FECUN - Bhutan conference

Reimagining Interdependence

Concept Note for the FECUN conference 2023
Online conference, 14-15 April 2023



This is the concept note for the FECUN Bhutan conference, a conference in the FECUN conference series. The conference is a free online conference that takes place April 14-15, 2023.

The theme of the conference is *'Reimagining interdependence.'*

The theme and the three main subthemes of the conference are in line with one of the main ideas of the FECUN conference series, inspired by views of education, culture, and nature from a particular 'place' on planet Earth; in 2023 Bhutan. At the same time, the theme and the subthemes are developed to function as an inspiration for contributions worldwide.

You can, in what follows, read more on FECUN, the FECUN conference series, and the Bhutanese inspiration for developing the theme and ideas behind the conference. You are also presented for considerations regarding how the conference theme can be related to worldwide concerns regarding education, culture, and nature in the interconnected world of the Anthropocene and the idea of Sustainable Development. Finally, you will hear more about the three subthemes of the conference.

FECUN and the FECUN conference series

The conference is a conference in the FECUN conference series, a part of the FECUN project (FECUN is an abbreviation of Futures of Education, Culture, and Nature).

FECUN

The FECUN project is inspired by UNESCO's Futures of Education project. This project focuses on establishing a new global infrastructure of education, which connects education with the notion of 'commons' and the idea of creating a new social contract for education that can repair injustices while transforming our visions and images of our futures together.

FECUN more specifically focuses on 1) the entanglements between education, culture, and nature (including issues related to sustainable development), 2) the global biodiversity of knowledge and presence related to these entanglements; and 3) how various forms and types of education (academia, applied science, polytechnic, and vocational education, arts and craft), as well as civil society and arts, might relate to these entanglements.

FECUN conference series

The FECUN conference series is a series of international conferences held at various places, or online; the format for the conferences is either hybrid (on-location and online) or virtual (online). The 2023 conference is virtual.

Each conference theme is inspired by a particular context and place on planet Earth. At the same time, the conference theme should function as an inspiration for reflection on the idea of FECUN for people beyond the local context, both worldwide and in other contexts around the world. The aim is to continuously reflect on our various futures (and traditions) of education, culture, and nature, concerning sustainable development and the Anthropocene, focusing on implications for culture and various forms and types of education.

For more information on the FECUN project, the conference series, and other activities in the FECUN project, see the FECUN website www.fecun.net

The Conference theme and subthemes in the Bhutanese context and worldwide

The theme of the Bhutan conference is *Reimagining Interdependence*. This theme is closely related to the Bhutanese context of education, culture, and nature and can, at the same time, function as an inspiration for reflecting FECUN themes worldwide.

The Bhutanese inspiration for the conference theme

Bhutan is a small country with diverse nature, culture, and history. Bhutan is between 200 and 7000 meters above sea level, and the climate spans from subtropical to polar-type. The country has various languages, cultural and ethnic groups, and living cultural and religious heritage (Buddhism 75 %, Hinduism 22%).

However, the culture is closely related to nature, and Buddhism (the country's state religion) also, to some degree, blends with various indigenous traditions.

This heritage is expressed culturally in festivals, cuisine, arts, craftsmanship, organic farming, the coexistence of traditional and modern medicine, etc. The diversity of the culture is also reflected in the Bhutanese education system, where 'modern' education in the form of, for example, tertiary academic, vocational, and academic education lives side by side with Buddhist monastic education; and it is possible to study, for instance, post-secondary education in traditional arts and crafts, as well as tertiary education in traditional medicine

The 'holistic' or 'everything is connected' idea of reality as involving a form of dynamic interdependence is, with variations, a key concept in many Asian worldviews, including but not limited to Mahayana Buddhism. More specifically, this idea has historically played an essential role in Bhutan, both in Buddhist philosophy and in the comprehensive cultural integration of Buddhism with indigenous worldviews, which are deeply rooted in living, 'spiritual' relations, and resonance with nature. The view of the interdependence of everything also concerns deep ecological questions relating to how we are to perceive, express, and understand ('the body, speech, and mind,') what it means to exist as embodied beings in an environment, mixed 'interdependently' with other beings

This blend of indigenous cultures, traditions, and Mahayana Philosophy is also very influential in Bhutan today. It plays a vital role in how Bhutan approaches the meeting with the modern world. One example is the Bhutanese government's well-known endeavor to find an alternative to 'modern' forms of evaluating or measuring (in modernity often related to economics, for example, Gross Domestic Product) the well-being and even happiness of a group of people. The Bhutanese alternative is called Gross National Happiness and is also inspired by the idea of interdependence. Furthermore, In Bhutan, happiness (*Gha*) is often connected with the notion of peace (*Key*) in a single expression, *Gha-Key*. That implies that happiness is strongly related to the idea of peace and, further, that peace is not only related to a state of affairs in the world but also a state of mind. A third example is the idea that the introduction of modern technology should be implemented in a purposeful and meaningful way, concerning both civil society and respecting and supporting the living resonance with nature.

The conference theme in a worldwide context.

These ideas, which relate to 'interdependence,' are also relevant to consider in a broader context. Firstly, regarding the idea of humans co-existing in resonance with living nature and other beings, how are we to perceive, express, and understand such entanglements of embodied beings. Secondly, the importance of the idea that there are alternatives to economic 'standards' when one wants to evaluate well-being and happiness. Thirdly, there is a close relationship between joy and inner and outer peace. Finally, the technological and social acceleration of modern ways of life should be met by and related to meaningful and purposeful ways to live in resonance with the world. Therefore, the conference theme and these related ideas are also intended to inspire reflection and research on various and alternative futures of education, culture, and nature beyond the Bhutanese and Buddhist contexts. It might be challenging to imagine what these futures could look like in light of interdependence; hence the theme is *reimagining* interdependence.

Subthemes of the conference

The conference further has three subthemes:

Subtheme 1: Reimagining interdependence in and in-between worldviews and cosmologies in the Anthropocene

This subtheme concerns the interdependencies and entanglements of education, culture, and nature in and in between worldviews. It examines the global biodiversity of knowledge, worldviews, and cosmologies in light of the Anthropocene. The idea of the Anthropocene relates to the interdependency of everything on the planet while it at the same time emphasizing the scale of human impact on all life on earth and the geological bone structure of the planet Earth itself.

We are, so to speak, leaving the last 11000 years of the Holocene and entering something new – the Anthropocene. That requires responsible human action, but at the same time, this response is not easy to give, as the situation is unique and unprecedented. We have to reimagine, among other things, the relationship between culture and nature, between human and non-human existence, and the role of education and edification.

Modern philosophers and theorists of science interested in the idea of the Anthropocene have introduced ideas of entanglements between humans and non-humans and the need to 'make kin' across species. Others have pointed out that we should realize that we already and always had lived in a metaphysics of mixture with non-human life and called for a reorientation of perception, expression, and understanding of ourselves as embodied beings. Such ideas raise profound questions regarding the cosmological assumptions in modernity.

However, as indicated, as is the case in Bhutan, the idea of co-existing in resonance with living nature, between humans and non-humans, can also be found in various elder worldviews worldwide. That raises questions regarding how that perceived the interdependence of living beings in these elder and newer worldviews had influenced the relations between (formal and informal) education, culture, and nature. How and what can we learn from insights from these worldviews, and how can it impact education?

But it also, in a planetary crisis, raises questions regarding how we are to perceive the relations *between* worldviews. How can these various worldviews – and their inhabitants be related? How can modern and not-so-modern worldviews meet each other? How can a global, planetary *infrastructure* (to paraphrase UNESCO's new report *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*) be established regarding the various Futures of Education, Culture, and Nature in the Anthropocene?

Subtheme 2: Planetary interdependence and Sustainable development, the 6Ps, SDGs, and ESD

The notion that everything is connected interdependently is embedded in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in Agenda2030 in at least two ways. Firstly, all 17 SDGs relate to each other across the 5Ps (*people, planet, prosperity, partnership, and peace*) mentioned in the preamble to Agenda 2030. Secondly, the various places on the earth are interdependently related so far that they all play a role in realizing planetary, sustainable development. However, the idea of connecting happiness, inner and outer peace, and the idea that modern ways of life can perhaps, in meaningful and purposeful ways, cast a fruitful perspective on the interdependence of the 17 SDGs and the 5Ps. Firstly one might consider the relation between happiness and inner and outer peace more thoroughly, thereby casting new light also on the relationship between sustainable development and peace. In the preamble to Agenda2030, that is also an important idea: 'without peace no sustainable development, and with sustainable development no peace.'

Further, attention to how we approach the challenges of modernity for realizing sustainable development in a meaningful way might not only concern education, culture, and nature in general. Economics and technology, but might likewise be related to various notions of inner and outer peace, happiness, and purpose. How we conceive such ideas also steers different hopes for futures of education, culture, and nature, both in theory and practice. We might perhaps add a sixth P to the 5Ps, namely *purpose* (purpose here not understood not as a given goal but as existential meaningfulness). So how can we conceive planetary interdependence and sustainable development as relating to the 17 SDGs and the 6Ps; what impact will such ideas have on practical work on sustainable development, and how could such an idea impact education for sustainable development (ESD)

Subtheme 3: Reimagining interdependence and integration of 'Head, Heart, and Hands' in various forms and types of education

The third subtheme concerns the reimagination of interdependence regarding the integration of 'Head, Heart, and Hand' in a particular form of education, namely education, which to a substantial degree involves applied and experiential learning. This kind of education combines in-depth study with practical experience and training. Therefore, it is also often well-connected with the surrounding environment, society and culture. The 'hands-on experience means that this form of education also typically involves a form of material knowledge, involving not only 'thinking' (head) but also will (hand), and embodied feeling, emotions, and potential resonance with the world (heart). Further, besides the valorization resulting from activities involving 'head, heart, and hand' in embodied learning and creation, this kind of education (and work) is often concerned with creating value for others, thereby sculpturing the world we live in into a 'social sculpture.' Universities of Applied Science, polytechnic, and vocational higher education institutions are all characterized by offering education that involves applied and experiential learning and training. Still, it can also be found in various forms of crafts education, art education, and traditional forms of education.

One type of question in subtheme3 concerns how this particular kind of education can be developed as Education for Sustainable Development or education in the Anthropocene. The 'material' embeddedness and the involvement of the surrounding world raise questions regarding how we are to understand the idea of creating values for others in a sustainable direction (which values are needed?). These questions become even more challenging when considering them in light of the Anthropocene (is it for humans or all sentient beings in the Critical Zones of Life, the value is created, and is it humans alone that 'create' value?).

However, besides these questions, another type of question concerns the sustainability and viability of applied and experiential learning itself. How are we to preserve, develop and/or transform applied and experiential learning in a way that gives room not only for 'head' and 'hands' but also the 'heart' and resonance considering that we live in an age of rapid modernization, and social acceleration. This question concerns what 'comes after' the aesthetics in traditional craftsmanship and how we are to 'sculpt' futures of education, culture, and education. Finally, what role could this kind of education play in what UNESCO has called the new Global Infrastructure of Education? Could this UNESCO agenda open up new possibilities for development and interaction *between* various educational traditions for applied and experiential learning (instead of a 'one size fits all 'Global Educational Policy')?

For more inspiration on possible perspectives on the conference theme and the subthemes, see the Call for Papers on the conference website.

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