

Concluding Thoughts

A Conversation with C. A. Bowers

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Chet Bowers (1935-2017), an environmentalist and educational scholar, died in July 2017. Chet will without doubt be remembered for his scholarly contributions to the intersecting fields of environmental studies, curriculum studies, environmental education, philosophy of education, and more broadly educational studies and social thought. In addition to Bowers being a provocative thinker of the late 20th century, perhaps what will stand the test of time and live on through his many publications are the stories of his fierce conviction to eco-justice. He held the firm position that educators could, and ought to, address and work toward abolishing unjust social suffering and environmental degradation—two imminent matters that he argued were inextricable from each other.

Discussing the proposal for this special issue with Chet, he offered generously that, while he was not feeling well, he would welcome the

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three of us editors drafting some questions that we might have for him regarding eco-justice and teacher education. Given the theme of this special issue, it seemed fitting to include Chet. While many scholars and friends of Chet are more suited to offer testimony of his bold scholarship and lasting influence, as guest editors of this special issue we are honored to provide a snapshot into some of Chet's thoughts with regard to his work, teacher education, and teaching.

Alison, Rita, and Johnny: *What was the moment that you realized that social justice and environmental sustainability are inextricable? Even though your work is interdisciplinary and influencing many fields of study, why did you choose education for your work?*

Chet: There were two parallel lines of thinking in the 1970s and early 1980s: The social justice thinking related to gender, racial, and economic exploitation that was the focus of liberal educators, and the eco-justice writing that was focused on how the health of marginalized groups was being impacted by the industrial system, as well as how the ecological crisis was deepening the catastrophic consequences that everyone was beginning to face. As I was focused on the latter, it became increasingly clear that liberal educational reformers were ignoring the ecological crisis. This was especially evident in how Paulo Freire and his many followers were ignoring the ecological crisis and the challenges of articulating reforms that addressed how to live less consumer-driven lives. My focus led to articulating the nature and importance of the cultural commons. In my 2013 book, *In the Grip of the Past: Educational Reforms that Address What Should Be Changed and What Should Be Conserved*, I included a chapter on how to integrate social justice issues within what I thought was a more urgent concern: namely, how to begin thinking about an ecologically sustainable future. The latter concern was always part of my critiques of liberal approaches to thinking about social justice as being too short-sighted. I was also writing about how the core cultural assumptions underlying liberal thinking were also the core assumptions underlying the industrial revolution.

Alison, Rita, and Johnny: *What would you say are the most important first steps a teacher educator can take toward supporting an eco-justice framework?*

Chet: My earliest writings on the language issues being ignored in the professional education of teachers appears in the 1974 book, *Cultural Literacy for Freedom*. This has been the main focus of everything I have written—whether on the uses of computers, social and eco-justice issues, and on how certain characteristics of our reliance on language

has led to reproducing the misconceptions of earlier eras when there was no awareness of environmental limits. The influence of different characteristics of the languaging processes that are widely taken for granted, and which should be central in the professional education of teachers, include the following: the metaphorical nature of most of our vocabularies (which varies between ethnic groups)—including how the metaphorical nature of language carries forward the misconceptions, prejudices and silences from the past; the myth of a conduit view of language as a sender/receiver part of communication that promotes the appearance that what appears in print is objective and factual; how the technology of print, for all its benefits, misrepresents the emergent, relational, and co-dependent world we live in—and leaves us instead with an over-reliance on abstract thinking; how print undermines the exercise of ecological intelligence; how the misconceptions carried forward from the past marginalize awareness of traditions, including social justice achievements, that will become increasingly important as the digital revolution and climate change move us further down the pathway of social unrest and conflict; and the differences between oral cultures and those that increasingly privilege print-based thinking and the authority of data which is a cultural construct that few recognize. It is because there is so little understanding of these core language issues that the myth from the past about individual autonomy, a human-centered world, and endless progress continues to be held. Teachers need to present students with the realities of how language processes illuminate and hide—starting with the fundamental truth that our vocabularies have a history that carry forward both the insights from the past and ecologically unsustainable misconceptions.

Alison, Rita, and Johnny: *Whose work has had a strong influence on the work you have done (either within the field of eco-justice or from another field that has influenced you)?*

Chet: There have been different sources of influence, depending upon the issues I was addressing. Aldo Leopold, the *Club of Rome Report*, and Rachel Carson provided the wake-up call, while my graduate work in the history of social thought helped to set my intellectual compass. As I focused on different themes the influence of specific writers came into play. Nietzsche, Mumford, and Ellul were important to my thinking about technology. On the distinction between orality and literacy, Walter Ong, Eric Havelock, and Jack Goody were important influences. Nietzsche and Bateson were important to understanding the metaphorical nature of language and to becoming aware of the ontological world as ecologies characterized as emergent, relational, and co-dependent.

Foucault and of course Geertz were important to understanding culture and the nature of how power is enacted. The key concepts related to the cultural commons and the forces of enclosure were influenced by Polanyi. With this background, along with the guidance of Ron Scollon, Dewey, Freire, and most liberal educators who took for granted the myths of the autonomous individual, a human-centered world, and unending progress, led to exploring why teacher educators as well as faculty in other disciplines continued to think within the conceptual framework of their mentors who shared many of the assumptions underlying the industrial/consumer-dependent culture. As I point out in my latest book, *Reforming Higher Education in an Era of Ecological Crisis and Digital Insecurity*, if I have made any original contribution it has been to expand on the interpretative frameworks of the theorists that influenced me in ways that helped to understand the conceptual roots of the ecological crisis. Reading the abstract thinking of Western philosophers, the computer futurist writers, and scientists who crossed over to become promoters of scientism, helped me to recognize the limitations of elites who promote culturally uninformed theories.

Alison, Rita, and Johnny: *How has your thinking about eco-justice changed or grown over the years?*

Chet: Being influenced by the writers listed above, and being always focused on trying to understand the connections between educational reforms and the ideological, cultural, and linguistic roots of the ecological crisis, led to an expanded understanding of how eco-justice requires addressing core beliefs and practices that drive the industrial/consumer-dependent culture that is only now being recognized as a major contributor to climate change. This means that the scientism/computer futurism that has undermined privacy and intergenerational knowledge and skills, the promoters of print-based cultural storage and thinking that fails to take account of different cultural contexts, and so on, contribute to the ecological crisis.

Alison, Rita, and Johnny: *What do you think is the biggest challenge eco-justice scholars should tackle in the future?*

Chet: The biggest challenge is overcoming the limiting conceptual frameworks promoted in graduate schools of education. If you check out the reference section of most publications by professors of education, you will find that few of the deep thinkers I mentioned above are cited. The excess of citations are of other writers who lack the conceptual background necessary for understanding the continued silence about the cultural roots of the ecological crisis, and the alternative localism

and Indigenous pathways to more sustainable communities. The other challenge can be seen in how my work is being used in courses where a single article or chapter is included with a long list of other writers who promote the Modern mindset with all its myths about emancipation, autonomy, and progress. The problem is that well-intentioned faculty lack the conceptual depth required for developing both critiques as well as a deep understanding of cultural pathways not dependent upon the assumptions underlying the Modern mindset. As the social chaos resulting from the climate deniers and abstract thinking ideologues continues, the pressures will make it difficult for professors of education to do the background reading that should have been part of their graduate studies. But there is a way into the future that may be effective. And this is to learn what the critical issues are, and to engage students in doing ethnographies of double-bind thinking, cultural myths, as well as the characteristics of ecologically sustainable beliefs and daily practices. The contradictions, double-bind thinking, and consumer excesses are part of daily experience—just as are ecologically sustainable practices. Unfortunately, these face-to-face and intergenerational traditions are given low status and thus dismissed by those indoctrinated with the myths of individual autonomy, materialism, and infinite progress. To cite just one example of the mis-education that continues to be promoted: even though all the social justice achievements of the past are experienced by later generations as traditions, most teachers understand traditions as holidays which leaves students ignorant of how the industrial and now digital culture's approach to progress requires overturning traditions. What traditions are being lost through automation and the replacement of people with computer driven machines and algorithms? How does over-reliance upon print lead to a loss of traditions? What are the traditions that Western philosophers considered important enough to be intergenerationally renewed? What did John Locke and Rene Descartes say about traditions? How does their argument that we can live without traditions differ from Edward Shils' understanding of the complexity of tradition? How many educators are aware that to understand the depth and complexity of culture one needs to understand the nature of traditions—which is the metaphor that Enlightenment thinkers of the 15th and 16th century associated with the superstitions of their era and not with the social justice achievement of 1215 and the signing of the *Magna Carta*? Enough!