

Education as ethical action in the polycrisis

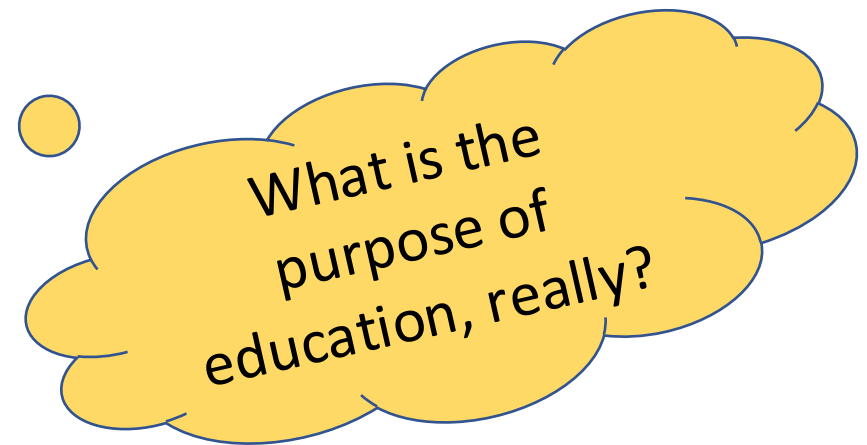
Lausanne Olvitt

04 August 2025

GEEP Webinar



How do my students need to think,
what do they need to think about,
and what do they need to be able to
do, if we are to have any chance
of achieving socially and ecologically
regenerative and just societies?



Global Polycrisis: a complex, interconnected set of crises that transcend national borders and require a coordinated, global response.

Global risks ranked by severity over the short and long term

"Please estimate the likely impact (severity) of the following risks over a 2-year and 10-year period."

Risk categories

- Economic
- Environmental
- Geopolitical
- Societal
- Technological

2 years

1 st	Misinformation and disinformation
2 nd	Extreme weather events
3 rd	State-based armed conflict
4 th	Societal polarization
5 th	Cyber espionage and warfare
6 th	Pollution
7 th	Inequality
8 th	Involuntary migration or displacement
9 th	Geoeconomic confrontation
10 th	Erosion of human rights and/or civic freedoms

10 years

1 st	Extreme weather events
2 nd	Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse
3 rd	Critical change to Earth systems
4 th	Natural resource shortages
5 th	Misinformation and disinformation
6 th	Adverse outcomes of AI technologies
7 th	Inequality
8 th	Societal polarization
9 th	Cyber espionage and warfare
10 th	Pollution

Source

World Economic Forum Global Risks
Perception Survey 2024-2025.



World Social Forum, 2024:

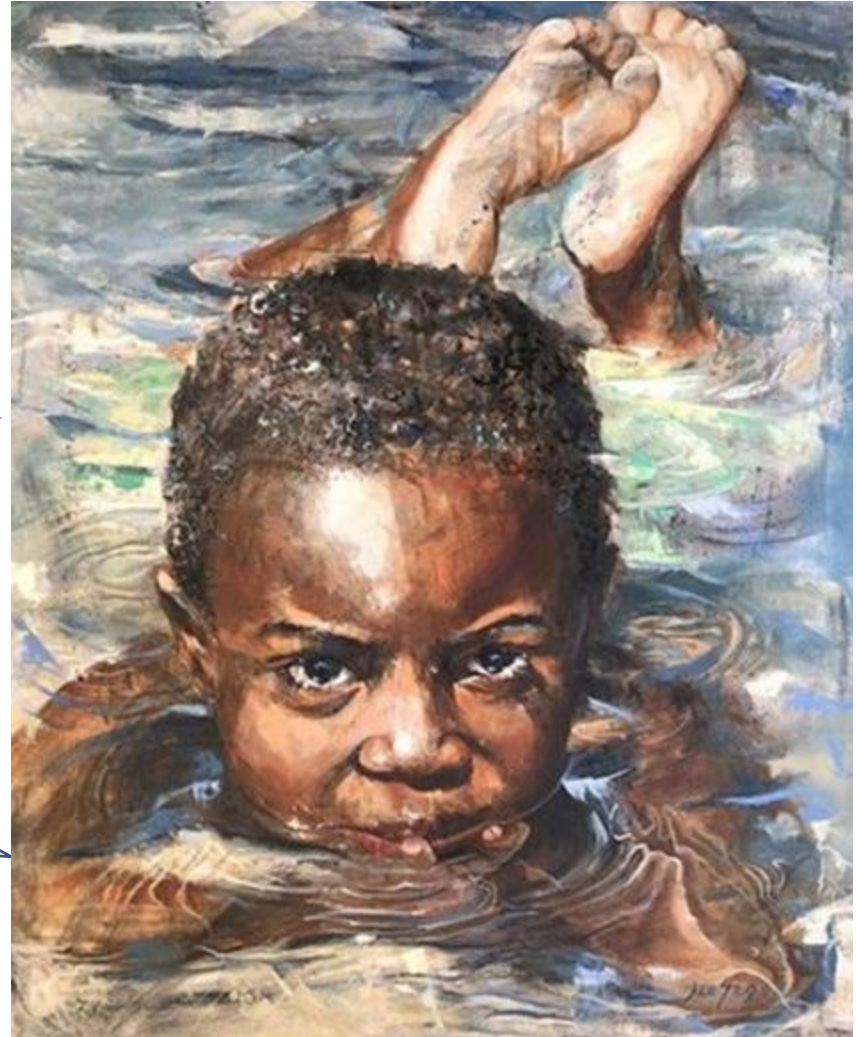
“We, the people of the planet, are currently facing an unprecedented environmental crisis coupled with rising inequality, widespread food insecurities, majoritarian violence, after-effects of the last pandemic and the threat of a future one, and escalating tensions between major powers. In fact, humanity is on the brink of multi-faceted calamities leading to the destruction of its own survival. Given the threat is real and urgent, **the ideals of the new world order that rests upon sustainability, dignity, co-existence, equality, and equity must be enacted and actualized**”.

The Common Good

Education as ethical action oriented to the Common Good

The Common Good refers to benefits that are shared by all (clean air, water, public health etc.) and are essential for everyone's well-being and flourishing.

It is a universal value that transcends individual interests and benefits.



Julie Stead

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As educators, we have a moral responsibility to use the power and privilege of our teaching practice (from curriculum design to pedagogy) to contribute to the Common Good.

*

There is no formula. No end point. No certainty.

*

We certainly need care, dialogue, creativity, a sense of adventure, and the company of others!



Personal view: subjectivity, emotion, embodiment, identity, moral commitment, agency and the subtleties of people's inner worlds



System view: interconnected networks and systems; structural aspects of society; resources; transactions; transitions



- Engeström, Y. (1990).
- Engeström, Y. & Sannino, A. (2012). *Concept formation in the wild.*
- Roth, W.M. (2007). *The ethico-moral nature of identity*

How might educators work more productively at the intersection of the system and the personal view?

Here, I touch on:

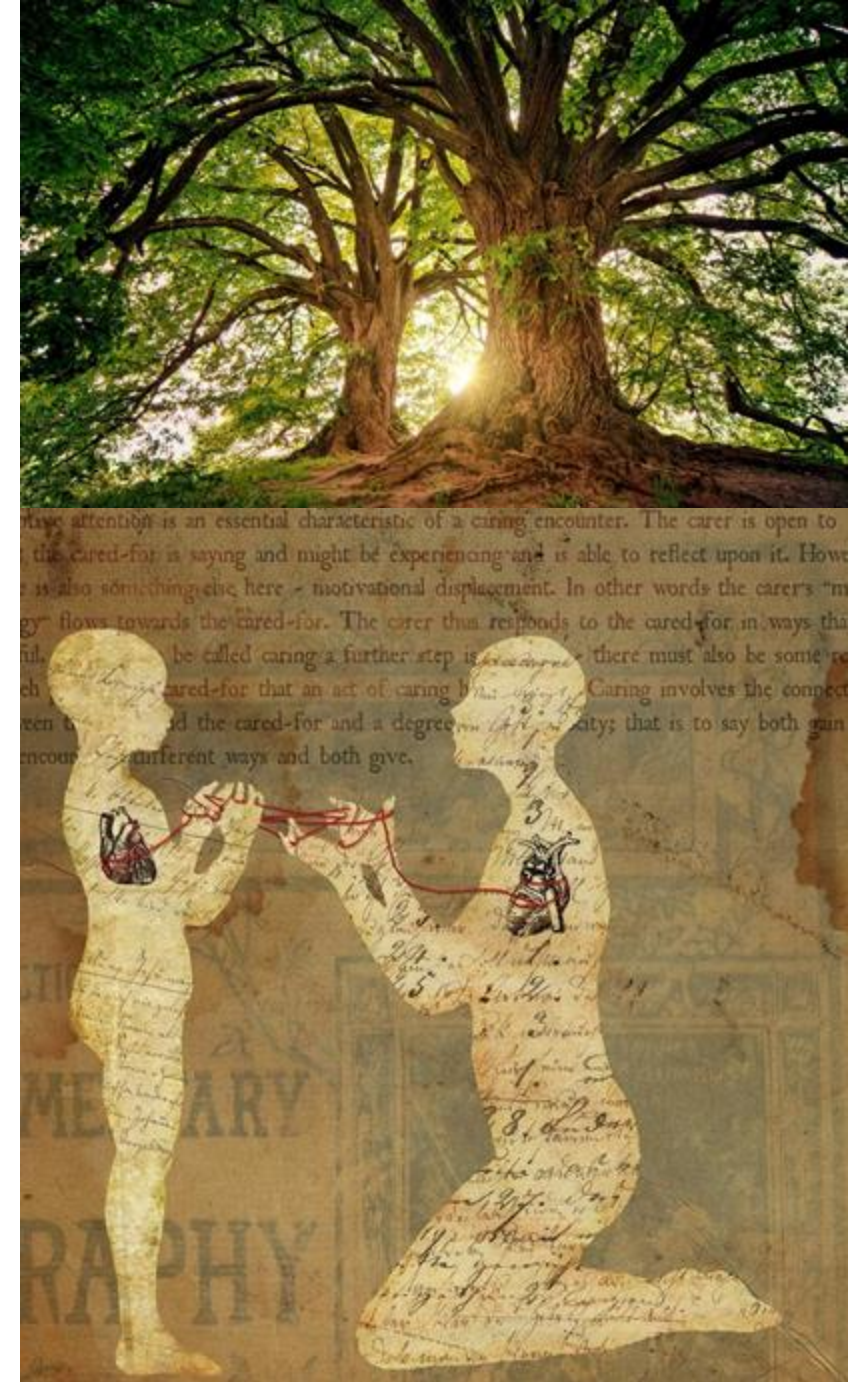
- *Relationality
- *Systems Thinking
- *Reflexivity

Relationality

- ✓ Acknowledges interconnectedness and interdependence in our world
- ✓ Complex web of relationships / entanglements
- ✓ Holistic
- ✓ Relationships are dynamic (changing over time in particular contexts; iterative)
- ✓ Antidote to individualism

“... We are made entirely of relationships, as is the whole of the natural world”.

(Spretnak, 2011, in Lange, 2018)



Relation-oriented education

- Whole-person (body, mind, emotion, spirit, will)
- This unlocks dispositions and skills our world urgently needs (e.g. empathy, reciprocity, reflexivity)
- Invites curiosity, attentiveness, care.
- Uncertain and sometimes daunting...
- More than shorthand for 'get in touch with our feelings' and 'be kind to one another'.
- Learning involves seeing more than just the parts; being attentive to the nature of the relationships between the parts.



e.g. Contextual profiling (PGDip class assignment)

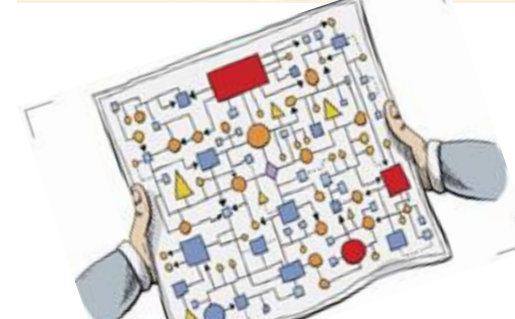
- Task precedes design of a small action research project; first connect with context.
- Multi-modal (sensory observation; historical artefacts; literature; interviews)
- Loosens the conventional 'academic approach' to contextual profiling
- Unexpectedly profound experience (cultural / political / spiritual) for some students.
- Needed careful debriefing ☐ time, trust; open dialogue; flexibility.
- Sustaining these teaching moments can be in tension with institutional pressures and personal capacities.

Systems Thinking

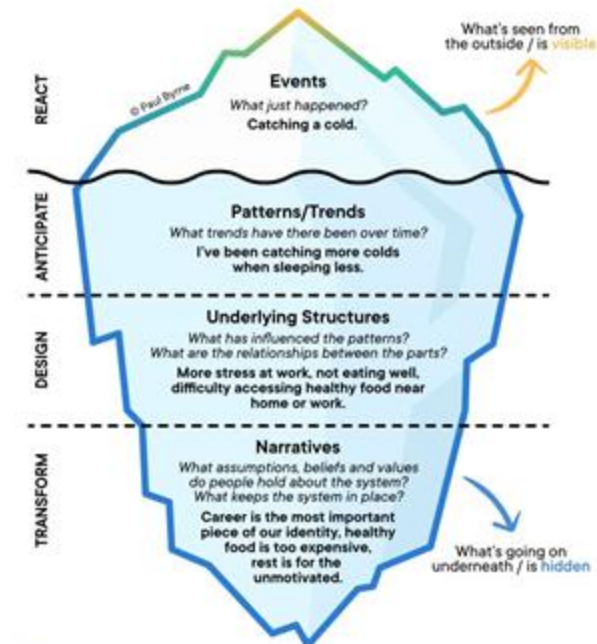
A system is "an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organised in a way that achieves something"

(Meadows & Wright, 2009)

- Anchored in a relational worldview
- Holding the macro, meso, micro in productive tension
- Responsive
- Non-linearity and emergence
- Coherence



The systemic thinking iceberg explained



Follow [Paul Byrne](#) for more insights on *Leadership, Teams, and Coaching*



PGDip-SL Local Excursion “systems thinking and sustainability”

***social-ecological** ***socio-economic** ***justice** ***sustainability** ***disrupts**
stereotypes & quick-fix solutions *** positivity matters** *****
contextually grounded *** complexity & messiness** ***cultural and historical**
perspectives ***cause-and-effect** *** leverage points**



Systems thinking is a key competence for sustainability transitions beyond the polycrisis

It helps people to:

- **Make sense of complex systems** at different scales [macro, meso, micro], and across domains [society, economy, ecology, governance etc.]
- **Recognise interconnections and patterns** in physical / observable things [water infrastructure; rainfall; vandalised taps] and in values, motives, cultural conventions etc.

Reflexivity

“As academics, managers, and students, we spend a lot of time focusing on what to do, the techniques, theories, models we can apply to be more effective and efficient. But what if we begin to think about who to be? If we can figure out what it means to be a good, ethical, moral person in a good, ethical, and just organization, then what to do may look different. Engaging in this type of discussion involves both self- and critical reflexivity.”.

Cunliffe (2016, p. 742)

- ❑ *To be self-reflexive* ? about our own beliefs, values, nature of our relationships with others, what we say, and how we treat them
- ❑ To be *critically reflexive* ? about organisational practices, policies, social structures, and knowledge bases.

Developing our students' (and our own) reflexivity often requires...

- Situatedness in authentic context
- Authentic relationships
- Time!
- Detailed and thoughtful feedback
- Transparency and openness
- Respectful and 'safe' teaching & learning environments
- Mediating students' exposure to diversity, complexity, uncertainty and adversity

All shaped by the curriculum and wider context of higher education:



Weaving Relationality, Systems Thinking & Reflexivity

Weaving these principles in educational processes can:

- Lead students to 'see the big picture' and engage complexity, while supported with suitable concepts and skills to make sense of it, not be overwhelmed by it.
- Acknowledge the fullness of who we are as embodied, feeling, vulnerable dreamers and change agents within the polycrisis.
- Bring ourselves into conversation and interaction with the world.
- Enrich inter- and transdisciplinary learning opportunities

This is not easy! It will certainly be imperfect and incomplete.

My examples are particular to my discipline, my personality, my colleagues...

But... it's an invitation!

I believe that the principles of relationality, systems thinking, and reflexivity are sufficiently robust and elastic for all educators to be “put to work” in their discipline and context.



Relationality

Ethical action

Authenticity

Dialogical approaches

Reflexive practice

Care

Navigating the tensions

Personal View

Re-imagining pedagogy

Course design

micro, meso, macro systems

Global polycrisis

Context matters

Sustainable futures

System View

Resonance

Systems thinking

Just transitions

The Common Good