



PHD Dissertation by Wendy Sarkissian, 1996

Abstract

[T]he social allocation of land to different uses and activities is fundamentally and inextricably a problem of ethics. This is so because such land use decisions have, both individually and cumulatively, tremendous social and environmental impacts.

Timothy Beatley, 1994.

The problem of environmental education does not depend on whether you're a planner or a forester. We've thought of values as an afterthought.

Alan Drengson, 1994.

1.0 Introduction

This interdisciplinary dissertation addresses one aspect of the education of Australian urban planners: *an ethic of caring for Nature*, conceived as a deeply grounded, contextual ethic based on a sense of connection with the natural world. The study grew out of my growing sense of urgency and concern about the role of the planning profession in contributing to global ecological problems. It grew directly from painful and confusing professional experiences like the those recounted in the story of the Williamstown Rifle Range.

The dissertation has four aspects. First, it articulates what an ethic of caring entails, both from a philosophical perspective and an experiential perspective. Second, it explores the current state of and potential for teaching environmental ethics within Australian planning schools. Third, it examines, from an ethical standpoint, the educational implications of direct connection with Nature. Finally, it proposes the foundations for a radical curriculum for planning education to nurture an ethic of caring for Nature.

2.0 The Research Assumptions

Three pivotal assumptions underpin this research. First, urban development in Australia (and elsewhere) contributes to both local and global ecological crises. Second, the activities of urban planners help to determine the form of urban development and, by implication, the ecological impacts. Third, the education of urban planners influences their practice. These points are assumed by the study but they are also established by the study. As in a spiral sequence, the end precedes the beginning.

3.0 Three research questions

The dissertation sets out to address three questions.

Question 1: *What is the current situation in Australian planning schools with respect to the relationship between planning education in general and education in environmental ethics, in particular?*

In exploring this question, I examine in detail curricula of Australian planning schools addressing environmental *matters* and environmental *ethics*. This is undertaken by means of comprehensive surveys with Heads of Schools, educators and students in the fourteen Australian schools of planning, as well as by other research means, including interviews with overseas practitioners, a literature review

and surveys and consultations with planning practitioners and others in the “land professions”ⁱⁱ. The approach is survey-based, descriptive and explanatory.

Question 2: *How might the education of urban planners in Australia be changed to contribute to the solution of ecological problems?*

In contrast to the systematic survey approaches which characterised my approach to Question 1, Question 2 required me to search beyond the current operation of planning education in Australia. This is because virtually nothing is being taught in the field of environmental ethics (or related fields) in Australia. Thus I searched in cognate disciplines, spoke to experienced and creative educators in Australia and overseas, and explored other dimensions of what might constitute, for a professional planner, a deeper connection with the natural world. The approach here is expressive, that is, qualitative, holistic, personal in character, experiential and grounded in “lived experience.”

Question 3: *How important to the educator and the student who ultimately becomes the practitioner is a direct experience of Nature in giving substance and energy to the formation of environmental ethics?*

This question became a critical focus of this dissertation.

4.0 The argument of this dissertation

If we accept that urban development and planning are contributing to global and local ecological problems, skilful professional education which focuses on the ethical dimensions of human relationships with the natural world, particularly direct experience of Nature, could equip urban planning practitioners to propose and implement plans which are socially and ecologically sustainable and seek to benefit all life on Earth.

In the dissertation, I argue that a complete revisioning of Australian urban planning education is necessary to counter the entrenched anthropocentrism (human-centredness) and utilitarianism which underpin both planning practice and education. I propose a radical curriculum, which provides opportunities for students to embody *an ethic of caring for Nature*, by realising and embodying at a deep level their connection with the natural world. I suggest that the key requirement is *experiencing Nature directly*, to provide an anchor in the natural world to sustain the neophyte planner in the complex and often paradoxical situations likely to be encountered in professional life. This work is primarily about relationship; while some aspects require solitude, the processes of making learning explicit require collaboration with and the support of others.

I offer three other elements which are considered necessary to support the growth of an ethic of caring: (1) a *community* focus; (2) the formal study of *ethics* (especially environmental ethics); and (3) attention to specific aspects of professional *literacy* to enable skilful design and implementation of ecologically and socially sustainable policies and plans. Curiosity about and sustained interest in the scientific and technical aspects of environmental matters will emerge as the caring function develops. Formal study of professional ethics will provide a moral and intellectual anchor and strengthen moral discourse generally within planning schools, universities and, ultimately, the profession.

I argue that, while some planners may be *ecologically* literate, in the sense that they understand how ecosystems work, as a general rule Australian planning educators and planning students are unaware of the ethical dimensions of their relationship with Nature. One reason is that their profession’s culture and activities mirror the wider society’s basic anthropocentrism. Australian planning educators in general have abrogated their responsibilities to foster the moral education of their students by arguing that they are teaching what is “acceptable” (or worthy of consideration) to the wider planning profession. Additionally, planning educators believe that study of ethical and moral issues is inconsistent with what they regard as the ‘proper’ emphasis of planning curricula. Programs are already packed with essentials: pressing demands for new skill development place pressures on already overlaid curricula.

While similar in some ways to the situation in Canada and the United States, planning education in Australia is even further out of touch with philosophical, ethical and ecological realities. There is an assumption that the key role is to train “technicians” who operate in a value-free manner within a

rational comprehensive model of planning. The need for change is therefore even more obvious.

5.0 Why I undertook this study

In 1991, I chose to leave my planning consulting practice to study on a full-time basis. While there appeared to be a growing ecological crisis, it appeared that my colleagues in the Australian planning profession were resisting ecologically sustainable development (ESD). I wanted to find ways to encourage greater professional commitment to ESD. The focus changed to planning education in 1992. Initially I undertook extensive reading in environmental ethics and long periods of solitude. Then I began to understand the problem, not as a *practice* issue but as an *ethical* one, that is, our behaviour is a function of the concepts we hold. Thus, I decided to explore more deeply the philosophical conceptual framework guiding planners and how planners' environmental ethics are nurtured in their professional *education*.

6.0 The two approaches used in this dissertation

A range of research approaches is employed in this study. The two primary paths, the *path of explanation* and the *path of expression*, are both methodologies employed within the *interpretive* research paradigm (Sarantakos, 1993:31).ⁱⁱⁱ By using these two paths of inquiry (from experience through explanation to general theory and from experience through expression to myth and archetype), I aim to create a space for dialogue and dialectical development (Reason and Hawkins, 1988: 85). While each approach contributes to the learning model which emerges as a result of the whole research project, they have yielded very different but complementary insights into education and practice.

6.1 The path of explanation

The *path of explanation*, which I also call "The Songs of Experience,"^{iv} is the mode of classifying, conceptualising, and building theories from experience. Its two classic approaches involve, first, observation and description and second, experimentation. The 'explanatory' aspects of this study use empirical and formal research methods, relying on fieldwork, formal analysis of surveys, statistics, and curriculum materials.

6.2 The path of expression

By contrast, the *path of expression*, is "the mode of allowing the meaning of experience to become manifest" (Reason and Hawkins, 1988) This mode, which I also call "The Songs of Innocence," employs different voices in a narrative structure, and uses storytelling, autobiographical life-writing, and other feminist and Postmodern approaches. The cornerstone of the study is an exploration of the self--myself--as a planner exhibiting the estrangements from Nature which I seek to heal within my professional colleagues. This study is grounded in the theoretical foundations of qualitative methodology: it is naturalistic; uses inductive analysis; depends on holistic inquiry; uses qualitative data, with detailed, 'thick' description; depends on the personal contact and insight of the researcher; attends to process and change; takes a unique case orientation; is context-sensitive; employs empathic neutrality; and reflects a design flexibility (Patton, 1990: 40-41, cited in Sarantakos, 1993: 46).

7.0 Issues addressed by this dissertation

This study addresses the educational origins of what appears to be planners' continued unquestioning participation in Australian urban development and their resistance to embracing more realistic formulations of a relationship with Nature. It explores the foundational philosophical and ethical issues upon which planners' relationships with Nature are based. It provides an interpretive case study of a direct experience with Nature. Canvassing a wide range of scholarly and popular literatures in several disciplines, it offers a model upon which an undergraduate or postgraduate curriculum could be based. It is the first comprehensive study of this type, to my knowledge.

8.0 Issues which this dissertation does not address

Due to the limitations of space, many important issues could not be addressed in this dissertation. While I acknowledge that grave problems continue to imperil the futures of all life on Earth, the current study cannot address economic or technical solutions to the global crisis or solutions to the formidable problems of increasing urbanisation. It does not offer a comprehensive critique of all aspects of planning practice, although much can be read into the survey results which could prompt such a

critique. The study focuses solely on undergraduate and postgraduate education and does not address continuing education. The current study does not offer proposals for either a detailed planning curriculum or a theoretical account of curriculum evaluation, although such work is seen as a necessary next step.

9.0 The organisation of this dissertation

My dissertation weaves insights and information from the mix of methodologies employed, balancing explanatory and expressive approaches. It begins by asking, by means of an exploration of sources on feminist epistemology and ethics, what an ethic of caring could involve. The current situation with respect to environmental ethics education in Australian schools of planning is then thoroughly examined. That investigation yields the tentative conclusion that virtually nothing is happening, that there is little to build on. Asking what could be the potential for direct experience of Nature to nourish an ethic of caring, I then chronicle my personal experience of a year spent consciously attempting to experience Nature directly: my journey to my *ecological self*. This expressive material has been selected, edited and arranged to complement the more 'objective' data in the survey chapter. The last sections of the dissertation summarise the lessons learned from all aspects of the investigation and, following a critique of liberal educational theory, propose the elements of a radical curriculum for an ecologically responsible approach to planning education to nurture an ethic of caring for Nature.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I argue in chapter 1 that human relationships with Nature must be dramatically transformed if global ecological catastrophe is to be averted. Proposing the model of a contextual ethic of caring for Nature, based on feminist epistemology and grounded in relationship, receptivity, reciprocity and responsiveness, I set the stage for a critique of the professional education of Australian planners.

Chapter 2: An Ethic of Caring: Ethical and Epistemological Foundations for this Inquiry

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical context for the dissertation. I offer, as an epistemological foundation of the inquiry, an analysis of an ethic of caring. It details the necessary and sufficient conditions for an ethic of caring which is gender non-specific and which can be applied to the non-human world. This provides a framework for reconceptualising planning education.

Chapter 3: Research Design

In Chapter 3, the rationale for and details of all research approaches are provided. The research, which is both empirically based and deeply personal, required a mix of methodologies. Chapter 3 has three sections: Section A, a brief summary of my research approach; Section B, a detailed description of all methodologies and methods; and Section C, an evaluation of approaches.

Chapter 4: Environmental Ethics and Planning Education in Australia

Chapter 4 is the survey chapter. My goal was to study the extent to which current teaching of environmental ethics meets the needs of Australian planning practitioners. This chapter examines environmental ethics and planning education in Australia and raises critical questions about professional education--about the qualities of academic discourse about professional ethics and environmental matters and environmental ethics--the intellectual and ethical climate within those Schools. Further, it provides a full exposition of what is being taught and what is being learned, and speculates about the normative foundations currently guiding Australian planning education. The analysis identifies strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the university coverage of core and non-core environmental ethics topics in Australia, as identified by Martin and Beatley (1993b). Some tentative conclusions are drawn about approaches to teaching environmental ethics in Australian Schools of Planning.

Chapter 5: A Journey to the *Ecological Self*

Chapter 5 chronicles my journey of the personal self towards the "ecological or cosmic self." I use methods which belong to the emerging traditions of ecological spirituality and experiential ecology. The form of the chapter is a collage of different voices presenting a "fragmented whole." This format is indebted to the emerging genres of life-writing and feminist autobiography (or *autography*). It is Postmodern in the 'constructive' and 'affirmative' sense of the word. The approach aligns with ecocentric (Earth-centred) and ecofeminist approaches, emphasising the values of caring set out in chapter 2, in particular, *engrossment*. Extensive discursive endnotes refer the reader to my insights

and published and personal communication sources.

Four voices are woven through the chapter, three as a discontinuous narrative. We hear two academic voices: the voice of my rational, analytic, 'academic' self, communicating in formal "progress reports" to my dissertation supervisor, "Dr. Turner", and the voice of my 'inner' self, communicating via letters to a close friend, Leonie. Third is the voice of Nature, communicated via animals, birds and plants and the wider landscape, sky and watercourses of Deep Creek. A fourth, more 'academic' voice in the endnotes explores alternative interpretations of my experience. Thus, a fabric of narratives and discourse is woven, using the first three strands, with material from my journal and letters written over thirteen months, dealing with my changing perceptions and changing heart. The chapter chronicles the loss of my sense of separation and alienation and my first full experience of a sense of oneness with Nature.

Appendix A is a videotape, "Beginning Again with Nature: Environmental Ethics," made in 1995 and designed to communicate those qualities of a journey to the *ecological self* which confounded my literary abilities.

Chapter 6: Weaving an Ethic of Caring for Nature: Lessons from this Inquiry

Chapter 6 teases out and weaves together the strands of experience, argument and insight into key lessons from the previous chapters. It weaves together themes--like strands of a web--into the first form of the fabric of a response to the question, "How can an ethic of caring for Nature be nurtured in the education of Australian planners?" I summarise insights and lessons from both the expressive and explanatory investigations. A detailed examination leads to a summary of lessons for planning education.

The summary contains five key revelations about the nature of the self in relationship. These five concepts could be seen as strands in the web, which represents a reconceptualisation of planning education. They are: (1) teamwork; (2) experiencing Nature directly; (3) the community ground; (4) environmental ethics; and (5) literacy. These strands in the web are expressed in terms of *five critical relationships*: (1) self cooperating with others; (2) Self anchored in Nature; (3) Self grounded in community; (4) Self as responsible to all life, and (5) Self seeking understanding. The chapter concludes with some general implications for planning education.

Chapter 7: An Ecologically Responsible Approach to Planning Education

Chapter 7 reviews the work of two leading educational theorists, David Orr and C.A. Bowers, providing a critique of the anthropocentric underpinnings of liberal educational philosophy (in particular, emancipatory and technocratic liberalism). It establishes the foundations for a radical model for planning education, the *T.EN.C.E.L.* model.

Chapter 8: The *T.EN.C.E.L.* Model for Planning Education

This chapter presents the learning model, the outcome of the research. Setting out the elements of an ecologically responsible approach to planning education, I argue for a curriculum which contains components of the following elements: *teamwork (T)*; *direct experience of Nature (EN)*; grounding in *community* processes and experiences (*C*); the formal study of *ethics (E)*, by means of environmental ethics courses; and attention to the aspects of professional *literacy (L)* necessary to understand environmental issues related to planning practice. I also propose some preliminary strategic steps to nurture this proposed approach within Australian schools of planning.

Chapter 9: Conclusions: Weaving a New Vision for All Life on Earth

The conclusions in chapter 9 indicate how the aims of the dissertation have hopefully been achieved. Ten key findings of the research are outlined. Further research directions are also identified. Having set out the dissertation in its linear logic, it is also possible to see that there are strong linkages across the dissertation. In particular, chapter 2 is strongly linked to chapter 5, as they are primarily "Songs of Innocence", while chapter 4 is strongly linked to chapter 7, as they are primarily "Songs of Experience."

10.0 Conclusion: Locating myself

While I was writing this dissertation, Carolyn Merchant's book, *Earthcare* (1996)^{vi} was published. In Chapter 9, she describes the activities of women in Australia working for environmental reform and a greater acceptance of environmental ethics. I align myself with that movement and feel honoured in the company of those women. I also locate this work within the deep ecology sub-field of environmental philosophy and firmly within the ecopsychology realm, where I find my allegiances with deep ecology,^{vii} transpersonal ecology and ecofeminism, as well as with other realms of transpersonal psychology.

Because this project grew out of my concerns about the direction my profession was taking, I have been at pains to present all my sources and explain the basis of my analysis in extensive endnotes and a full bibliography. For the reader's convenience, all endnotes have been located in Volume 2. I hope that this work may provide an impetus to further research, as well as theoretical and pedagogical development.

This completes the introduction to this dissertation. The next chapter introduces the notion of an ethic of caring. It presents the theoretical context and epistemological foundation for the arguments and analysis that follow.

Notes

ⁱ Environmental ethics is the field of inquiry that addresses "the ethical responsibilities of human beings for the natural environment." It is concerned with values and questions about the extension of moral considerability to nonhuman life, the rights of Nature and the responsibilities of humans to Nature and natural entities (Armstrong and Botzler, eds., 1993: xv). A working definition for research purposes is "the most fundamental aspects of the relationship between humanity, other life forms, and the Environment or Nature, as well as the moral obligations of humanity to the earth community" (Martin and Beatley, 1993: 117).

ⁱⁱ Beatley's definition of the "land professions" includes urban and regional planners, landscape architects, foresters, soil conservationists, and conservation biologists, among others (1994: 8). I would add architects, engineers, surveyors, hydrologists, urban designers and environmental planners.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Sarantakos' typology of social research paradigms, the following methodologies are grouped under the 'interpretive' umbrella: symbolic interactions, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, ethnology, ethnography and sociolinguistics (1993: 31).

^{iv} See Erdman, 1982, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*.

^v *Engrossment* is defined by Nel Noddings as a receptive mode of consciousness in which "we receive what there is as nearly as possible without evaluation or assessment" (Noddings, 1983: 34, cited in B. Houston, 1992: 112). Another definition Noddings offers is the following: "the soul empties itself of all of its contents in order to receive the other" (Noddings, 1992: 16, citing Simone Weil, 1951: 115).

^{vi} See Carolyn Merchant, 1996, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*, especially Chapter 9: "The Ecological Self: Women and the Environment in Australia," pp. 185-208.

^{vii} See Roszak, Gomes and Kanner, eds., 1995 and Walsh and Vaughan, eds., 1993. This matter is discussed in greater detail in the notes to chapter 5.