Australian Journal of Environmental Education, vol. 30(1), 62–63, 2014

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A Few Thoughts on Conceptual Analysis 30 Years Later

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I am enormously grateful to the readers of this journal for their kind attention to this work over the past 30 years. Conceptual analysis, the subject of my article, is primarily about clarifying meanings of those key concepts that are central to our collective work. Given the number of nebulous concepts in environmental education, and in education in general, this work has never ceased to be important — though, sadly, it is often neglected. Take, for example, a concept currently in vogue, *social learning*. Two ways of approaching this sometimes fuzzy concept would be, first, for authors to provide a clear articulation of the term, in their own view. What exactly does the idea of social learning involve for an author, and what are the implications for its use in the particular context in which it is used? This is a lot like clarifying one's own assumption about a concept for the benefit of the author and reader alike, and something we should be able to expect from all authors. Second, researchers can analyse the scope of a concept's usage within a body of literature, such as Rodela (2012) has done with social learning. This kind of analysis can provide a kind of heuristic for other researchers to navigate the extant usage of a key concept, and to point in future directions.

One could criticise conceptual analysis, based on its attention to linguistic usage, as a means of simply replicating the same old conceptualisations. But, as Rodela has demonstrated, concepts are understood and used in multiple ways. The spaces between these current usages can also point to new possibilities for understanding a concept, and for it to evolve (e.g., Jickling & Wals, 2008).

Conceptual analysis has never been about finding a single true meaning of a concept (Barrow & Woods, 1982; Jickling, 1997; Peters, 1966, 1973). For example, Barrow and Milburn (1986) have clearly said, 'the very idea of a true or correct conception (should) be set aside, and the business of analysis be seen as an essentially personal business' (p. 17). That is, it is one's own responsibility to do one's own analysis. And to declare that analysis — especially for concepts like 'education' — even if just framed as personal assumptions, adds a level of clarity, rigour, and honesty to the work. Avoidance of this kind of analysis based on rejections of truth seeking or metanarrative building is spurious.

A modernised approach to conceptual analysis is revealed in the first chapter of Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) book, *What is Philosophy?* In 'What is a concept?', they argue that concepts need to be created. In my own analysis of their somewhat enigmatic presentation, it seems that they are using 'create' in at least two ways. The first can be read as a need for altogether new concepts, much as David Abram rejected 'non-human' in favour of 'more-than-human' in a move towards new possibilities. The second points to the need for each of us to create, or construct, the concepts that we use, *through our own analysis*. In the latter task, it is remarkable how closely they parallel the thoughts and language of those who went before them. For these authors, it

https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2014.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seems, conceptual analysis is the necessary, ongoing, and personal creation of concepts. I agree.

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Biography

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https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2014.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press