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'Educating to transgress': ecotopian pedagogies for the Symbiocene

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ABSTRACT

With climate and biodiversity collapse accelerating, fundamental socio-ecological transformations are required as a matter of urgency. Education for sustainable development (ESD) positions education as an important context for tackling the ecological crisis. However, dominant ESD pedagogical approaches are insufficiently critical of the systemic drivers of unsustainability and the present ecocidal status quo. In this conceptual article, we bring together three intersecting critical-pedagogical traditions – critical, utopian and eco pedagogies – to build an ethico-political foundation for what we call 'ecotopian pedagogies'. Ecotopian pedagogies, as a theory and transformative political praxis, seek to fundamentally disrupt the systemic drivers of our ecocidal present, interrupt the replication of (neo)colonial and anthropocentric futures, and (re) ignite students' critical and imaginative capabilities for building multispecies-just worlds. We define 'ecotopian pedagogies' and structure this article around five values to serve as a non-didactic starting point for anyone who wishes to work with and develop them.

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Introduction: the mounting unsustainabilities of neoliberal capitalism

Sustainability is a contested concept with different conceptualisations and applications in diverse contexts (Virtanen, Siragusa, and Guttorm 2020; Vos 2007). Crucially, 'sustainability', like resilience (Firth 2022, 21–30; Ingalls and Stedman 2016), is not *inherently* desirable, especially if what one is sustaining is a system or process that is antithetical to terrestrial flourishing. 'Sustainable development', as established in the Brundtland Report (Brundtland 1987), is development that meets the needs of present generations without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Education for sustainable development (ESD) positions education as an important context for tackling the ecological crisis (United Nations 2025). Creating curriculum structures, content and learning outcomes to support sustainable development is inherently political and can 'allow us to look critically at how the world is and to envision how it might be, supporting

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learners to create and pursue visions of a better world' (Advance HE 2021, 8). However, this dominant 'crisis response' to embedding sustainability in Higher Education (HE) overlooks the destructive roles of capitalism, anthropocentrism, and related systems of oppression and extraction in fuelling contemporary unsustainability (Kahn 2008; Kopnina 2020). It therefore fails to tackle underlying causes and encourages us to focus on quick fixes that facilitate a return to the status quo (Cordero 2014; Van Dermijnsbrugge 2024). Indeed, decades of 'Sustainable development' and the associated belief in the reconcilability between endless economic expansion, material extractivism and biospheric integrity (Hickel 2020; Ward et al. 2016) have seen seven of the earth's nine planetary boundaries breached (Kitzmann et al. 2025), global biodiversity abundance in freefall (WWF 2024), accelerating climate disintegration, mounting extreme socioeconomic inequality and associated political destabilisations (Chancel et al. 2025). Meanwhile, young people are increasingly struggling to cope with climate and eco-anxiety (Hickman et al. 2021).

Seeing these issues playing out in our own universities in the UK and the Netherlands motivated us to set up a one-day event titled 'Ecotopian Pedagogies for the Symbiocene' in June 2025 at the University of Manchester, supported by the university's 'Teaching Innovation Fund'. The session brought together students and HE practitioners who shared the above concerns to explore pedagogical possibilities that might help our western colonial institutions break free from their 'straightjacket of economy-centred anthropocentric indoctrination' (Kopnina 2020, 8). With all of us hailing from privileged social backgrounds and being embedded in institutions that are built on colonial practices, we have a responsibility to not just acknowledge these circumstances, but actively seek ways to challenge them and work towards just alternatives that are diverse, plural and localised. Yet, it is inevitable that the ideas and perspectives that emerged from the discussions are implicated by our (institutional) backgrounds. The purpose of the session, and by extension this paper, is therefore not to offer a universally applicable framework, but to explore place-conscious (Gruenewald 2003) ecotopian pedagogical values in the spirit of the pluriverse (Escobar 2020; Querejazu 2016). The 'pluriverse' concept challenges the Western myth of the 'one-world world' (Escobar 2020, 14) and recognises the living earth as a dynamic world wherein many interconnected worlds, ways of being and possible realities coexist (Querejazu 2016). Therefore, the articulation of ecotopian pedagogies will undoubtedly look different depending on local and regional political, cultural, socioeconomic and socio-ecological specificities, and relationships between communities and the land. We see these diverse localised articulations of ecotopian pedagogies as enriching and essential for the convivial futures (Albrecht 2020) we so desperately need.

During the event, we shared and explored ideas for radically imaginative pedagogical approaches that help dismantle the ecocidal status quo and build multi-species-just presents and futures (Rupprecht et al. 2020). For the session, we applied 'utopia as method' as a methodological tool (Levitas 2013b; Van Dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier 2022) consisting of three modes: (1) archaeology (the critical analysis of historical and present gaps in a given reality); ontology (the excavation of existing ontologies that underpin 'reality' as presently constructed); and architecture (the process of imagining alternative futures that emerge in and from the present) (Levitas 2013a, b). The utopian method allows for rich

imaginations of alternative futures, as opposed to the short-term crisis responses that are prevalent in (educational) research practices (Van Dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier 2022). Data were recorded in the following ways: a shared Padlet with notes from the participants during and after the event; photographs of materials taking during the event; and personal notes. From these data, and through an iterative thematic analysis with our theoretical frameworks (critical, eco- and utopian pedagogies), we distilled the conceptual and practical ideas that are presented in this paper. In the sections that follow, we seek to build an ethico-political foundation for what we call ‘ecotopian pedagogies’ as a theory and transformative political praxis, drawing on rich literatures within three interconnected critical-pedagogical traditions: critical pedagogies (Freire 1996, 2014; Giroux 2007; hooks 2014), utopian pedagogies (Coté, Day, and De Peuter 2007; Firth 2013, 2016; Van Dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier 2022; Webb 2013, 2016, 2017), and ecopedagogies (Alberro 2024; Kahn 2010; Kopnina and Timothy 2024; Taylor 2020). These traditions that emerged as political horizons, were narrowed by the neoliberalisation of HE and its multiplying casualties (course closures and redundancies, instrumentalisation and commodification of education). Thus, it became vital to reclaim spaces in HE and beyond for keeping radical hope and possibilities alive.

Although extant bodies exist on critical, utopian, and eco pedagogies, there is currently no work explicitly bringing these threads together. Approaching pedagogy as a vital mode of political practice for challenging, rather than sustaining, an unjust status quo, *ecotopian pedagogies* seek to fundamentally disrupt the systemic drivers of our ecocidal present, interrupt the replication of (neo)colonial and anthropocentric futures (Stein et al. 2023), and (re)ignite students’ critical and imaginative capabilities for building multispecies-just worlds (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015). We define ‘ecotopian pedagogies’ and structure this article around five values to serve as a non-didactic starting point for anyone who wishes to work with and develop them. The values are derived from thematic analysis and theoretical engagement with the data recorded during the one-day event in combination with our reading of the relevant literature and previous work (Alberro 2024). They should not be read as a fixed framework for ecotopian pedagogical practices, but as guidelines that can be adapted and modified, based on local sensitivities and context-specific circumstances. The five values are: anti-hegemonic and collective; radically imaginative; multi-species oriented; multimodal; contingent and cyclical. These values can offer conceptual and practical guidance to educators, students, researchers, and activists interested in undertaking ecotopian pedagogical praxis. Starting from these values, we develop a working definition of ecotopian pedagogies, and offer practical examples based on our own experiences as educators in HE, for nurturing critical and imaginative enquiry, and developing ‘paths of possibility’ for socio-ecological transformations (Barnett 2017, 114; Van Dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier 2022). We argue that what is needed are more inclusive (Mazzocchi 2020) and transformative approaches to sustainability aimed at sustaining life in its diverse forms and the earth’s regenerative capacity (Ingold 2024; Virtanen, Siragusa, and Guttorm 2020). Similarly, a radical change in values and worldviews wherein nature is not perceived in terms of ‘resources’, but rather as full of relatives (Whyte, Chris, and Marie 2018).

A brief contemporary heuristic of three interconnected pedagogical traditions

We believe that the following pedagogical traditions are all essential for creating a new framework for praxis that addresses the urgent need for transformative socio-ecological change: Critical Pedagogy, Ecopedagogy and Utopian Pedagogy. The future of humanity faces an existential threat from accelerating climate breakdown and the related crisis of collapsing biodiversity, defined as the variability of life in all its manifestations (Chivian and Bernstein 2008). The latest World Wildlife Fund Living Planet Report (WWF 2024) revealed a staggering 73% decline in the abundance of monitored vertebrate populations over the past 50 years. These losses are being fuelled by accelerating changes in land and sea use, unsustainable exploitation of species, and pollution, destroying the natural ecosystems vital for all species' well-being. This necessitates overhauling the prevailing socioeconomic paradigm of endless economic growth and overconsumption. One important (arguably vital) route for social change is transformative pedagogy, which fosters critical reflection on, and ethico-political engagement with, the world (Wrigley, Lingard, and Thomson 2012, 105). While HE pedagogy is recognised in critical and environmental literatures as crucial for major change (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015), there is a gap in the literature around exploring its potential role in fostering more respectful multispecies relations. We believe that these tensions can be addressed through productive interchanges between critical pedagogy (for its critique of institutional hierarchies and alienation); ecopedagogy (for its critique of the alienation between humans and nature) and utopian pedagogy (for its emphasis on hope and prefigurative change in the urgency of the present). Whilst there are very real tensions between these approaches, we believe they can be productive in our framing of ecotopian pedagogies, as we will illustrate in the following sections.

Critical pedagogies

Critical pedagogy straddles boundaries between disciplines, institutions and social movements. It is a philosophy of education, an international social movement, and a political/revolutionary strategy. Inspired by concerns over rising socioeconomic inequalities from the late 1960s, it developed and applied the concepts of critical theory to both the study and praxis of education and broader study of culture. Perhaps the most well-known critical pedagogue is Paulo Freire, whose 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1996) and wider prolific works centre around the idea that governments and powerful economic actors utilise education to maintain and reinforce structural relationships of oppression in their societies, which is reflected in the hierarchical and didactic nature of teacher–student relationships. Critical pedagogies, by contrast, emphasise the agency and experience of the oppressed, offering participatory methods for uncovering submerged critical consciousness for a shared critical standpoint (1996; 2014). In 'Pedagogy of Hope' (2014), Freire emphasises the importance of nurturing critical faculties in service of a concrete, diverse, radical politics (30) for dismantling systemic injustices. Critical pedagogies can take place within, against and beyond formal institutions (Cowden and Singh 2013). Critical pedagogues seek to foster more equitable and connected relationships between the

classroom and the world under transformation. One key domain involves challenging epistemic hierarchies that posit HE practitioners as sole possessors of a superior (objective) knowledge, with students as passive receptacles of information (McLaren et al. 2024). Rather, teaching and learning are fundamentally relational activities between actors with their own legitimate, though always limited, experiences of the world, and who expand and deepen their knowledge through dialogical interactions (Freire 2014, 38). Knowledge and education are also always inherently political and entangled with the world, including the biological sciences, ‘as if the phenomenon of life could be understood apart from its historical-social, cultural and political framework’ (Freire 2014, 68; McLaren et al. 2024, 5). These colonial dimensions are most starkly articulated in relation to Indigenous contexts. As American Indian Studies Professor John W. Tippeconnic (Comanche, Cherokee) remarks, formal Western Eurocentric education has long served as a ‘forceful weapon used by dominant powers to eradicate or weaken indigenous identity’ (in Estes 2024; Grande 2015, 36). By contrast, critical pedagogies are fervently anti-colonial, concerned with troubling epistemologies of domination alongside ‘capitalist, imperialist aims of unfettered competition, accumulation, and exploitation’ (Grande 2015, 26). Decolonial teaching and learning involve a commitment, following Spivak (2013), to ‘learn to learn from below, from the subaltern, rather than only study him (her)’ (439). Critical pedagogies thus ask: how have colonial imaginaries shaped the content, practice and aims of education (D. Bell 2022)? How do we teach not only without reinforcing, but rather, to transgress existing systems of domination (hooks 2014, 18)?

Utopian pedagogies

Underscoring the synergies between utopian and critical praxis, Freire (2014) observed that authentic utopias are those born of the tension ‘between the denunciation of a present becoming more and more intolerable, and the “annunciation” ... of a future to be created by us women and men’ (81). The concept of utopia, along with what ought to be transformed in any given time or place, has very wide and diverse interpretations (Levitas 1990a; Vogel and O’Brien 2022). When used here, we refer to ‘an ethos of experimentation that is oriented toward carving out spaces for resistance and reconstruction here and now’ (Coté, Day, and De Peuter 2007, 317). Like decolonisation, utopianism is a perpetual process (Grande 2015, 46), a dynamic constellation of becomings (Moylan 2020) and strivings to dismantle intersecting socio-ecocidal systems (Kwauk and Casey 2022, 52). Utopian discourses have been heralded as a useful (even an essential) perspective from which to approach aspects of educational theory, policy and practice’ (Cooper 2013; Egmore, Gleeup, and Birger 2020; Fielding and Moss 2011; Firth 2013; Papastephanou 2024; Peters and Freeman-Moir 2006; Van Dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier 2022; Webb 2013, 2016; 2017, 551). They fit the idea of an ‘education of desire’ (Levitas 1990b, 106–130), which involves a re-imagination of the status quo along more socio-ecologically just trajectories (Freire 2014; hooks 2014; Sargisson 2002; Vogel and O’Brien 2022, 656). The speculative process of imagination offers a vital means to transgress the ‘taken-for-grantedness of present

conditions' (Levitas 2013b) and re-examine the open-ended possibilities that always constitute 'reality'. While utopian pedagogies take different forms (Coté, Day, and De Peuter 2007; Firth 2013), we draw on Webb's (2017) framing: they create 'space for the exploration of desires, longings and hopes, and for drawing out utopian possibilities within concrete experience ... a pedagogy aimed at liberating the imagination as to the possibilities for systemic change' (553). This requires methodological tools – utopia as method, systems thinking, futures thinking, transdisciplinary approaches (Levitas 1990a; 2013b; Van Dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier 2022) – that re-ignite individual and collective agencies for tackling intersecting societal issues.

Eco-pedagogies

Utopian and critical pedagogical traditions to varying degrees remain too human-centred and often assume an essential/essentialising human nature from which critique and resistance must proceed (A. C. Bell and Russell 2000; Misiaszek 2023). Thus, eco-pedagogies (Kahn 2010; Misiaszek 2017; Taylor 2020), or 'total liberation pedagogies for sustaining life' (Kahn 2008, 11), seek to 'counteract the conceits and dangerous delusions of human separation and dominion that are perpetuated by dominant Western-style education systems and which have caused the current ecological crises' (Taylor, Zakharova, and Cullen 2021, 86). Eco-pedagogies combine Freirean aims of social justice (Freire 1996, 2014) with a 'future-oriented ecological politics' that radically opposes the globalisation of neoliberalism and imperialism, and promotes eco-centric values, and ecological citizenship (Ajaps 2023; Kahn 2008, 8). An ecocentric orientation is rooted in reciprocity and a recognition of one's essential relatedness to other earth beings across vast spatial-temporalities (Biermann and Townsend-Cross 2008, 150; Kimmerer 2013; Lin et al. 2023). In addition to embedding ecological justice and post-anthropocentric lenses and content throughout curricula, this can take the form of many different activities inside and outside of the classroom. For instance, one of the authors deploys an activity called 'Agencies Abound' in her undergraduate (UG) modules on sustainability, wherein students are asked to select an area (i.e., near campus or their place of residence) and take notes on who they encounter, recording as much information as they can. This activity is inspired by place-based eco-pedagogical approaches (Gruenewald 2003; Taylor, Zakharova, and Cullen 2021) and NxumaloNxumalo's practice of 'refiguring presences', which aim to 'bring back into consciousness the presence of those who are often forgotten or rendered invisible' (Taylor, Zakharova, and Cullen 2021, 76). Such engaged pedagogical practices that honour the whole learner and mimic living systems are essential for fostering socio-ecological sustainability transformations (Burns 2015, 262). Moreover, engaging in the 'language and practice of animacy' (Tran et al. 2025, 49) in our everyday lives, such as acknowledging other-than-human personhood (i.e., referring to other animals as 'they/them' rather than 'it') (Harvey 2021, 127), can transform how we relate to the world in profound ways. As we discuss below, ecotopian pedagogies are fundamentally rooted in and seek to nourish the diverse socio-ecological assemblages that enable our existence.

‘All living is relationship’: speculations on ecotopian pedagogies

In this section, we articulate what ecotopian pedagogies might look like, structuring our vision around five values that might serve as non-didactic guidance for anyone who wishes to work with and develop them. The underpinning values of ‘ecotopian pedagogies’ are anti-hegemonic and collective; radically imaginative; multi-species oriented; multimodal; contingent and cyclical. These values could offer conceptual and practical guidance to educators within and beyond Higher Education settings, who wish to engage in the transformative and imaginative work the current moment requires. Equally, we hope to offer students, researchers, activists, social movements, affinity groups, community groups and beyond, a starting point for doing ecotopian pedagogical work. The five proposed values are followed by three practical examples.

Working across traditions and from different perspectives inevitably leads to some productive tensions and contradictions. We endeavour to be explicit where this is the case and to explore these with a critical lens, being clear on our positions as authors in relation to various philosophical and theoretical differences within and between the literatures. Nevertheless, our focus is on building a coherent and practical vision for transformative ecopedagogical praxis.

Anti-hegemonic and collective: within, against, and beyond the neoliberal university

Following the critical pedagogical tradition, which focuses on the critique of institutional hierarchies, ecotopian pedagogies require an anti-hegemonic and collective approach. Critical pedagogues argue that spaces such as universities are limited in their capacity to engage in transformative work (Amsler 2008; Ellsworth 2005; Freire 1972; hooks 2003, 2024). Anti-hegemonic and collective approaches can be applied in our attempts to tackle intersecting injustices across different spaces: ‘within, against, and beyond’ (Cowden and Singh 2013) the neoliberal university.

From *within*, we practice what Bojesen and Suissa (2019) term ‘minimal utopianism’, wherein we facilitate students to imagine new ways of being in the world, encouraging an understanding of existing socioeconomic contingencies as malleable and open to radical change through collective action (295). Operating from within the university, though often challenging its structures, offers opportunities to think critically about the institution itself and instigate change from within, whilst also building links with radical possibilities that may lie against and beyond it.

Working *against* the university can be articulated through diverse modes of collective direct-action. These include strikes for better working conditions, boycotts against unethical political ties of universities (Hiltner et al. 2024) such as the divestment movement, and resistance against the uncritical implementation of genAI (Guest et al. 2025) considering its myriad socio-ecological harms. Such forms of activism function as a collective refusal to accept the status quo within which the neoliberal university operates. Wider societal direct-action initiatives

concerned with women's rights, decolonisation politics, environmentalism, queer politics, etc. are all considered to be part of the intersecting ecotopian pedagogical praxis.

Operating within and against the university reveals the possibility of what lies *beyond* the institution. Our solidarity with other social movements as well as non-institutionalised educational spaces can be exemplified through our disruptive collaboration with and inclusion of the work that happens across a wider social landscape. This work reveals the hope and prefigurative work that lies at the heart of utopian pedagogies and plays a central activating role in ecotopian praxis.

Radically imaginative: illuminating paths of possibility

Ecotopian pedagogies involve fundamental critiques of the harms, 'public secrets', gaps and deficiencies of the prevailing status quo (Taussig 1999), alongside imaginative projections and instantiations of desirable socio-ecological alternatives. Within the disjuncture between what is and what might be, radical possibilities abound. Critical thinking skills, facilitated by theoretical lenses such as critical posthumanism, ecocentrism, queer, decolonial and feminist political ecologies become crucial for sharpening one's gaze. As a result, we might better recognise protracted injustices as well as the silences, backgroundings and omissions that constitute forms of slow violence (Nixon 2011), such as air pollution and neoliberal austerity policies.

However, as Tuck (2009) poignantly argues, it is also crucial to move to a 'desire-based framework' wherein we do not fetishise damage and degeneration but celebrate survival, hope and regeneration (416). Hence, imaginative or 'futures' thinking, which involves critically exploring the vast, open-ended terrain of possibilities that always surrounds and constitutes any given reality.

Here, we draw on an understanding of imagination as a collective process rather than a property of individuals (Van Dermijnsbrugge 2024). This view reveals that all social forms are collectively imagined – laws, money, schools – and that although they seem permanent, these forms really are 'the temporary solidifications of the (shared) radical imagination' (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 6). Once we acknowledge that 'social forms are a temporarily shared imagined landscape' (216), their principles and practices can be reimagined at any given point. Deploying ecotopian pedagogical praxes against and beyond the university paves the way for the co-creation of just multispecies alternatives through actively applying the radical imagination.

Multi-species oriented: working towards the Symbiocene

The adjective 'ecotopian' in 'ecotopian pedagogies' is derived from a combination of 'ecological' with 'utopias'. Ecotopias involve radical critiques of the socio-ecological deficiencies of the (neo)colonial-capitalist present and instantiations of more ethical and sustainable human/nature relations (Alberro 2024). However, a spectrum of many shades of green abounds (Garforth 2018). More technocratic (eco)utopias like Alexander Bogdanov's 'Red Star' (Bogdanov 1984) envision socio-ecological harmony and abundance through technological advancements (Benjamin 2024). By contrast, 'deep green

utopias' like Aldous Huxley's 'Island' and Starhawk's 'The Fifth Sacred Thing' urge a 'critical, vigilant, scrutinising attitude' (Freire 2014, 122; Illich 1973) towards technology and emphasise the importance of value shifts in engendering more egalitarian relations between humans and other beings (Firth and Preston 2025).

Contemporary green speculative fiction by indigenous and activist communities such as Mykaela Saunders' 'This All Come Back Now' (Saunders 2022) and Grist's 'Imagine 2200' climate fiction series (Grist 2026) often underscores the transformative potential of kinship ethics (Tran et al. 2025; Whyte 2020) for informing more caring and respectful relations with the other-than-human world. 'Multispecies justice' (Haraway 2008) thus emerges as a key unifying framework for ecotopian pedagogies, which encompasses all earth beings – and by extension questions regarding their present and future flourishing – as 'quintessentially relational' (Tschakert et al. 2021, 5).

As a counterpoint to the current ecocidal assault on life and its myriad potentialities, philosopher Glenn Albrecht gestures towards the 'Symbiocene' as a vision of a desirable, more liveable future (2020, 21). In a Symbiocene, we might direct our efforts to aiding and affirming life-like processes, to total integration and respectful conviviality with Earth others through cooperative and caring emotions, rather than resting on assumptions of superiority and separation (21–22). Ecotopian pedagogies seek to realise these convivial futures.

Multimodal: feel-think experiences

Multimodal representations including text, sound, visuals, colour and gestures are important strategies for ecotopian pedagogical praxis as they support the development of pluriversal (Escobar 2020; Querejazu 2016) concepts, practices, and imaginative perspectives for alternative world-building. They allow for artistic expressions and aesthetic appreciation, modalities often undervalued in the neoliberal university (Salmenniemi, Porkola, and Ylöstalo 2024).

Multimodalities can also facilitate more-than-human voices by decentring 'the human as the sole learning subject and exploring the possibilities of interspecies learning' (Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw 2015, 2) using text, sound, visuals, gestures and colours. A more accurate term for the effects of multimodal representations would be 'feel-think' (Allen et al. 2022, 455), or the cultivation of 'sensibilities and affections that see the human and non-human world as interdependent and in constant flow' (455). That is, tentative knowledge arises through our intimate, embodied participation in the world (Firth 2016). For instance, activities that enjoin students to become attentive to the agencies that surround and constitute them. Feel-think experiences also involve acknowledging and valuing emotive experiences like grief and rage over the ecocidal tides sweeping the globe as legitimate and productive experiences.

Multimodality, in connection with the radical ethos that underpins ecotopian pedagogies, facilitates an interdisciplinary approach which challenges the discipline-oriented, rationalist and individualist Enlightenment model in which contemporary Western education is rooted. Other-than-Western onto-epistemologies, such as Indigenous worldviews, can be a source of inspiration for considering other-than-human worlds as agentic and dynamic assemblages of earth kin, rather than as

a mere resource base (Kimmerer 2013; Tran et al. 2025; Whyte 2020). To avoid epistemic extractivism, epistemologies from the Global South should be engaged with in ways that 'do not present it as a supplement or footnote, but as an equal albeit different way of knowing' (Ajapa 2023, 1028–29).

Contingent and cyclical: the science and ethics of relationship

In our articulation of utopian pedagogies, we utilise utopia as an 'activating presence' that allows us to consider how we might create a society that qualitatively differs from the current one (Aidnik and Hviid Jacobsen 2019, 28). However, reimaginings of a radically different society should remain provisional and contingent, requiring a willingness to rethink our own assumptions based on the changes, rhythms and cycles of the world around us (Levitas 2013b).

A clear example of this cyclical and relational way of being in the world appears in Aldous Huxley's ecotopian novel 'Island' (Huxley 2005). In the society of Pala, education is ecological and engages the whole person – both mind and body – to help individuals develop their diverse capacities and ways of living in the world (208). Crucially, early childhood education begins with lessons in ecology: 'Never give children a chance of imagining that anything exists in isolation. Make it plain from the very first start that all living is relationship. Show them relationships in the woods, in the fields, in the ponds and streams, in the village and the country around it' (211). Education does not aim to prepare people for heavy industry or military work. Instead, it focuses on the 'sciences of life', which help people learn how to live 'as fully human beings in harmony with the rest of life on this island' (210). Acknowledging the importance of an interdisciplinary education grounded in the rhythms of the environment as well as social sciences and humanities, the 'science of relationship' is always taught 'in conjunction with the ethics of relationship' (211).

The above differs starkly from the guidelines offered by the World Bank (as one example of an hegemonic transnational organisation), who argue for an education that helps us 'to be better able to prepare for, cope with, and recover from shocks, including those related to extreme weather events' (Marin, Schwarz, and Sabarwal 2024, 30). Instead of focusing on honing the capabilities and responsibilities needed for building more caring and just worlds, they continue emphasising an educational model that 'has contributed to the ecological crises it seeks to mitigate' (Silova, Rappleye, and Komatsu 2025, 8).

In this section, we outlined our vision for ecotopian pedagogies structured around five defining values: anti-hegemonic and collective; radically imaginative; multi-species oriented; multimodal; contingent and cyclical. In what follows, we will attempt to make our vision and our framework more concrete by describing three practical examples undertaken by members of the authorial team and placing them within the analytic framework of these values.

Three examples of ecotopian speculative exercises

Mapping utopia: within and beyond universities

An example of collective world-building, which one of the authors, Rhiannon, has been facilitating for over a decade in various contexts, broadly titled variations on 'Mapping Utopia', facilitates participants to explore the tensions and possibilities of individual and collective dreaming. The exercise draws together utopian and (usually) ecological themes in the context of a format inspired by democratic education and critical pedagogy, and explicitly addresses the ecotopian pedagogical value of being radically imaginative.

This exercise has been entertaining, useful and educative/consciousness-raising in spaces beyond and within universities: it has been tried in social movement spaces ranging from radical social centres, an anarchist 'free skool' in a Hackney squat, an occupied art gallery (Temporary Autonomous Arts), and two autonomous academic conferences run by radical postgraduate students (*KnowledgeLab4* and *VI. Forschungswerkstatt Kritische Geographie*). It has been adapted to cover various different topics, including time and temporality (Firth and Robinson 2014); critical cartography (Firth 2014); and feminist body mapping (Firth 2016; Firth and Robinson 2016). It has also successfully formed a part of university module curricula in two different institutions. The description that follows provides more detail about its most current iteration as a participative seminar activity following a lecture on 'Feminist and Queer Utopias in Education', which has been running since 2021 at UCL Institute of Education, in an MA Sociology module 'Gender, Sexuality and Education'. The lecture is usually (though not always) the final lecture in the series with the intention of ending on an optimistic 'high note'. After introducing students to the history and debates around the concept of Utopia, particularly in the context of feminist and queer pedagogies (in literature, theory and social movement practice), the exercise encourages the students to engage their own individual and collective political imagination in a facilitated space intended to be non-hierarchical and democratic: Traits that connect directly to the anti-hegemonic and collective ecotopian pedagogical value base.

The exercise begins by asking students to spend some time in silent contemplation during which they must imagine – drawing together themes from the whole module, as well as the method of utopia – their own personal 'Gender, Sexuality and Education' utopia. They are encouraged to record their ideas either in writing, or even to begin to sketch them diagrammatically, encouraging multimodal expressions. Once they have settled on their individual utopia, they are put into groups. It helps – in terms of opening up more radical imaginaries – to move them to groups they would not normally self-select. In their groups, they are facilitated to present their utopias to one another, and to collectively discuss and negotiate how they can build these ideas into a collective, group utopia. During these conversations, artistic mediums are distributed so they can illustrate the layout of this utopia.

Although the exercise is not explicitly ecological, it almost invariably raises discussion of ecologies since it is spatially oriented and involves imagining oneself 'at home' in another environment. Students are primed to think about the

relationship between gender, colonial and environmental objectification, domination and extractivism. The exercise often raises conflicts, and it is exciting to see how students negotiate and resolve these. Recurring conflicts over the years have included: the balance of public/community and private space, with one student finding herself in a group with a very collectivist ethos and feeling the need to build herself a separate home on the outskirts to affirm her introversion and need for privacy. The group decided this was acceptable, and utopia should have processes to support members to build private homes. Students have also explored conflict over whether schools, and notions of the institutionalisation of education, and teacher/student authority and separation can be radically reformed (in order to perpetuate utopian values); or whether they must be abolished entirely. The creative visions of these discussions – and the need to negotiate and agree to the extent, which the vision can be committed to paper – are very much multi-modal, anti-hegemonic, and radically imaginative in the spirit of what we are positing as ‘ecotopian pedagogies’.

The shell management game

Another author, Helen, designed and leads ‘The Shell Management Game’ – a sustainability simulation embedded in Northumbria University’s Level 6 (UK final undergraduate year) module, ‘Strategic Leadership for Responsible Organisational Change’. It offers an opportunity for final-year business students to analyse the contradictions and complexities of corporate sustainability through an experiential, multi-stakeholder decision-making exercise. Students examine two possible pathways for Shell: Plan A, to resume Arctic drilling (after investigating and abandoning the plan in 2015); and Plan B, to expand investment in renewable energy. They are asked to critically evaluate how corporate, governmental, and ecological interests interact in shaping the company’s long-term direction.

This exercise specifically addresses the three ecotopian pedagogical values of multi-species thinking, multimodality, and a contingent and cyclical approach to strategic leadership. Students assume roles as Shell executives, shareholders, protestors, government representatives, and non-human stakeholders to debate and justify decisions. They are required to research Shell’s current sustainability reports, stakeholder positions, and policy environments, drawing on real-time data and media sources. The activity explicitly incorporates non-human perspectives by inviting students to represent affected species or ecosystems, and framing business strategies as an ethical and ecological practice rather than a purely economic exercise. Throughout this activity, students express their analysis in a multimodal approach. They produce a concise analytical report outlining their rationale for both strategic options, complemented by an oral artefact such as a video statement and stakeholder briefing, and a visual expression in the form of a campaign. This approach enables students to translate complex sustainability issues into accessible formats, fostering both analytical rigour and creative ecoliteracy. The game follows a contingent and cyclical approach, which also reflects the iterative nature of organisational change. Students must revise their proposals in response to stakeholder feedback, newly surfaced ethical dilemmas and environmental evidence, acknowledging uncertainty as a structural feature of sustainability leadership. Reflection on the process is

a key component, with students required to demonstrate how their understanding of responsibility evolved as competing stakeholder claims and ecological considerations came to the surface during their exchanges. By foregrounding dialogue, reflection, and adaptation, the exercise cultivates a capacity for ethical decision-making that recognises interdependence between human and more-than-human systems.

The practical activism project

Inspired in part by Silva and Students for Diversity Now's (Silva and Students for Diversity Now 2018) 'practical activism projects', another author, Heather, designed a 'sustainability praxis project' for the new hybrid, transdisciplinary undergraduate module 'Fundamentals in sustainability' at her institution (University of Manchester). For their class project, Silva's students were asked to collaborate on a project for social change, ultimately deciding on campaigning for a Diversity Centre at their university. The 'sustainability praxis project' liaises with the University of Manchester's University Living Lab (ULL 2025), spearheaded by Professor Jennifer O'Brien, which supports partnerships that connect the university's academic activities with non-academic partners. Through the ULL, students can co-produce research projects with external organisations to help them meet their sustainability objectives. In this instance, students are put into small groups and asked to select a 'sustainability challenge' set by a local government or civil society group such as Friends of the Earth Manchester. Once students elaborate a problem statement, delineating the key socio-ecological challenges faced by their chosen organisation, they collectively produce an analytical report exploring potential imaginative solutions to the challenges from a relevant justice lens – i.e., multispecies, planetary. The sustainability praxis project speaks especially to the 'anti-hegemonic and collective', 'radically imaginative', and 'multi-species-oriented' principles of ecotopian pedagogies. The assessment promotes anti-hegemony and collectivity by facilitating students' collaborations with actors outside of the university, whose unique experiences with and understandings of major sustainability challenges are equally valid. The work is multi-species-oriented, as students are actively encouraged to consider other-than-human beings when assessing the wider dimensions, drivers and potential solutions to the sustainability challenge. Lastly, the work encourages radical imagination by requiring students to collectively explore the vast terrain of possible ways forward, ultimately proposing one preferred option, not on the basis of 'cost-effectiveness' or 'political feasibility', but in terms of its ability to further socio-ecological justice.

Towards a conclusion: scanning ecotopian horizons

In this paper, we explored a conceptual and practical foundation for what we call 'ecotopian pedagogies', building on the work that happened during an event titled 'Ecotopian Pedagogies for the Symbiocene' in June 2025 at the University of Manchester. With ecotopian pedagogies, we wish to offer a transformative praxis that explores pedagogical possibilities beyond the often problematic mainstream sustainability discourses, and still widely accepted capitalist-colonial approaches, of western education institutions and beyond. It seeks to fundamentally disrupt the systemic drivers of

what we see as a dangerous ecocidal status quo that many of our institutions are variedly complicit in, and encourages work that has multispecies-just worlds in mind. We have positioned this work as an approach to facilitating critical speculative enquiries and actions that support socio-ecological transformations from the present. This paper should be read as encouragement for educators, students, researchers, activists, social movements, affinity groups, etc. to experiment with, challenge and further develop ecotopian pedagogies in a diverse range of contexts, within, against and beyond Higher Education institutions.

With ecotopian pedagogies, we draw on three interconnected pedagogical traditions: critical pedagogies, utopian pedagogies, and ecopedagogies. These traditions have informed our current working definition of ecotopian pedagogies, which is centred around five values: anti-hegemonic and collective; radically imaginative; multi-species oriented; multimodal; contingent and cyclical. Through offering three practical examples of ecotopian speculative exercises, we attempted to illustrate what ecotopian pedagogies might look like in practice. These exercises are drawn from our necessarily limited experiences in western higher education institutions, and are inevitably rooted in our own pedagogical backgrounds as well as the pedagogical traditions we traverse in this paper.

As such, we welcome additional and alternative perspectives on ecotopian pedagogies that are rooted in the vast pluriverse of diverse onto-epistemological traditions. We seek to open this as a conversation and encourage others to apply their own perspectives, experiences and lenses to expand ecotopian pedagogical practices, adding to the possibilities as well as illuminating gaps that remain in the service of radical socio-ecological transformations. It is through respectful disagreement and productive tension that ecotopian pedagogies as a living transformative praxis can remain plural and imaginative instead of becoming singular and deterministic. Tsing (2024) reminds us of the 'awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference' (4). With this paper, we hope to encourage 'unexpected alliances' (Tsing 2024, 12) that can expand the conceptual as well as practical aspects of ecotopian pedagogies across disciplines and contexts.

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