

Understanding Human Ecology Education and Its Foundational Value for Society

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November, 2023

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Human Ecology education is an essential and transformative approach to learning that focuses on the interplay between humans and their human ecosystem. It is a multidisciplinary educational program combining life skills, personal presentation, built and natural environments, sociology, psychology, and ethics to develop an understanding of the relationships between us and our world. By fostering human care literacy, critical thinking, and responsible action, Human Ecology education empowers individuals to make informed and fair decisions and construct a sustainable future for themselves, others, and the natural world. Because the lessons are lived daily, the rhythms and habits of daily life within family and community are naturally passed down to future generations, making the impact of the programs exponential and long-lasting in society.

Human Ecology education is an educational framework with programs and courses emphasizing reciprocal influence and interdependence — the “we, us, and our” of our lives. It goes beyond professional education by considering human relationships in light of their social, cultural, and economic dimensions. By equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to understand and address complex social, professional, and environmental issues, this educational approach prepares students transitioning to adulthood to be self-sufficient and resilient for life; it also prepares them for a world of diminishing resources and changing climate.

Evolution of Human Ecology Education

The roots of Human Ecology education can be traced back to the early folk educational movements of Bildung education in Europe, which spread to the five Scandinavian countries and became the basis for their system today known as The Nordic Way. It is documented in Lene Anderson's book, *The Nordic Secret*. During this early time, there was a growing recognition of the detrimental effects of the class structure on the lowest peasant class, which generated the formation of folk schools. These schools spread, and more people in the lower classes realized their own latent power to improve their lives. Human-centered educators began to advocate for an education model designed to meet the human needs shared by all people and also the government's responsibility for enabling people to reach their full potential through education.

Over the years, Human Ecology education has spread to many countries and colleges, and, although it should be offered from the elementary level to college as students mature, at the present time, few schools in the U.S. do so. At the elementary level through the sixth or seventh grade, Human Ecology programs focus on meeting personal needs, such as the critical knowledge of food, clothing, and shelter that enables an individual to be healthy and safe. The lessons are learned experientially so that children can see actual benefits in real-time. On the secondary level, the lessons include more complex tasks in each category, involving the needs of more people, including time and task management, consumer protection, law, finance, health,

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and how our complex social systems work on the state and national level; all are important to prepare for transitioning to adulthood and living independently in a more multicultural world.

In his Hierarchy of Human Needs, Maslow identifies these stages for meeting human needs and shows how they lead to self-actualization for the rest of an individual's human development throughout life. Students should be able to understand their needs and manage their resources to meet them when they reach the college or vocational level of education. Human Ecology education guides students through every stage of Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs until all the complex elements of physical and psycho-social development, social systems, climate adaptation, and economic and social ethics can provide an innate personal framework for understanding and addressing the complex challenges of our time. Human Ecology is particularly valuable for community college students since many must work while attending school, often coming from marginalized populations as they try to transition to a new culture.

The Current State of Human Ecology Education

Although Human Ecology education is recognized as an integral part of education, there is a problem: it is usually only taught at the post-secondary level in colleges. By then, people have reached adulthood, are living independently, and lack the skills they should have learned in elementary and secondary schools but did not. Those are the formative years, before adulthood, when human life skills, concepts about life, attitudes, and beliefs become ingrained. Traditionally, life and cultural skills were learned at home, but in society today, the U.S. has more single mothers, divorced parents, fragmented families, and resulting health problems like obesity, chronic conditions, and mental illness than ever. The imperative for schools to teach human life is critical.

Despite the positive growth of Human Ecology on college campuses, challenges still need to be addressed to fully implement and scale Human Ecology education. Limited resources, resistance to change, the need for teacher training, and gender role stereotypes are some barriers that must be addressed. Responsibility for sustaining a family has been traditionally assigned to women; however, today, there are more men living alone and more raising children. Human Ecology is gender-neutral since it teaches the human life skills everyone must learn to live independently in today's multi-faceted society. With the increasing awareness of environmental issues and the growing demand for *preventing* social and ecological decline instead of *treating* the problems after the fact, there is much to do to expand and strengthen Human Ecology education.

Systems Thinking: Analyzing and understanding the interconnections within ecosystems.

Systems thinking is a crucial component of Human Ecology education. It involves understanding and analyzing the complex interconnections within our human ecosystem. Systems thinking encourages learners to perceive the world as a network of interrelated systems rather than isolated components. For individuals, this means understanding the connections between skillful financial management, eating patterns, and personal healthcare, enabling them to combine national finance, health, and food systems into one household for a family's well-being. Other

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larger national systems that an individual must understand include justice, education, consumer protection, and housing. Human Ecology encourages students to consider the underlying causes and interdependencies of problems rather than focusing solely on isolated symptoms often encountered in a crisis.

Human Ecology promotes collective sustainability by teaching students how to adopt sustainable practices in their family systems and daily lives, such as reducing waste, conserving energy, and making environmentally conscious choices. Unless all public schools 'get the memo,' important national goals cannot be met with isolated programs in some schools and not others. Neither can national goals be met if the focus is solely on what markets, economists, and corporations can do, not individuals. In a consumer-based economy, individual decisions are directly related to national prosperity. The educational programs also highlight the need to address social inequalities, promote inclusive decision-making processes, and equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values to become change agents resisting the status quo and being proactive for the better.

One prominent theoretical framework that underpins Human Ecology education is Ecological Systems Theory (EST), developed by renowned psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner. This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the interplay between individuals and their context to promote holistic learning and development. Individuals become more socially mobile, functioning well in many different places or cultures and within complex social systems other than their own. When applied to education, Ecological Systems Theory encourages educators to recognize the influence of various systems, such as the home, the community, and the natural environment on students' learning experiences. Human Ecology believes humans are not separate from nature but integral to both the built and natural ecological systems. This perspective challenges the traditional dichotomy between humans and the natural world, highlighting both entities' mutual dependence and influence, not to conquer or subdue.

Ethics

Human Ecology encourages learners to recognize the consequences of their choices and behaviors on society and nature, the foundation for promoting responsible, ethical, and sustainable practices that can mitigate human social and physical negative impacts.

Ethics plays a crucial role in Human Ecology education, providing a moral and philosophical framework for understanding the ethical dimensions of human-ecosystem relationships. Environmental ethics examines questions of value, responsibility, and justice about the global world, guiding individuals to consider the ethical implications of their actions towards all life. Sustainable development is a critical moral concept in Human Ecology education that emphasizes the need to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. It recognizes the interdependent balance between life's social, economic, and environmental dimensions and seeks to integrate them equitably. Interestingly, Swedish culture has a prevailing social concept learned at home and carried into society, which is identified by one word: lagom. It means "enough is enough"; every child learns it early in life, as

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they ask for more cookies. Later in their lives, it helps distinguish between a 'want' and a 'need.' The study of Human Ecology encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making that considers the long-term consequences of personal and collective human actions, and it helps people become active agents of change and understand the cause and effect of their decisions.

Implementation of Human Ecology Education

Implementing Human Ecology education involves translating the theoretical foundations into practical strategies that can be integrated into educational settings at all levels. In the lower grades, that means instituting a specific Human Ecology program, but at the secondary level, it also includes designing curricula that incorporate Human Ecology principles into more interdisciplinary exploration, including science, social studies, language arts, and even mathematics. Curriculum development for Human Ecology teachers should emphasize hands-on experiences, field studies, and real-life applications, first in the home and then in the larger community. By incorporating home management, food, clothing, interior design, child development, and community and environmental issues, the content enables learners to adapt to change and understand their own lives and the context within which they live, fostering a sense of responsibility towards family, community, and the environment over time. This practical approach assures health and safety long term, supports families, combats depression, and prevents future poverty and its emotional and social costs later in life. If the program begins early before transitioning to adulthood and matures in breadth and knowledge as students mature, then regardless of what professional path students choose to follow, the result is a stable, resilient nation. As leaders emerge from graduating classes, they will be pre-disposed to developing public policy that is human and life-centered.

Various teaching strategies and approaches are needed to engage students in Human Ecology effectively. Experiential learning, for instance, involves access to a lab for hands-on activities, field trips, and immersive experiences that allow students to interact with the home and natural environment directly. Traditionally, this education often included a six-week stint with a group living in a campus apartment, a lab to learn household management; the experience allowed students to realize the complexity of daily life. This real-life approach enhanced the understanding of personal differences and fostered a sense of connection and investment in cooperative living. For instance, simply learning to purchase, prepare, and serve a meal teaches nutrition, science, math, aesthetics, etiquette, time management, and the arts of conversation and etiquette.

Inquiry-based approaches are also highly effective in Human Ecology education; they encourage students to ask questions, investigate how different cultures live in daily life and in other environments, and seek answers through research, experimentation, and critical analysis. Students develop problem-solving, data analysis, social protocol, and communication skills, which are crucial for proactively solving future life challenges.

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Evaluation and Assessment: Measuring the effectiveness of Human Ecology Education programs

Traditional assessment methods, such as tests and quizzes, may only partially capture the breadth and depth of learning in this field. Instead, a more holistic and authentic approach to assessment is needed, such as formative assessments, like observations and student reflections. Summative assessments can take the form of projects, small group productions, presentations, or exhibitions that allow students to demonstrate their understanding and application of Human Ecology knowledge and skills. Experiential assessments of quality of life skills in a living environment are also possible.

Additionally, on the administrative and community level, evaluation should extend beyond individual student performance to measure the overall impact of Human Ecology programs in the schools on students, communities, and the local environment. As a Human Ecology program becomes a core program in local schools, this can involve collecting student attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge retention data and assessing the programs' broader home, ecological, social, and economic outcomes on the whole community with each graduating class. Research has shown there will be less social conflict, crime, waste of resources, poverty, and homelessness, and more sharing and caring. Social mobility is increased, as is emotional and cultural intelligence. Generations will benefit over and over as the knowledge is built into the family, raising children, and home management, contributing to a healthier, sustainable, and more inclusive future for all and greatly lessening the differences that lead to social inequality.

While technology can significantly enhance the implementation of Human Ecology by providing access to a wealth of digital tools, resources, and platforms, integrating technology must be purposeful, humane, and aligned with the goals of Human Ecology. Technology should be used to enhance learning experiences and promote critical thinking rather than as a substitute for hands-on experiences and direct interaction with other people and the natural environment.

Impact of Human Ecology Education

Human Ecology education is not a new concept, and it has been implemented successfully in various educational institutions and organizations worldwide. Its lessons are communal to all human beings. In the U.S. alone, ten to fifteen colleges offer degrees in Human Ecology and are able to train teachers; around the globe, many more universities also offer Human Ecology programs. Today's task is to bring Human Ecology into the lower grades and work further upstream during those formative years to prevent social decline.

Individuals who receive Human Ecology education are more likely to achieve lifelong good health, have less depression and mental illness, more intact families, and less financial failure; they adopt sustainable behaviors, make informed social and environmental decisions, and advocate for positive change. Students develop a deep sense of family, global responsibility, and empathy toward others, demonstrating a solid commitment to sustainability in their future professional decision-making. As individuals become aware of the complex interconnectedness

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of human and ecological systems, they are more likely to successfully navigate complex social systems, advocate for policy changes, support sustainable initiatives, and participate in democratic decision-making processes. This collective effort, on the national level, can lead to a shift towards better national health and more conservation of natural resources, and it lays the foundation for the preservation of a sustainable democracy and prosperous economy.

Teaching Human Ecology is an interrelated win for individuals, cities, schools, nonprofits, philanthropic funders, and state and national governments. Forming collaborative partnerships and joint-power agreements between educational institutions, communities, and environmental organizations helps overcome resource limitations and creates a supportive ecosystem for Human Ecology education. Many consumer companies with ESG goals can meet their social responsibilities by funding teaching materials, teacher training, and products for demonstration or audio-visual learning. Municipalities need to form partnerships with their school systems to support Human Ecology education because it builds more resilient communities and directly saves cities and states the staggering costs of social problems and conflict, violence, and crime.

Human Ecology education can be the bridge and benefit significantly from integrating indigenous knowledge and perspectives into its contemporary curriculum and pedagogy. Indigenous cultures deeply understand the interconnectedness between humans and the environment, and their wisdom can provide valuable insights and alternative approaches to sustainability. Incorporating indigenous knowledge systems and inviting indigenous perspectives fosters cultural diversity, promotes social justice, and enhances ecological understanding; it helps students see the commonality of human needs.

In conclusion, while challenges exist, the future of Human Ecology education is promising. Through collective efforts, we can create a society where Human Ecology is widely embraced; it empowers individuals to become responsible stewards of the environment and fosters a sustainable and harmonious relationship between people and all the elements of the human ecosystem, for generations.