

Sustainable education

- putting relationship back into education

Stephen Sterling calls for a new educational paradigm emerging around the poles of holism, systematic thinking, sustainability, and complexity



'The development of ecological understanding is not simply another subject to be learnt but a fundamental change in the way we view the world.'

– JOHN LYLE, 1994

Picture the scene. It was early 2001, and the publisher of the Schumacher Briefings and I had were having a chat in his office about the title of the new education Briefing. I had just made a bid for 'Sustainable Education'. His reply was along the lines: "surely, you mean 'education for sustainable development', or 'education for sustainability' don't you? Are you implying 'education that lasts?' – it doesn't make a lot of sense".

"No", I said, "I don't want to call it education 'for' anything, and yes, 'Sustainable Education' is exactly the title I want".

Let me give some background. I've been involved in environmental education since entering teaching in 1972, later joining the Council for Environmental Education in England, and then for the past 15 years, working in the field as a consultant, writer and lecturer with NGOs and academia. In that thirty year period, beginning with the UN Conference on the Human Environment held in 1972 in Stockholm, numerous high level statements and mandates have pointed to the importance of 'environmental education' (EE) and later 'education for sustainable development' (ESD) and these have been reflected in policy and practice to a greater or lesser degree at national and local level in many parts of the world.

It hasn't made a great deal of difference: either to the state of education or the state of the environment. Indeed, most educational theory and practice still supports unsustainable practices. A UNESCO report on progress since the Rio Summit of 1992, prepared for last year's World Summit on Sustainable Development, notes that 'much of current education falls far short of what is required', and calls for a 'new vision' and 'a deeper, more ambitious way of thinking about education' (UNESCO, 2002). Meanwhile, we are educated by and large to 'compete and consume' rather than to 'care and conserve'. The growth paradigm, individualism and consumerism tend to be supported uncritically, either directly or by default, and the growing influence of the private sector and corporations on education is likely to exacerbate this. With the prospect of the marketisation and control of education being taken further through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), the challenge to the sustainability education community is great indeed. So, far from being the universal solution favoured by governments and NGOs alike, education is largely still part of the problem.

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As the UNESCO report points out, just as we have learnt to live unsustainably, we now need to learn how to live sustainably. Such learning for responsibility requires educational systems, institutions and educators to develop response-ability – that is, the ability to meet the challenge and opportunity that sustainability presents. This is the context for any meaningful discussion about the role of education in the 21st century. After three decades of involvement in the field of environmental and sustainability education, I have come to believe that the only way to achieve this is to elaborate, develop, practice and argue for a changed educational paradigm. Hence, the concept of 'sustainable education' is not just a simple 'add-on' of sustainability concepts to the curriculum, but a cultural shift in the way we see education and learning, based on a more ecological or relational view of the world. Rather than a piecemeal, bolt-on response which leaves the mainstream otherwise untouched, it implies systemic change in thinking and practice, informed by what can be called more ecological thinking and values – essentially a new paradigm emerging around the poles of holism, systemic thinking, sustainability, and complexity.

In writing the 2001 Briefing Sustainable Education, I outlined the possibility of a unifying theory of education and learning, which

integrates the best of past liberal practice with current practices of transformative learning, capacity building, creativity and adaptive management, and suggested steps to help achieve constructive change at all levels.

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Sustainable education implies four descriptors: sustaining, tenable, healthy and durable.

- Sustaining – it helps sustain people, communities and ecosystems
- Tenable – it is ethically defensible, working with integrity, justice, respect and inclusiveness
- Healthy – it is itself a viable system, embodying and nurturing healthy relationships and emergence at different system levels
- Durable – it works well enough in practice to be able to keep doing it.

There is nothing particularly mysterious about this. In the imposition of managerial and economic values on education, evidenced in the whole panoply of endless testing, inspection, precise learning outcomes, performance indicators, competition and so on – and in the disillusion and mounting stress levels that have accompanied this drive, we have lost our sense of authentic education, of caring, of community, of engagement, of real purpose.

Rather, an ecological view implies putting relationship back into education and learning – seeking synergy between all aspects of education: ethos, curriculum, pedagogy, management, procurement and resource use, architecture and community links – with emphasis on such values as respect, trust, participation, ownership, democracy, openness, and environment. Envisioning this change – and realisable, practicable steps in our own working contexts – is key. In essence, what we all are engaged in here is a critically important 'learning about learning' process, and one which will directly affect the chances of a more sustainable future for all. The very positive response to the Briefing, from individuals and organisations in various parts of the world, indicates that many people are more than ready for this challenge.

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