

Sustainability, Learning and Citizenship: key issues for research

I'm going to talk about the relationship between sustainability and learning in terms of the work of schools, colleges, and universities – and something about research in relation to these.

I once asked a sixth-form student whether she intended taking a gap year before going to university. She said 'No' rather firmly, so I asked why not, and she replied that she wanted to get all her learning out of the way as quickly as possible. I suspect she meant all her 'teaching', as it's easy to conflate the two. I hope so, as the potential for continuing learning does seem to be a life sentence, with no remission, for the human species. Given the difficulties we face, this is just as well.

John Foster has made a telling contribution to our understanding by arguing that Sustainable Development makes no sense other than as a social learning process of improving the human condition that can be continued indefinitely without undermining itself. He argues that Sustainable Development doesn't depend on learning. Rather it's inherently a learning process of making the emergent future ecologically sound and humanly habitable, as it emerges through the continuous responsive learning which, Foster says, is the human species' most characteristic endowment. This neatly captures the idea of learning as a collaborative and reflective process, the inter-generational dimension, and the idea of environmental limits.

A crucial point about effective learning is that it not only has tangible and useful outcomes in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills, social action, etc, it also reinforces the motivation and capability for further learning – both individually and socially. And a key outcome, especially in formal education programmes, is the enabling of successful transitions to the next stage of learning – whether in formal settings, in training, in work, or just in life. What is studied is obviously crucial, but how we determine this, equally so, especially in relation to the understandings we bring to bear when making inevitable choices in the selection from culture that curriculum always involves. Research around all this seems very limited, but much needed. At any stage, there's always a balance to be struck between a broad-based, wide-ranging education and a more specialist one, between a focus on ideas themselves, and on their application in a social context, and between keeping ideas separate, and integrating them.

So, what does this mean for Sustainable Development, and ESD? I'd say that all three sectors – schools, colleges and universities – have vital, but different, roles. Up to 16, there needs to be an emphasis on getting across a general, and probably rather diffuse understanding of, and sense of concern for, sustainability. This involves a broad-based approach with a focus on both the school's internal and external social context, not only as places that provide scope for learning, but also where socio-economic change is needed.

The sustainable schools initiative stresses the idea that schools need to be role models for communities and society. This ensures a strong social change focus with emphases, for example, on reducing energy usage and the carbon footprint, increasing social participation, and enhancing biodiversity. This broad-based approach has the development of capability to make a social contribution at its heart. It's clearly about an active citizenship but it's not always recognised as such. There is an academic element, of course, which imparts some limited specialist knowledge, and which is mainly experienced through subjects such as science, geography, and D&T. Successful schools will integrate these approaches, but we don't know nearly enough about how most effectively to do this. Specialist knowledge becomes increasingly available, and more detailed, as learners mature, and there's more chance for the media to influence – or perhaps lead – learning. The link to living, and social engagement, and the wider world of employment, certainly acquires a greater imperative with age – through greater personal relevance.

Unfortunately, there's an over emphasis in schools on personal agency with a tendency to view the student as an individual actor who knows what to do and what not to do, in relation, for example, to recycling, saving energy, and reducing waste. This ensures an emphasis on things that are relatively easy to do by individuals, as opposed to actions that people are not able to do on their own – such as getting a school or other organisation to change its procurement and cut down waste in the first place. This, essentially privatised view, neglects the picture of the student as a social and more public actor – as someone engaged in the messy but vital business of democratic citizenship.

Such actions relate to the formulation and critique of public policy (both national and local), and to purposive interaction with social institutions about their practice – the sort of macro social change that can make a real difference. By and large, schools tend not to emphasise this view of action. It can, of course, be somewhat political in nature, but, then, that's the whole point.

In a recent paper, my colleague Andy Stables has argued that the prime curriculum focus in schools now should be on the ...development of skills of critical thinking, dialogue and debate, with environment and sustainability one of many focuses. He argues that, whilst openness to the real public debate is crucial, it's vital to remember that capacities are not outcomes, that they don't simply precede outcomes, and that, to a large extent, it's the making of real-life decisions that most fully develops the capacity for exercising responsible citizenship. This seems a good reason to enable students to begin to practise such real-life, decision-making in schools, and citizenship seems the most appropriate – and mainstream – niche within which schools can pursue ideas around sustainability.

Unfortunately, this insight that ESD will have maximal impact when seen as citizenship education remains largely obscured. Thus, schools lose an opportunity to mainstream ESD. It also means that citizenship itself remains something of a quasi-subject looking for a useful purpose. The priority I'm presenting here for schools is the development of citizenly awareness, understanding, skills, and motivations. Research evidence suggests that schools that are experienced in sustainability work do appreciate this imperative and its whole-school nature. It's not, however, very widespread, and I'd say that it needs to be a developmental, and research, priority.

What of higher education? Well, the student experience is quite different with undergraduate courses tending to specialist, and discipline-specific matters, rather than the broad-based, community and citizenly, focus that we've seen with schools. Although there are attempts to broaden this out through common modules, for example, this remains problematic. As does the currently fashionable (if rather unfocused) talk about sustainability literacy as some common entitlement of all Higher Education students. This seems likely to remain a hope rather than a reality, although a research focus here will surely continue.

In Hefce's recent research on teaching about sustainable development in English universities, it was almost wholly discipline-related activity that was found, and, of course, the Higher Education Academy works largely through subject centres. The HEA's ESD Project is currently preparing guidance for universities wishing to embed sustainability into curricula and wider activities.

Another element of all this is what the sustainable schools initiative terms the necessary integration between Curriculum, Campus, and Community: that is, what is learned should be integrated with the management (in both human and resource senses) of the campus, and institution, and with activity in the community. Thus, attempts at the local sourcing of food, and issues such as fair trade, are significant elements within many schools with attempts to bring these together in what's taught. There's less scope for this within universities where this integration only occurs where such a focus makes contingent sense to particular degree courses: engineering and management come immediately to mind here. Certainly, It's unlikely to be directed by senior managers (as it is in schools), or wished upon institutions by funding councils (as it is by the DCSF). The Plymouth CETL is one of only a handful of notable exceptions here.

Having said this, it does seem to me that institutions' current attempts to reduce their ecological footprint, and carbon usage, ought to be carried out in partnership with students and other major stakeholders in the process, and the scope for research here appears to be considerable. It seems likely, however, that this will best be done in partnership with the NUS and individual student unions, rather than with volunteer or special interest groups of students, and interesting examples of practice can readily be found. This is, of course, a form of citizenship activity. So, expertise in relation to teaching and sustainability within higher education is more likely to be found within disciplines, and academics are likely to see themselves as advancing or developing the subject, say, engineering education, rather than ESD. This brings them several advantages; most significant of which is that other academics are likely to understand what they are trying to do because they share a conceptual basis.

Where the nature of work, and what it means to be a competent professional, is changing, because of the need to address sustainability, we find calls for new graduates to be well prepared. It's this

pull which gives rise to a major impetus for change, as well as the interests (that is, the push) of academics. In schools, this pull element is very limited. What there is comes from government and organisations such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority whose agency is much less effective than that of the professions in universities. This interface with the workplace, where the sustainability issues faced by society are prominent, can be a significant factor in course and degree re-design, and there are examples of this across the entire higher education disciplinary spectrum, as the recent Hefce research illustrates. How these changes might most usefully be effected remains appropriately contentious, however, and is the more interesting for it. As such, it constitutes very fertile research ground as the literature already illustrates.

The unique research remit of higher education institutions, and the imperative of outreach into business and the community where research is disseminated, connections made, and social change engaged in and supported, hardly needs stressing, as university research and scholarly activity will continue to be key components of social progress – however we come to see this. Opportunities for sustainability-related research are growing as both research funders, business and third sector organisations see the need for appropriate research. It's worth noting, however, that potential for inter-disciplinary research – and its reporting – remains largely unrealised owing to a range of factors, some institutional, some disciplinary, and others external.

Uniquely, most of what a university does can be classified, one way or another, as teaching, research – or administration. A particular tension exists across all three of these domains which we might think of as a tension between stability and change – between certainty and speculation. It's fuelled, on the one hand, by the obligation to archive, protect, apply, and bequeath existing knowledge; and, on the other, the imperative to challenge that knowledge, to break through into unexplored territory, and to go beyond problem-solving into comprehensive problem-redefinition. In the present, there's an expectation that everyone will face new, unimaginable circumstances in their lifetimes with which, in one way or another, and for better or worse, they will have to learn to deal.

This means that the tension between the known and the unknown is now just as strong for teaching as it is for research. It's most marked for university teaching, of course, but also for colleges and schools. Whilst at particular times and places we may want to stress knowledge transmission, or a challenge to that knowledge, inescapably now both are crucial – and this brings us back to ESD as citizenship education. It must follow from all this that universities (and to a lesser degree, colleges and schools) cannot in some instrumental fashion teach now for sustainable development in the future – the precise requirements for which will depend on a range of factors. Some of these are uncertain, and some unknown, with one such factor being the influence of the research-informed higher education curriculum itself in determining those requirements.

In the clearly liberal conception of a university, the institution, and the individuals they educate, should be at the cutting edge of society's creative response to unfolding future circumstances. This clearly is not achieved by making them the uncritical repositories of present conventional wisdom – whether in relation to higher education or sustainable development. We know that universities value knowledge, and for that reason they have to demand clarity about what's known, and how, and the parameters of uncertainty around this. Universities also value the pursuit of knowledge and must, therefore, always insist on its present, and on-going, incompleteness – in the face of those who, for whatever reason, wish to extrapolate to final, general truths.

Sustainable development touches on all aspects of our intellectual lives, and will require us to husband what we know, turn from glib certainties, and confront the future with an open, learning orientation, as John Foster argues. A key current question is: 'what can education do for sustainable development?' But, a complementary one is: 'what can sustainable development do for education?' which leads to important questions such as: 'what's a university, a school or college now for?' One model of the social role of education is in accord with Amartya Sen's account of rational behaviour as the continuing development of preferences over what preferences to have, and of development as the capability, the substantive freedom to choose a life one has reason to value. Thus, the whole of the formal education system should be promoting such rationality and freedom, as these qualities are firmly associated with the tolerance of a plurality of values that we

shall need. How best we might do this is one of the many aspects of the research agenda in this field that deserve particular attention.

My key point is that, whether manifest as a broad course or narrow specialism, whether designed to raise awareness or develop skills, and whether in schools, colleges or universities, ESD can helpfully be seen as an education in citizenship – a preparation for informed, open-minded, social engagement with the main existential issues of the day. A key research question at every stage of this educational experience is where balances need to be struck between what we might do; another is how best to do this. These are both questions worthy of all our careful attention.

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