

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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The purpose of this chapter is to look at some of the changes that educational institutions will need to make if their learners are to acquire sustainability literacy skills for life in the twenty first century. Instead of providing a blue-print for institutions which focuses on a particular form, I am advocating an education system where *process* is paramount and itself becomes the change that will take us through sustainability literacy towards sustainability. My work at Schumacher College was to translate the new world view into both an overt and a hidden curriculum. For me therefore, the really interesting question is how institutions can transform themselves so they are ready and willing to embrace such a process. As we begin to see the unprecedented disruption of the life systems that have sustained us, it is clear that the need is urgent and unavoidable.

The educational system, of course, is at the heart of our current unsustainable society, being both its product and its creator. Embodied in all its aspects, from the architecture to staff selection and from catering to curriculum planning, are values and assumptions which are in themselves unsustainable. In theory, this is widely recognised and accepted. Awareness of the current ecological and environmental crises, and the risks of not addressing them, has been with us for decades, yet the international community, despite applying some of the most highly educated minds, shows no sign of being able to divert the disaster that is forecast. It is axiomatic that effective action is unlikely to come from people whose training has been within, and whose loyalty is to, the unsustainable paradigm the current education system reflects. Further, 'more of the same' educational approaches will surely create 'more of the same' outcomes: graduates incapable of developing effective strategies for building a sustainable society.

As an example of the incapacity of the education system to produce an adequate response to the challenges of sustainability, it might be useful to reflect on the response of governments world-wide to the current recession. The response so far has been to encourage consumers to buy more, to encourage banks to lend more, and for governments to throw money into propping up failing industries such as the car industry, all to keep the wheels of commerce turning and people in jobs. In other words, to return to exactly the same unsustainable system which caused the economic collapse in the first place. The response also ignores the lessons of history, where recession and reinvestment have been linked with war.

It is probable that the people taking the decisions that determine the trajectory of our global and local development are generally themselves the most successful products of what we might agree is a flawed educational system. Their academic achievements reflect its most

highly prized values, though clearly many of those values can now be seen as contributing to unsustainable practices (see *Values Reflection and the Earth Charter*, this volume). Rather than people such as this, it will probably be courageous individuals who have experience of and success in real-life problem solving who will help point us towards a more sustainable future. They will most likely be flexible, imaginative and co-operative people, able to talk with others outside their narrow disciplines and personally committed to the need for social transformation. All educational institutions will have to respond to the imperative to nurture such inspiring individuals within the communities they serve, and to incorporate them at the heart of decision making.

Stephen Sterling (2004) has described three possible levels/orders of institutional response to the challenge:

There are places which respond by educating *about* sustainability. This content and/or skills emphasis in the curriculum is fairly easily accommodated into the existing system, often by 'bolting-on' modules about sustainability. The learning is *about* change. He describes this first level as an accommodative response.

Education *for* sustainability has an additional values emphasis and thus involves the greening of the institution itself. It necessitates deeper questioning and reform of the institution's purpose, policy and practice, so that learning *for* change takes place. This is the reformative response.

At its most demanding and thorough-going, education that can equip learners with sustainability literacy skills is about *capacity building* and has an emphasis on action. In this transformative response, a 'living' inquiry-based curriculum is developed. The focus is on becoming permeable, experiential learning communities and organisations. The learning *is* the change. It is only through this type of response that education can provide an environment where learners can transcend the limited set of skills offered by traditional education and gain the skills they will need to contribute to a more sustainable society.

The carrots and sticks used to control our educational institutions instil in them an aversion to risk. Even so, their leaders make space for innovation, if only to get a competitive edge over rivals, as long as the attendant risks are relatively small and the rewards sufficiently attractive. Thus, forward thinking senior management already does promote first or second order change by embracing experimentation in education about, or even for, sustainability. It is less likely that an institution will opt for the third order of change with its emphasis on growing permeable, experiential learning communities. But since conditions arising from climate change, peak oil, economic instability and ecosystem degradation look set to result in global conflicts and disruption of current systems, it will not be sufficient to respond with anything less than third order change. Our places of learning have to become places of transformation and enquiry.

How are our educational institutions to be encouraged to pursue this third level transformation? To be fair, none of us is certain what a sustainable society will look like, (although some of us like to think we have some ideas), so precisely *what* form of education will help students deal with the challenges ahead is unproven. We can be sure that all individuals, whether leaders or not, have to learn to be adaptable and take the risks which will help wider society draw up a map to sustainability, because the risks of doing nothing are immense. This volume gives numerous examples of what sustainability literacy might include. Certainly, followers and leaders alike will have to develop their imaginations, and learn to live with the uncertainty, set-backs and the potential failures that such risk-taking will inevitably entail. They will turn their backs on the greed and profligacy which brought us to where we are now and recognise a need to alter our relationships with each other, with the planet and the other beings with whom we share it.

Embarking on the journey of transition, each institution will have to examine the very basic assumptions it is founded on. At the heart of their questions, they will need to consider what is required of us as sane creatures living on a fragile planet. They must recognise that the world we live in now is both orderly and predictable *and* unpredictable and chaotic, and demands from us a model of education different from that which gave us the modern unsustainable industrial society. They must accept that any educational system should aim to demonstrate interconnectedness and interdependence if it is to offer a helpful model for living in a sustainable world. In their programmes they will need to create a balance between the rational and scientific, *and* the intuitive, qualitative and creative dimensions of education. They will need to accept that for a more sustainable world, social, environmental and economic well-being must *all* be nurtured, and that means helping learners appreciate interconnections between human systems and natural systems, and develop skills in working across disciplines. There are new principles that institutions of higher learning will have to welcome. Working in a different paradigm from the old mechanistic one they will need to embrace uncertainty, constant change, paradoxes, contradictions, and ambiguity. All will come to be seen as opportunities to develop our own understandings as we grope towards sustainability. For example, instead of U turns being occasions for condemnation, changing our minds will be applauded as changed circumstances and new information becomes available.

There will have to be a recognition and an acceptance that the time available to shift our direction is short, so speed is of the essence. On the other hand, practices to promote mindfulness and deep reflection rather than formulaic responses to sustainability issues will have to be encouraged. ‘Slow thinking’, like slow food, will be a badge of quality.

Each organisation may need to sweep away many of the day-to-day rules which govern members’ lives, upgrading expectations of behaviour and encouraging personal responsibility. Current regulations often assume the lowest common standards and therefore bring forth the least responsible behaviour and a breakdown of relationships.

Society will be searching for new models for learning. Learners will be seeking a combination of intellectual study and active engagement in societal change processes. In time, instead of going away to large scale centres of learning, many young people will choose to remain in their local community to work on its adaptation to the harsh conditions it finds itself in. ‘Community’ will become a more central notion, a place where communal work/service makes you feel at home and fulfilled, a place to bond across generations (see *Citizen Engagement*, this volume). Our localised places of learning will be places of human scale, beauty, joy and fun, of routines and rituals which make people feel at home, and where the focus is on facilitating the learning process.

At present, educational establishments are often monocultural and mono-generational. Recognising that living and working in community creates the need and opportunity for all kinds of problem solving, institutions must devise strategies to enable different groups in the community, all generations, and those with different life experiences, to work together on real-life projects. Interdisciplinarity will be an important vehicle for driving transformation and will demonstrate that success does not simply derive from specialisation and narrowness.

Here are a few practical suggestions about where the iterative processes leading to transformation of the existing system may begin.

If learners are to gain sustainability skills through tackling real-world problems, a good place to start would be in the places they are studying. At the moment the physical buildings and campuses of schools and universities manifest unsustainability, whatever their courses say about sustainability. The hidden and overt curricula are at odds. If administrators are to make their organisations genuine learning institutions, they must start on their redesign so as to involve users in as many aspects of their development and maintenance as possible. In embracing a transformative agenda, institutions will be modelling the need and capacity to live with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Students, staff and community could gain sustainability literacy skills through engaging in both policy making and management decisions about campus and community transformation. For example, food, its growing, sourcing and cooking offer limitless opportunities for both real life learning, and promoting the resilience of the local community. Staff selection and recruitment, campus traffic management, building maintenance and estate management, energy provision and security are critical areas where everyone can engage in, and learn through the institutional transformation process.

A root and branch review of facilities could lead to a gradual retro-fit using more sustainable technologies. In this, learners can gain skills in ecological design, getting a practical understanding of principles such as adaptation rather than replacement, reducing use of resources, diversity rather than uniformity, feedback, relationships, connectedness and so on.

Appropriate assessment procedures will have to be devised to ensure that sustainability literacy is centrally valued. This may involve a shift away from the kind of marks-orientated

summative assessment that is currently dominant within the education system, towards formative assessment and assessment for learning (Broadfoot 2007). Quality assurance procedures can nurture the context which enables individual learners to acquire a broad and diverse range of skills and attributes for sustainable living, e.g., the courage to take risks; the capacity to work hard under pressure; the willingness to deal with set-backs; intellectual flexibility and innovative thinking; confidence to work when there are no 'right' answers; co-operation as well as competition; and understanding of social, environmental and economic well-being. At the same time, procedures requiring the constant review of plans and policies need to be incorporated into organisational practices. For example, more flexibility has to be designed into programme planning so real-life learning opportunities can be seized as they arise.

All aspects of both the overt and hidden curricula will have to be revisited time and again, and re-examined to see whether and how they contribute to the critically important agenda of capacity building for sustainability. A fearless and ongoing scrutiny of institutional plans, practices and policies must be welcomed in the spirit of identifying what will promote transformation. And, on the journey, we shall have to identify between us what seems to work, sharing good practice across institutions. Administrators will have to let go the desire to keep control, because the speed of the transformation required is such that traditional planning methodologies just will not deliver. Change agents may be anywhere and everywhere in the institution, and transformation will be bottom up, top down and middle out.

Predictions of irreversible climate change, the urgency of learning low-carbon lifestyles, the unacceptable disparity between global rich and poor, all demand there can be no further procrastination. We might fear that achieving sustainability is impossible. Yet, given that in our own various ways we have all contributed to the problem, perhaps our shared steps in a new direction might lead us on a more constructive path. Learning institutions are uniquely well placed to represent an attractive and positive set of values aligned with humans' best aspirations, and to rise to our most demanding, and potentially most rewarding remit: of helping learners develop the skills to survive and thrive in the challenging conditions of the twenty first century, and contribute to a more sustainable future.

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[describes how assessment needs to change in response to the new realities of the
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