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Education, Arts and Sustainability

Emerging Practice for a Changing World



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Education, Arts and Sustainability

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About the Authors

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Arnold April comes from a background in professional theatre as an award-winning director, producer, and playwright. He founded the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) in 1993 and the Radical Compliance Arts and Learning Laboratory in 2013. He is also one of the co-designers of Habla: the Center for Language and Culture in Merida, Mexico. He has taught at the University of Chicago, National Louis University, the University of Mississippi, Columbia College, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is one of the co-authors of *Renaissance in the Classroom: Arts Integration and Meaningful Learning* and is a contributor to the *Routledge International Handbook of Creative Learning*. He consults nationally and internationally on the role of the arts in effective school improvement as well as on manageable and useful approaches to arts learning assessment. He has been recognised for exceptional leadership by the Chicago Community Trust and by the Leadership for a Changing World initiative, supported by the Ford Foundation. He worked as a senior specialist in arts integration and documentation with the University of Tasmania, the University of Melbourne, and the University of Sydney through the Fulbright Scholars program.

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Chapter 1

A Conversation on the Possibilities for Arts and Sustainability Education

How to open a book? We have spent much time thinking and rethinking about how we might begin a book that blends the ideas, passions, critiques, and voices of four authors from diverse backgrounds and scholarly traditions, as well as those of the many more educators and young people who have engaged in the creative projects we document here. It has been a daunting, enjoyable, and at times confronting process to stay open to wild thinking and sometimes uncomfortable critique. Central to our collective effort was a commitment to a spirit of inquiry and dialogue—a spirit made all the more necessary when, in the closing stages of the manuscript’s preparation, there was an arresting change in the dynamic of the world’s political leadership; a change with as yet unknown impacts that reach to the very heart of this text.

The twenty-first century has been characterised by rapid change and ever-increasing global uncertainty. The trauma associated with human migration of such a large scale, the shifts in our understandings of what it means to be human in a more-than-human world, and the rise of economic systems that seek to divide and conquer cultural and social distinctiveness and respect for difference, unsettles many of us committed to the principles of sustainability. So to open a book—as a writer or a reader at this time—especially a book that intentionally invites an engagement with processes of change towards sustainable futures, has become an intensified task. One-size-fits-all recipes or narratives with grandiose claims of change are neither attractive nor useful to those of us grappling with the educational complexities of meeting the individual and collective needs of learners and communities in such a context. Yet the grand narratives of economic progress, individualism, and dissociation from our planet’s fragile future are what dominate. We face heightened challenges with the world’s new political environment, yet as authors we remain hopeful about the transformational possibilities of integrating arts and sustainability pedagogies for initiating change that matters. We are cautious of promoting this integration as a panacea for troubled times, but here we describe

compelling examples of practices that are specific to real people, places, and contexts; where arts education and the principles of sustainability education meet to offer collectively wider impact and significance. While we are mindful of the situated nature of these case studies, we strongly believe that to open a book with principles of practice is an important act. To write of the core principles of sustainability (participation, partnerships for change, critical thinking, systems thinking, and envisaging better futures), and to make public our discussion on how these principles are already embedded in these case examples of teacher practice in the arts, feels even more important now than when we began our book conversation some years ago.

For some time, we (the authors) had been researching and practicing, individually and together, on the edge of the interdisciplinary fields of creative learning and education for sustainability. Our experiences had led us to become increasingly concerned about the direction of contemporary educational policy and, more broadly, about the prospects for future generations living and learning on this planet. Some of us had been immersed in forward-thinking dialogue about how teachers might best address issues of sustainability in their teaching, particularly as research findings were telling us that sustainability education was largely ad hoc in practice (Hill and Dymont 2016; Dymont et al. 2015), and mostly interpreted through narrow “environmental” understandings of good civic behaviour such as recycling and composting. Others of us had experienced and researched arts initiatives that demonstrated profound impacts on young people’s sense of belonging to a world bigger than themselves (see the work of Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (www.capeweb.org) and Habla Center for Language and Culture (www.habla.org) as well as Hunter 2008, 2015; Hunter and Emery 2015). We had also experienced disappointments when highly successful initiatives in schools had been discontinued as a result of cuts in government investment in many areas of education, the arts, and sustainability. The idea for this book arose from a conversation around these issues while planning for a teacher professional learning event in Tasmania, Australia, on the intersections between the arts and education for sustainability. Seeded by Sherridan Emery who at the time was completing a Masters project on the topic, the UTAS Arts and Sustainability Professional Learning Day was hosted by University of Tasmania researchers, Mary Ann Hunter (arts education) and Allen Hill (outdoor and sustainability education) with visiting Fulbright Senior Scholar, Arnold Aprill, who was founder of Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education. Collaboration, creativity, and dialogue were at the heart of our planning for the day-long event and were manifest in a number of ways in the day’s schedule. For example, the keynote presentation became a conversational dialogue and the hands-on workshops were styled as open-ended enquiries rather than showcases of practice, with facilitators acting as provocateurs rather than experts.

At the time the event was held, Mary Ann and Arnold were part-way through a journey around Tasmania conversing with artists and teachers about creativity in