explains the non-culturally neutral nature of technology, the failure to clarify when science becomes scientism, the silences relating to the nature and importance of the commons. Other possible topics could include the need to rectify our political vocabulary in ways that enable students to recognize what commons sustaining traditions are now being threatened by market liberalism and the reactionary nature of religious fundamentalism. The need to offer courses that present different cultural approaches to sustaining the cultural and environmental commons, including how they are resisting the pressures to be integrated into the West’s economic system, is still another possibility.

This introduction to the nature and issues relating to the commons easily leads to curriculum developments that range from the elementary grades through graduate school. The elementary teacher, for example, can introduce students to the distinction between what is shared face-to-face and what has been monetized. Even at this level, the teacher can engage students in a discussion of the nature of tradition, and begin to examine which traditions are useful (and for what reasons) and which traditions still survive when they either should not have been constituted in the first place or the society has moved beyond them. Other characteristics of the commons identified above can also be introduced by connecting the discussion to what the students have already experienced. At the other end of the educational process—that is, at the graduate level—each of the themes and issues can be examined at much greater depth. Making the commons the focal point, for example, could lead to examining how Western philosophers have contributed to undermining the commons, and to clarifying their importance. Similarly, issues relating to how ideologies, technology, scientism, globalization, and so forth could be addressed in courses ranging from political science, sociology, economics, history, to anthropology and cultural linguistics. Also, at the graduate level it is possible to introduce a comparative cultural analysis as well as a historical perspective.

Hopefully, these interdisciplinary dialogues, and the courses that can be informed by them, will lead to acquiring the language and concepts necessary for thinking about the commons, as well as cultural forces that are undermining them. In effect, the success of a university education must now be assessed in terms of whether the knowledge and participation in helping to sustain the
local commons becomes so familiar to the students and faculty that they become critically aware of the cultural practices and assumptions that now threaten our future survival.

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References


