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Forging Inclusive Solutions

Experiential Earth Charter Education

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Abstract

Forging Inclusive Solutions describes the aims, methodology and outcomes of Inclusive Leadership Adventures, an experiential education curriculum for exploring the Earth Charter. Experiential education builds meaningful relationships, skills, awareness and an inclusive community based on the Earth Charter principles. When we meet people where they are, it becomes easy and enjoyable for all participants to organise their thoughts, feelings and experiences into realistic and motivating action plans. In the words of one recent participant, *'I've learned that we are leaders of a future society which is sustainable and unified.'*

Keywords: experiential education, respect for diversity, inclusive community, intergenerational learning, inclusive leadership

The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world. Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.
(Earth Charter 2000: Preamble)

Provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development.
(Earth Charter Principle 14a)

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Since 2003, staff and volunteers at Cowichan Intercultural Society, an NGO in rural Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, have been bringing together children, youth and adults from our community of 70,000 people (and other communities we are connected to) for empowering four-day experiential education adventures that engage everyone actively in (a) exploring the Earth Charter's vision of sustainable development and (b) developing skills for forging inclusive solutions. This article describes the aims, methodology and lessons learned about education for sustainable development within the Inclusive Leadership Adventures project.

AIMS OF INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP ADVENTURES

An Inclusive Leadership Adventure aims to bring together diverse groups of youth, caring adults and always a few children, to develop spiritual, emotional and intellectual connections with the magnificence of diversity. We want everyone to leave with:

- an appreciation of social diversity and biodiversity as gifts that enrich and sustain communities
- strong connections with the Earth Charter
- leadership skills for forging inclusive solutions that will '...bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace' (Earth Charter 2000: Preamble)
- positive and practical local action plans for implementing the principles and values of the Earth Charter in home, school and community settings.

METHODOLOGY

The Inclusive Leadership Adventures curriculum has been developed by applying a step-by-step process called Building Bridges designed to bring diverse people together to build more accessible, equitable and inclusive organisations, schools and communities (Hill, McDaniels and Cowichan Intercultural Society 2009). For two reviews of the intercultural communication literature that has informed the development of the Building Bridges steps see Gudykunst (1998) and Landis and Wasilewski (1999). Briefly, these steps are:

- Step 1:** **Networking:** Inviting and supporting people from diverse backgrounds to come together equally.
- Step 2:** **Gathering:** Welcoming and engaging everyone in co-creating a relaxed, inclusive atmosphere that is a safe, respectful and positive mutual learning experience of benefit to everyone involved.
- Steps 3 to 6:** **The Building Steps:** Building respectful relationships, building skills for forging inclusive solutions, building awareness about diversity issues and building an inclusive learning community through participatory experiential education.

Step 7: Action Planning: Developing plans for making a world of difference beginning with our own lives, our homes, our schools and our communities.

Step 8: Preparing for Follow Up: Reflecting, committing to first steps and then supporting each other to do what we say we are going to do.

Mukherjee, McDermott and Bakhnova (2005: 26) describe how the Building Bridges steps are applied during an Inclusive Leadership Adventure to engage diverse groups of youth and adults in exploring Earth Charter.

Participants are guided through a series of indoor and outdoor challenges and creative activities that get everyone involved in sharing leadership to create a community based on the principles of the Earth Charter. They learn to communicate and connect in ways that build bridges across differences and replace prejudice and discrimination with sensitivity, openness, and valuing all living beings. Participants learn to see each other and all living beings as potential role models for putting the principles of the Earth Charter into practice.

The Inclusive Leadership Adventures curriculum is continuously evolving through Participatory Action Research cycles (see, for instance, Arnold et al. 1991; Centre for Collaborative Action Research 2006–2009). In practice this means that co-facilitators and participants are simultaneously engaged in participatory education, action research and leadership development while applying the Building Bridges steps before, during and after each Inclusive Leadership Adventure.

- As participatory educators, we are all guiding each other to build awareness about the Earth Charter while learning and practicing skills for forging inclusive solutions.
- As action researchers, we plan an Inclusive Leadership Adventure, participate in the journey, observe, evaluate, learn from what happened and then apply the lessons learned to planning subsequent adventures.
- As leaders, we all share responsibility for collaboratively creating a welcoming learning community based on respect for people and nature and for promoting and encouraging these inclusive ways of being when we return to our own homes, schools and communities.

In summary, the Building Bridges Steps and Participatory Action Research methodologies engage participants in directly experiencing how to, ‘...find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals. Every individual, family and community has a vital role to play’ (Earth Charter 2000: The Way Forward). The rest of this article will share some lessons we have learned about experiential education for sustainable development through guiding these experiential explorations of the Earth Charter. We hope our reflections will be useful to others who are educating people about the Earth Charter.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT STEP 1: NETWORKING

We have learned that extensive networking is required for participants to directly experience Principle 1 of the Earth Charter which is to 'Respect Earth and life in all its diversity', and 1b which is to 'Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity'. Several months before the start of an Inclusive Leadership Adventure we book space at Cowichan Lake Education Centre, an outdoor education centre in our region that has endorsed the Earth Charter and strives to put the principles and values into practice. Next, we recruit an intergenerational team of about eight to 12 'Inclusive Travel Guides'. These Guides are youth and adult volunteers who have attended one or more Inclusive Leadership Adventures and taken additional facilitator training. Then we all share leadership in the challenge of inviting and supporting thirty to forty more youth and caring adults from diverse backgrounds to register. We reach out within our circles of influence and circles of interest to invite individuals, families and intergenerational teams from schools, youth groups, faith groups, aboriginal communities, cultural communities, government and NGOs involved in a wide range of local and international environmental and social justice issues. For example, in the autumn of 2009, participants included youth from various schools in our region, newcomers from Holland and Germany, aboriginal youth and adults from Cowichan Territory, representatives from a nonprofit support group for visually impaired youth, members of a local stream stewardship group, several child and youth care students from Vancouver Island University and Canada World Youth volunteers from across Canada, Mozambique and the Ukraine.

We have also learned to implement Earth Charter Principle 9 and 9c which are calls to 'Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative', and 'Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations'. Cowichan Intercultural Society asks everyone involved to share responsibility for financial sustainability. Briefly, staff, volunteers and participants are asked to share leadership in sustaining Inclusive Leadership Adventures through volunteerism, charitable and in-kind donations, grants, sponsorships, fundraising, contributing what we can toward the participant fees. We have found that through this shared leadership approach, we are able to subsidise the many potential participants who face financial barriers and still find enough funds to cover the costs. We also routinely put individualised supports in place to equalise access such as:

- helping participants share rides
- booking a wheelchair accessible taxi
- translating our participants' manual into another language
- providing the manual in digital format for a participant who is blind
- hiring sign language interpreters for a participant who is deaf
- hiring a personal care attendant for a participant who lives with mobility challenges
- arranging communication buddies for people who are learning to speak English
- welcoming and including babies and younger children of participants who are parents.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT STEP 2: GATHERING

From the beginning of an Inclusive Leadership Adventure we engage participants in sharing responsibility for co-creating a culture based on Principle 12 of the Earth Charter: 'Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities'. One gathering exercise is to work together in pairs and small groups to answer questions about how to support each other's dignity, health and well-being in ways that respect the many different cultures and backgrounds represented in the learning community. Participants' answers are sorted into themes that are posted as guidelines for the group to follow during the adventure. The most common theme is to listen with an open mind. Other common guidelines are: no judgements, be friendly to everyone, care for the buildings and grounds, nonviolence, be creative, be active, spend lots of time outdoors, play sports and games, share our cultures and be considerate of others.

In another gathering exercise we work together in small groups to learn a section of our Inclusive Leadership Participants' Manual (Cowichan Intercultural Society, 2009) and each group prepares a creative way of presenting that section to the rest of the participants. This type of small group jigsaw learning is filled with opportunities to learn and practice skills for forging inclusive solutions while educating each other about goals and objectives, the four main themes of the Earth Charter and strategies for opening up to learning with and from each other during this journey into the heart of the Earth Charter.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT STEP 3–6: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, SKILLS, AWARENESS AND COMMUNITY

Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.(Earth Charter 2000: Principle 16)

Throughout an Inclusive Leadership Adventure we apply a variety of enjoyable strategies for building relationships between all participants by mixing and remixing people during games, discussions, meals, outdoor experiences and workshops. We form small and diverse heart-to-heart groups that meet once a day to build trust and share our stories. We facilitate activities that build relationships between people and nature, such as sending people into the forest to meet and learn from more than human living beings.

When we are building skills we are living out Principle 16b which is to 'Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.' The three sets of skills we have found especially useful for preventing, managing and resolving conflicts and problems are as follows:

- Skills for connecting with differences are learned by playing cooperative games that are filled with opportunities to practice being a role model, joining inclusive circles, daring to be different, refocusing and reframing, leaving out losing and other skills for connecting with differences (Hill 2001).
- Skills for listening to and expressing facts, feelings, values and requests are learned by participating in workshops based on Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg 2003) and Compassionate Listening (Hwoschinsky 2001).
- Skills for responding effectively to incidents of discrimination against people or against other living beings are learned through workshops based on Anti-Discrimination Response Training (Ishiyama 2006).

Our main challenge in building awareness is to engage participants in translating the Earth Charter words into meaningful educational experiences. The Earth Charter is beautifully written and refers to many topics that are of interest to young people, such as safeguarding wild lands and marine areas, recovery of endangered species and ecosystems, managing water and other renewable resources, equitable distribution of wealth, gender equality, rights of Indigenous people, eliminating discrimination, eliminating corruption and preventing cruelty to animals. However, these topics are embedded within complex sentences filled with difficult vocabulary and abstract concepts that many, if not most, readers find overwhelming and hard to understand. We have developed many educational experiences for developing meaningful connections with the words and concepts in the Earth Charter including cooperative games and sports, meditative experiences in nature, jigsaw-learning activities, experiential workshops, discussion-based workshops and creative activities such as art, drama, poetry, music and dance (Hill 2009). Direct experience is the best teacher so we are careful to minimise waste, sort recyclable materials and collect all uneaten food scraps and food-soiled paper to be dropped off at a nearby composting facility.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT STEPS 7 AND 8: ACTION PLANNING AND FOLLOW UP

The goal of action planning is for participants to organise their thoughts, feelings and experiences into realistic and motivating plans for applying one or more principles within the Earth Charter to 'being the change you want to see in the world' (Mahatma Gandhi). To meet participants where they are, we have developed seven different action planning processes based on the Trans-theoretical Stages of Change model (Doppelt 2008; Prochaska, Norcross & Diclemente 1995). First we guide participants to determine their action planning stage of change. Then they break out into the action planning station that is best suited to the stage they are in. The action planning assessment questionnaire, action planning processes and preparations for follow up that we have developed or adapted are described in Hill and Cowichan Intercultural Society (2009). Here are some examples of action plans participants made at a recent Inclusive Leadership Adventure:

- 'We pooled our ideas and came up with a plan to play sports and go on a nature walk and then we did it.' (This is an example of how we guide participants who are in the precontemplation stage of change to experience immediate success during an action planning session).
- 'I will write a letter to the editor educating people about not using Styrofoam plates and cups'.
- 'I will write an article about age-ism'.
- 'I will spend the next two years volunteering at the eco-village building houses out of recycled materials, growing organic food and exploring the hole in people's psyche that is causing consumerism'.
- 'Our group made plans for a workshop that will teach elementary school kids about standing up for social justice'.
- 'We are planning a youth convergence weekend focused on permaculture and food security'.
- 'We are going to hold meaningful movie nights that get youth thinking and talking about environmental and social issues'.
- 'We are going to stay out of gangs and connect with our culture by going on Tribal Journeys this coming summer'.

RESULTS

The immediate outcomes are that participants tell us they find these four-day experiential explorations about the Earth Charter to be interesting, relevant, inspiring and transformational. The medium-term outcomes are the large number of action plans that are being implemented (especially by people who attend an Inclusive Leadership Adventure in intergenerational groups) as well as the large number of schools, NGOs and government departments that support individual youth and intergenerational teams to participate in Inclusive Leadership. Our follow-up research shows that a group of fifty people who attend an Inclusive Leadership Adventure will involve 1,000 more people in their action plans during the following year. The long-term outcomes are the growing number of long-term follow-up projects in the Cowichan Region and the gradual spread of Inclusive Leadership to other communities. For example, more and more schools are asking Cowichan Intercultural Society to facilitate Inclusive Leadership workshops for students in leadership, peer counselling and social justice courses. Another follow-up project that has now been running for two years is a weekly 'drop in and volunteer' service group co-hosted by Cowichan Intercultural Society and our local Aboriginal Friendship Centre. Two more examples of positive long-term outcomes are the successes of two Canadian youth (Kim Citton and Mike Sheehan) who first learned about the Earth Charter at Inclusive Leadership Adventures held in 2003 and 2004. Both Citton and Sheehan went on to represent Canada at the Earth Charter Conference in the Netherlands in 2005. Five years later both are still involved in Earth Charter education. Mike Sheehan, founder of BeatBoard Education and Training, is also the co-founder and program manager

for e-GLO (Earth Charter Global Learning Opportunity). Kim Citton facilitates Earth Charter education activities for Cowichan Intercultural Society and Canada World Youth.

In closing, here are some observations from youth who have participated in Inclusive Leadership Adventures focused on the Earth Charter:

- 'We all come together from different places, experiences, cultures, and backgrounds. In a matter of a few hours we become a new culture that's a perfect example of how our local area, province, country, and the world can live and support the earth'.
- 'My perspective toward the Earth Charter was so vague; there was somehow a disconnection between my life and the Earth. I have become more aware of my surroundings and I really want to take a step and take care of the Earth'.
- 'I had never before heard of or was interested in the Earth Charter, but through this past couple of days, I have never been so overwhelmed with compassion for diversity and a desire to help this world and the people in it'.
- 'I learned that the Earth Charter encompasses all the important aspects of us, as humans living on this planet. It states how we can live with each other and the rest of the world in a positive way'.
- 'I've learned that we are leaders of a future society which is sustainable and unified'.

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