

ESD as Transformation – a liberal review

William Scott, University of Bath, UK

“We must take the first determined steps toward a sustainable future with dignity for all. Transformation is our aim. We must transform our economies, our environment and our societies. We must change old mindsets, behaviours and destructive patterns. We must embrace the integrated essential elements of dignity, people, prosperity, planet, justice and partnership. We must build cohesive societies, in pursuit of international peace and stability. ... Such a future is possible if we collectively mobilize political will and the necessary resources to strengthen our nations and the multilateral system. We have the means and methods to meet these challenges if we decide to employ them and work together.” (UNGA, 2014)

Social critique and transformation

In 1989, the biologist Mary Clark argued that in Western history there have only been two major periods of *conscious* social change and transformation where societies deliberately critiqued themselves and created new worldviews. The first occurred in the Greek city states (500 – 400 BC) where old ways of thinking became suspect and the first schools emerged. Philosophers purposefully asked different kinds of questions through public dialogues, new lines of thought and social action emerged, and a new status quo was established whose ideas and practices spread. The second time, Clark said, was through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment when Western culture, through its natural and social philosophers, subjected itself to critical thought and renewal. The result was the modern worldview that the West more or less retains today, and which many believe has resulted in the sustainability problems that affect us all. The irony is, of course, that the Enlightenment also brought new values and political and social freedoms that many live by, and would wish to defend. Clark (1989: 235) argued that we need to “collectively create a new worldview that curbs ecological and social exploitation, and recreates social meaning”. She saw that this process needed to be a society-wide, citizenly, phenomenon involving everyone – not just political, social, religious or cultural elites.

It is clear that such processes need to be global in scale and scope, and optimists will want to find evidence of their happening in phenomena ranging from the UN-focused COP climate change discussions and the establishment of Sustainable Development Goals, to ground-up social action such as the Occupy, Anonymous, Divestment and Transition movements. All these, and more, might well be seen as unco-ordinated attempts to address the *sustainability problematique*: how can we all live well, without compromising the planet’s continuing ability to enable us all to live well, but just to write this down is to illustrate its inchoate state.

Education as transformation

Clark saw such transformational endeavours as educational in the widest sense, but she understood that the process could not just be trusted to formal educational institutions. She made a clear distinction between dominant processes of moulding society to fit in with the status quo and its received wisdoms, and the enabling of a critique of beliefs and assumptions which aids transformative change and the creation of new ways of thinking and being.

Whilst it is the case that a transformative ideal has long been near the heart of some visions of education, particularly liberal ones, this has mostly been in the sense of personal growth and fulfilment. Even to consider that formal education as we know it could lead attempts to

transform society and resolve the *sustainability problematique*, is to reveal a core paradox; that to change society, education and schools would themselves first need to be changed by that society. This is doubly problematic because two main purposes for schooling are conservative ones of values and cultural transmission, and a preparation for citizenly and economic participation in the society that exists; in this, education is necessarily seen in instrumental, not transformative, terms.

Anyway, as some such as Andy Stables (2010) have argued, school students are only ever likely to pick up a general and diffuse sense of concern about and for the world's problems, that is led or reinforced by any involvement they may have in the overall public discourse. Because of this, Stables says, curriculum should focus on the development of skills of critical thinking, dialogue and debate, with sustainability as one possible theme. Through this, young people would be enabled, should they choose, to take an increasing role in society and social change. The position of students in colleges and universities is similar, although their depths of understanding are greater, as is the influence they might bring to bear within those institutions, and in the jobs they take up.

ESD and transformation

For others, it is not education, *per se*, but education for sustainable development (ESD) that has, alongside transition, divestment, etc, this socially transformative potential. This is partly because ESD has both the *imprimatur* of the United Nations, and because of its ability to bring together a wide variety of educational groups and strategies aimed at addressing our existential problems. UNESCO (2012a:13) has encouraged this view:

“ESD is far more than teaching knowledge and principles related to sustainability. ... in the broadest sense it is education for social transformation with the goal of creating more sustainable societies. ... ESD aims to provide a coherent interaction between education, public awareness, and training with a view to creating a more sustainable future.”

However, despite UN endorsement, UNESCO sponsorship, NGO activity, and much individual effort, ESD has not fulfilled that promise, and a core difficulty is something we have seen already, albeit in different language. Stephen Sterling (2015: 4) terms it the central paradox of ESD:

“It is seen as critical to any prospect of a more sustainable future, but ... it challenges mainstream thinking, policy and practice in much formal education. ... The more transformative and holistic approach that sustainability requires is often difficult to implement, requiring systemic change and organisational learning over time ...”

Indeed, if education, *per se* cannot do this, how could ESD be more successful? An artful response to this question is to advance a co-evolutionary argument: that successful ESD would lead to change in the demands made of education by society, which would then reinforce the need for more ESD, leading, eventually to a positive transformative cycle. Thus, the argument goes, with ESD working symbiotically within both the education system and within society more generally, those in power would soon come to understand the error of their ways. This view, however, relies too heavily on disingenuous appeals to false consciousness to be taken seriously.

That said, the appeal of ESD is clear as it can claim to bring together forms of education whose geneses lie in learning activities that examine [i] how living things depend on each other and on the biosphere, [ii] why there is such a widespread lack of social justice and

human fulfillment across the world and what might be done about this, and [iii] how everyone's quality of life is increasingly imperiled by our current economic models. Thus the potential of ESD is that it might enable such deeply inter-related issues to be addressed together so that we might come to understand, address, and then resolve, the *sustainability problematique*. This, as we have seen, links the quality of people's lives (now and in the future), the economic and political systems these are embedded in, and the continuing supply of goods and services from the biosphere that underpin and drive such systems.

A potential strength of ESD is the variation that is found from one context to another which has arisen from local interpretations and developments as the concept is shaped to fit, more or less comfortably, with existing policy and practice. Inevitably, this all involves accommodations with preferred ideological and epistemological dispositions. Equally inevitably, all interpretations of ESD rest on understandings of what sustainable development itself *is*, even if the conceptual links are loose. This diversity within ESD, which is clear to see from emerging practice, is also a weakness as it rests on a lack of shared understandings which, in turn, inhibit communication and collaboration.

Another view of ESD

Of course, not all its proponents see ESD as transformational, *per se*, understanding that the aim must be to effect change where possible, and usually in systems not well disposed to it. This was broadly the UN's view (UNESCO 2005:5) when it agreed to an ESD Decade (2005 – 2014), and identified four overarching goals for "all Decade stakeholders":

- Promote and improve the quality of education
- Reorient curriculum
- Raise public awareness and understanding of sustainable development
- Train the workforce

There is nothing here which suggests that the UN thought that educational systems or institutions should set out to be socially transformative. Rather, it took its cue from the *Tbilisi Declaration* (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978) and Agenda 21, building on the rich (though largely ineffective) legacy of environmental education provision whose intertwined social and environmental goals were summed up by Stapp *et al.*, 1979: 92):

"The evolving goal of environmental education is to foster an environmentally literate global citizenry that will work together in building an acceptable quality of life for all people."

In the two decades following this, policy proposals, curriculum and teacher development programmes, and innovative educational resources were all developed in largely unsuccessful attempts to nudge mainstream education practice towards the Tbilisi goals. Whilst there was some modest influence on curriculum and professional development, this was not ultimately significant and made little lasting impact on education systems. Looking back on all this in 1995, John Smyth argued that the adjective *environmental* had been a significant barrier, as it signalled that environmental education was something separate from established disciplines and practice, and was thereby outside mainstream educational activity and influence. The fact that environmental education tended to be promoted by ministries of the environment, rather than education, both reflected the problem, and further entrenched it.

Much the same can be said today of ESD, but it is now the term, with its implicit reification, that embodies the problem. Just as we think of the UN, WHO, IMF, UNESCO, etc as institutions, so it is with ESD which, rather than being an influence *on* education systems

and practice, has become thought and talked about as an alternative to these, and / or as equivalent to a subject or discipline. For example:

"ESD is difficult to teach in traditional school settings where studies are divided and taught in a disciplinary framework." (McKeown 2002: 32)

This reification is particularly pronounced in higher education where much emphasis has been placed on 'introducing ESD' (which hardly anyone had heard about) rather than further developing the considerable professional sustainability-focused activity and expertise that already exists. The result is that no one who really matters in education systems, takes ESD seriously, and, although UNESCO (2012:5) does say that "the need for ESD [has become] well established in national policy frameworks", the evidence for this is nugatory.

A liberal end view

The more liberal view of all this (Scott, 2014) is that educational institutions need to prioritise student learning over institutional, behaviour or social change, whilst making use of any such change to support and broaden that learning. In this sense, it is fine for a school, college or university to encourage its students to save energy, create less waste, promote biodiversity, work in the community, or get involved with initiatives such as fair trade, provided that these are developed with student learning and their actual studies in mind. To do otherwise is to forget why educational institutions exist. Being restorative of social or natural capital is laudable, but not if it neglects or negates the development of learning, and doing all this in collaboration with the communities within which institutions are socially, economically and environmentally embedded, will aid everyone's learning, and perhaps even sustainable development. Thus, a successful liberal education today will take sustainability seriously in everything it does. In particular, at its heart will be students asking critical questions of society, looking for the need for change, and getting involved. Whilst some will see this as ESD, for the majority it will just be *education*. Paradoxically, it may well be through such small-scale, on-the-ground, open-minded developments that the potential for the sort of transformation that Mary Clark called for, and the UN General Assembly says is so necessary, may well be enhanced.

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