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(De)Littering – Caring for teaching and learning spaces

Background and context of the project

Human activity has made incredible developments in the modern world. Throughout these developments, non-humans were relegated to the periphery of human advancements. The unprecedented progress made hitherto, has thrown humanity into a time and space, which are characterized by a notable period, the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is an ‘epoch in which human disturbance outranks other geological forces’ (Tsing, 2015, p. 19). The concept, lifted from Geology, points to the destruction of places in geological time, where the destruction is irreversible. Denialism about global warming, climate change, environmental degradation, terrorism, large scale poverty and land ownership issues, has brought about the Anthropocene. Higher Education in South Africa is folded into the fabric of the Anthropocene with its emphasis on productivity and progress driven by neoliberal extractive managerialist agendas. Instability and precarity, like many other forces in human history, have a propensity to shake up that which humans have taken-for-granted over non-human matters. The problem of littering the environment when left unattended, is an environmental catastrophe waiting to happen in the long term. Print and electronic media are full of reports on countries such as India, Nigeria, Haiti and Zambia, to mention a few, where littering is a huge problem.

In South Africa, reports show that littering is on the rise and is a social concern in schools (Mapotse & Mashiloane, 2017; Matsekoleng, 2017) and communities (Awshar, 2018). Littering, dumping of garbage, refuse and rubble are human activities that disrupt the ecosystem on which human life is reliant. Littering is misplacing solid waste material. It is a growing global occurrence (Ong & Sovacool, 2015; Kallen, 2018 & Darkoh, 2009) and a major social problem (Reich & Robertson, 1979)

The issues have been simmering for a very long time in the midst of denialism. Climate change, and the destruction of the planet require that we engage with socially and environmentally just pedagogies that frame timespacemattering not just as resources but as essential to our collective existence. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), from multiplicitous positions are well positioned to play a significant role towards addressing the Anthropocene.

Problem Statement

The gradual destruction of planet Earth by human activity(s) through littering of public spaces, is a grave concern. Littering, dumping of garbage, refuse and rubble are human activities that disrupt the ecosystem on which human life is reliant. At the University of Limpopo and some schools where student-teachers do their Practice Teaching, littering is a rising phenomenon. Therefore, the main concern was: Why do learners litter, and what can teachers do to conscientise learners to keep teaching and learning environments clean?

Aim of the project

The aims of the project were three-fold: (a) To explore why learners litter, (b) What can teachers do to conscientise learners to keep teaching and learning spaces clean, and (c). To co-construct clean spaces at the University.

Processes / Methods

There are many possible ways, as yet unthought-of, in which we may live differently from the way we live now in our entanglements with the world’s matter(s) Kotzé (p. 98, 2017). The world’s matter(s) in this context refers to littering. Littering, negative to many and essential to the

capitalist world, requires new ways of looking at it. Kotzé (p.98, 2017) argues: What is needed in terms of finding solutions for pressing problems of social and environmental injustices is, as Deleuze (cited in Kotzé) suggests, the affirmative, experimental work of thinking different worlds in which we may also live differently.

Given the complex nature of littering, an eclectic approach was adopted because I believe that there is no theory, which can wholly describe how people behave and why they behave the way they do. People are diverse. Humans are rhizomatic, heterogeneous and multiplicitous (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013). Human behaviour cannot be understood from a single theory except that social behaviour is in itself rhizomatic. The eclectic approach adopted, drew from the theories of Bandura's Social Learning and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems. These theories, are underpinned by Deleuze and Guattari's views on understanding human nature, affect and interaction as well as the Affect Theory (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). On one hand, the Ecological Systems theory focuses on the interrelationships of various contributing factors toward human development and on how the developing individual reacts to these ecological factors. On the other hand, Bandura's Social Learning theory states that 'people observe their own behaviour, judge it against their own standards, and reinforce or punish themselves' (Slavin, 2012, p. 134). People who litter seem to do so without any guilt or fear of punishment. Perhaps, they litter because they observe and model other people's littering behaviour as acceptable. When people notice that the environment is already cluttered, they too, clutter it further. This entanglement may thus be reinforced by the denialism of people who litter without any care for the environment. A common thread that runs through all these theories point to the idea that the interactions between an individual and the environment shape the final outcome of an individual.

Participants were purposefully sampled from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd year Bachelor of Education student-teachers whom I taught. The reasons for the choice were accessibility and that the student-teachers became active participants. Involving student-teachers at the outset of the project was informed by Deleuze's approach to understanding the world from the 'others' perspective (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013). Coleman and Ringrose (2013, p. 13) point out 'that putting to work some of Deleuze's ideas about the world and ways of studying it might help to shed light on other ways of knowing, relating to and creating the world, 'noticing' different kinds of things that might be happening, or things that might be happening differently'. The question; 'why do learners litter' and other related questions were better comprehended as a result of student-teachers' involvement in the project. I did not wish to impose biases of littering on student-teachers, for the reason that they are fluid and heterogeneous (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), 'fractitious, multiplicitous and unpredictable' (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013: p. 4). All the student-teachers are of diverse backgrounds. They bring to the teaching and learning situation(s) wide-ranging content, practices and beliefs about their lived spaces. When they enter the teaching space, they become assemblages, which in turn, produce behaviours that may not necessarily be an outcome of their backgrounds. Therefore, I did not want to speculate about the reasons why they littered teaching and learning spaces.

I infused in my lessons the practice to keep teaching and learning environments free from litter. Student-teachers discussed video clips and pictures of littered environments, which I had recently captured on campus and in schools. Thereafter, student-teachers were requested to interview each other regarding littering.



Pictures taken by the researcher (2015)

Student-teachers were furthermore given a small-scale research-based enquiry on littering. The enquiry was undertaken during the student-teachers' Teaching Practice experience both at primary and high schools. The student-teachers interviewed five female and five male learners in focus groups. Five teachers were interviewed individually. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data (Creswell, 2012). In addition, student-teachers also used the photovoice research method (Palibroda, Krieg & Havelock, 2009) to capture littered spaces by means of their mobile phones. The pictures, are telling a grim story.

Outcomes

Littering is habitually produced by humans. In the teaching and learning space, it is produced by learners and teachers, who are at all times entangled in the phenomenon of littering. The trashing of the environment through littering is a bi-faceted process. Its bifurcated understanding is a result of situational entanglement to some, as an intentional process whilst to others, it is auto-responsive.

Data collected from foundation phase school learners suggest that learners were supposedly innocent. Littering to them is normal in the course of learning and play and something to play with. When instructed to pick up the litter, they found that the trash bins were taller than them and far apart. As a result, they ended up littering places where they were not watched by their teachers. High school learners and student-teachers claimed that to a larger extent, littering is directed to a lack of caring for nature or environment, laziness to utilise the provided trash bins, total lack of responsibility for tidiness, and shortage of bins at the institutions. The participants revealed that most of the learners, attribute littering to habitual act emanating from home, which produces the lack of respect for the environments. At home they were raised differently and once they were away from home, they tried to fit in the littered environment. They became negligent and made littering an acceptable way of disposing unwanted material.

Some of the disturbing responses regarding littering were found to be the lack of a culture of cleanliness in communities and schools. The attitude to litter randomly was seen to be perpetuated by the community and cascaded to learners. Littering is considered a choice related to sheer carelessness and job-creation. Littering is purported by participants as an issue, which is normal and does not bear any consequences. It is evident from the participants that littering is attributed to the lack of knowledge about the conservation of nature through visible sign boards, which inhibit littering. The provision of knowledge is claimed to be the responsibility of the family during the socialisation process of children. In the same breath, other participants were of the view that littering was not a moral issue within communities to care for one's environment at an early age; it all begins at home. Gregg and Seigworth (2010) indicate that to give value to things is to shape what is near us. If the family is wordless about littering, this could imply that the family gives value to trashed environments and by so doing shape the littering narrative.

Suggestions to (de)litter teaching and learning spaces were made by almost all the participants albeit wavering between basic/practical to more complex processes. On the basic/practical side, participants suggested that there should be many, big and colourful trash containers which are not put far apart. Some of the trash bins should be put next to lecture hall/classroom entrances. Other participants suggested that scary gigantic structures should be constructed from wires near main entrances wherein trash could be thrown.

The importance of initiating cleaning campaigns and environmental awareness programmes was mentioned by the majority of the student-teachers. They proposed that teachers together with learners, should lead advocacy and persuasion programmes at community radio stations, taxi ranks and street markets about messages to keep the environment litter free. They argued that some bit of environmental intelligence is highly required to inculcate the culture of caring and discipline for the environment. The responses indicate that teachers should be in the

forefront and be empowered to uproot the culture of littering through punitive measures on culprits.

All participants support the idea of positive reinforcement for those who make earnest efforts to keep their surroundings litter free. This, should be in some form of rewards for individuals who are seen to be reducing littering.

Limitations and way forward

The 3rd aim of the project, ‘to co-construct clean spaces at the University’ was not achievable as planned due to some challenges such as sporadic disruptions of academic programmes.

The Centre for Academic Excellence (CAE) has accepted the project to be one of the Interdisciplinary projects at the university. The CAE will fund the realization of the 3rd aim. The project will be driven by the CAE. At this stage of implementation, the Student Representative Council (SRC) together with student-teachers who participated in the project, will embark on the (de)littering project thereby conscientising the entire student body about caring for teaching and learning spaces.

Conclusion

Some participants strongly stressed that there is a serious absence of modelling behaviour on the side of the teachers to keep the school environments clean; teachers themselves litter in public. The investment on time and energy to combat littering seems to be the least prioritized by those in power to ensure litter free practices. Learners trash the environment as though they are announcing their arrival or departure like animals. In the animal kingdom, animals tend to mark their territories by spraying urine on fixed objects, thereby announcing their presence. Could it similarly imply that human beings prefer socially intolerable ways to mark their territories by littering or urinating in public spaces? Could it be that students litter because there is some gratification in the process? Or, could it be that learners litter because they find happiness in trashed environments? The project could not establish that littering was a value to the ‘litterer’

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