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Teaching Note

Speaking 7 Days of Garbage: Raising Awareness of Sustainability in the Classroom

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7 DAYS OF GARBAGE, GREGG SEGAL (SEGAL, 2016).

For several decades, the depletion of natural resources as a consequence of the aggressive and irresponsible behavior of our species has been a major problem facing society (Brown, 2004). There has been no shortage of voices warning that this depletion of planetary resources could result in the collapse of civilization (Diamond, 2006). In response to this, the United Nations proclaimed 2005-2014 as the Decade of Education for a Sustainable Future, urging UNESCO to promote, in all educational institutions, the fostering of attitudes targeting sustainable development (Combes, 2006).

Classroom activities aimed at raising awareness of sustainability should therefore be an essential part of the curriculum to foster values and habits that generate an attitude of respect for the environment. The education system should bear in mind that appropriate environmental education will foster the next generation's commitment towards our planet and an awareness of the need to care for it, thereby offering the benefit of a better future for all. The inculcation of environmental awareness among students is an indispensable element for the creation of ethically committed professionals who, across disciplinary fields, will build a new reality for sustainable development – far from the current overexploitation of resources and in harmony with nature, of which we are a part.

As science teachers (from Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena and Universidad de Málaga, Spain), we were invited to propose and hold a classroom activity in a secondary school in Cartagena to celebrate World Environment Day as part of a program of informational activities planned by the school. Thus, we developed an activity that could be integrated within the framework of any subject in environmental sciences or as a cross-curricular exercise of any educational program. The students were 14 years old (third year of Enseñanza Secundaria Obligatoria, ESO, Compulsory Secondary Education), middle class, 60% boys and 40% girls, and had the following origins: 85% Spanish, 10% Latin American, and 5% Moroccan. The objective of the activity was to get students to reflect on the huge amount of waste we generate. To this end, we considered the recent work by photographer Gregg Segal (Segal, 2016) entitled "7 Days of Garbage," which shows families surrounded by the garbage they have produced over a week. (The first photograph in this teaching note depicts the photographer with his family.)

Through the visceral power of his disconcerting photographs, Segal's project aims not only to raise awareness of the immense volume of waste that we generate, but also to highlight how unaware we are of this fact. In this sense, he is forcing us to confront our unbridled consumerist excess and its most prevalent direct negative impact on the environment, namely our generation of substantial quantities of waste (several kilograms per person per week), including a significant proportion of non-degradable packaging.

Segal's photographs, in which this mere week's worth of waste is practically swamping its human generators, relentlessly transmit the essence of the ruthless anthropocentrism that is using nature and its resources – justified through an offensive assumption of human supremacy – to aggressively and unsustainably satiate our short-term desires for comfort and pleasure.

After viewing Segal's provocative work, the students' first reaction was one of incredulity. Specifically, some (perhaps due to an instinctive defensive reaction) asserted that it was not possible for so much garbage to have been generated in just one week. However, after they were assured of the veracity of the photographs, their disbelief eventually gave way to general astonishment at what the images were revealing. Following the short debate



7 DAYS OF GARBAGE, GREGG SEGAL (SEGAL, 2016).

generated by this first impression, we asked the students (after dividing them into groups) to answer a series of questions related to environmental sustainability: What is our responsibility as a society? What can we do to contribute to a more sustainable world? How can we consume responsibly? Is it possible to reverse the situation?

But first, to stimulate their critical thinking and introduce them to some of the concepts in environmental education, we the teachers commented that, as perpetrators of this anthropocentrism, humankind seems to have forgotten its interdependence and equality with the other species on Earth. We assume that the environment is here to serve us, thereby disregarding our status as simple

members of the biotic community, as proposed by Arnold Leopold (Leopold, 1949), wherein respect for the beings that live alongside us should be the most significant sign of our identity. In addition, the extreme consumption reflected in Segal's images, which feature citizens of the most developed countries in the world, including the United States, shows how we not only undervalue other species, but also – within our own species – arrogantly assume the right to exploit collective resources at the expense of the misery of the most underprivileged.

After floating the above ideas, we gave the groups twenty minutes to discuss the issues raised and write down their reflections. The conclusions reached by each group were then shared and an enriching and constructive debate ensued. The following main ideas emerged.

Concerning our responsibility as a society, it was suggested we should implement, at least initially, a so-called "weak" anthropocentrism that screens the omnipresent desires of our species, aiming to fulfill only those that – after thorough consideration and based on long-term biosphere sustainability – are truly necessary. In this sense, we should mention that although the vast majority of students supported the previous proposal, a few voices propounded the idea that we should be less concerned about conserving our planet. Their reasoning was that, in the future, once the Earth's resources have been exhausted, our intelligence and technology will allow us to migrate to new and unexploited worlds, thereby perpetuating an endless cycle of successive planetary colonization (and destruction). This premise gave rise to the issue of whether ethics has any value in the face of such a utilitarian and predatory vision. In any case, following the notion of "weak" anthropocentrism mentioned above, it was concluded that a next and definitive step should be the tautological recognition of the human species as part of nature itself to ensure (in line with the inherent value of life postulated by Paul Taylor; Taylor, 1983) that every decision made contributes to the conservation of the integrity of Leopold's biotic community; in other words, if we are protecting it, we will be protecting ourselves.

Another idea that emerged is that legislators must act ethically and in the aforementioned direction when drafting regulatory frameworks. Moreover, manufacturers must respect the established rules of sustainability, and consumers must act responsibly as they are the first to uphold the philosophy of respect for the environment by rejecting those products that threaten the integrity of nature. Keeping this idea in mind will make us more aware that we are part of an organic whole, as Arne Naess (Naess, 1988) asserts with his concept of "deep ecology." However, this does not mean that we, as individual consumers, have the same responsibility as the political class or large corporations. Obviously, these two actors (often intertwined by their common selfish interests) hold the power, respectively, to establish mandatory regulations for sustainability or to abandon aggressive advertising campaigns, among others. In other words, they are the ones with the means to ensure a more realistically hopeful future.

In addition, it also became clear that the message in Segal's project, although crude, highlights how, from a systemic point of view, it is clearly incomprehensible that in

the closed and finite system of Earth, incapable of growing beyond its limits, the unsustainable use of non-reusable packaging has become normalized. To understand this persistent and pernicious contradiction, we must ask ourselves what underlying interests may be at work in perpetuating and even intensifying such behavior. At this point, we must become aware that the so-called "developed world," which exists through the exploitation of a planetary North-South dichotomy that is maintained with ulterior motives, is the main beneficiary of the whole perverse economic cycle. Sustained by a myopic and contradictory "market," this cycle does not hesitate to grab the resources of the most disadvantaged 80% of the population to satisfy the rampant consumerist desires of the remaining 20%. This incontestable fact is not only undermining the inter-species respect that we owe as mere terrestrial citizens (with dire ecological consequences) but is also fostering a lack of intra-species respect that is instigating uncounted abuses at the social level, with no sign of stopping.

On the other hand, when asked whether it is possible to reverse the situation, the classroom debate revealed that to move away from naïve approaches, it is necessary to have an awareness of the complexity of this problem, including its deep-rooted inertias and the numerous agents involved. This will necessitate a profound revolution in the sense that it is a matter not only of consuming less, but also of consuming better. Hence, the necessary change should include not just the welcome recycling of waste – in itself a stopgap since it assumes that the first stage of waste generation is inevitable – but also a progressive transformation of society and the economy. Thus, based on unwavering respect for nature and a fraternal consideration towards all beings inhabiting our planet, it is necessary to ensure that the quality of life can improve on a global scale – including radical changes in the North-South dynamics and always under the principle of equity – to change the access to resources (with a fair distribution of the costs and benefits). Meanwhile, new forms of exercising politics must emerge, ones that are constantly watched over by the citizenry to counteract the threat of the dictatorship of the markets.

In short, the activity conducted here, using the stimulating context for reflection provided by the work of photographer Gregg Segal, fostered a series of ideas that led to an enriching and reflective debate by the students. This served to raise awareness of the importance of caring for our environment to ensure a sustainable future for the planet.

In summary, this teaching activity, based on Segal's photographs, attempts to address a reality that is not only unsustainable from the anthropocentric point of view of guaranteeing the ability to meet the resource needs of future generations, but that also emerges as a dynamic that is unacceptable from the biocentric perspective of ensuring the respect for and preservation of life-hosting systems. After all, the change that our planet needs demands an elevation of the emotional maturity of our species, leading us not only to the knowledge that we need for this profound revolution, but above all to the wisdom to, once and for all, actually bring it about.

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