Making Sustainability Visible

Sustainability is about people and the choices they make, ultimately it is a question of human behavior. A deliberate effort to demystify sustainability via open and critical awareness is an essential part of my role as an environmental educator. Choices in regard to sustainability can often be presented as problems to be solved with the acknowledgement of multiple correct answers; modeling is not about presenting one right way, it is about presenting a thoughtful or deliberate way. The power such a problem solving can be the motivational energy it generates, the alternate possibility that it inspires, and the behavior that results. In the spirit of illuminating everyday or 'regular' sustainability decisions, I will present one example from my role as an educator.

An environmental and outdoor education program brings the challenge of logistics into the question of sustainability and the classroom—our classroom is outdoors, sometimes right outside the door, sometimes across town, and sometimes it may be half-way across the country. One introductory outdoor education course offered at the University of Minnesota Duluth uses the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness as our classroom; we spend a weekend in the autumn camping and paddling in this unique setting. To engage 50 people in this effort and stay true to the planned outcomes of the experience, a great deal of logistical planning is necessitated. Much of this involves questions of sustainability, transportation, trip expense, costs, Leave No Trace planning, gear preparation, etc. Consider transportation—*one school bus w/trailer or 12 cars to move 50 people?* Along with the actual transport of students, a bus must make two seemingly wasteful trips (an empty trip back from the drop off and return empty for the pick up). The total bus fuel expenditure is approximately: 1 bus x 400 miles/8 mpg = a total of 50 gallons. In contrast, the cars making a direct up and back trip, the equation is: 12 vehicles x 200 miles/25 mpg = a total of 96 gallons for the trip. This comparison, using averages and approximates, presents a strong case for the bus; however, a simple comparison of fuel use does not go far enough. Other values, such as keeping students together, avoiding vehicle problems, risk management for 12 student vehicles vs. 1 professional driver and vehicle, etc. all factor into a decision. When the details are presented, the sustainability decisions such as bus vs. cars can be addressed and discussed. Students can learn from such a decision.

This example is meant to illustrate that careful decision-making about our shared education experiences may provide lessons in sustainability beyond the actual content of our courses. Illuminating such decision-making can allow educators to promote sustainability awareness without advocacy. We can use such decisions to encourage students to think critically about environmental behavior and further, to consider how their own decisions may be a part of sustainability.