

‘Learner Drivers’ for the Future: A Different Education for a Different World

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What do you think when you see those L plates on the car in front? ‘Oh no, that’s going to slow me down’? ‘Glad I got my test out of the way years ago’?

It’s a metaphor, of course, but current conditions – economic, social, ecological, political, technological – are requiring us all to be ‘learner drivers’: more cautious, going slower, reading our broader environment, aware of dangers and signals of change. Because we are facing testing times like never before – not just once, as in the driving test, but over lifetimes. We are living in a different world than was the case even a decade or two ago, and the future is profoundly uncertain. As Al Gore says in his extensive study:

There is a clear consensus that the future now emerging will be extremely different from anything we have ever known in the past ... There is no prior period of change that remotely resembles what humanity is about to experience.

(Gore 2013: xv).

There are almost daily headlines around such issues as energy, food security, biodiversity and species loss, poverty and inequity, climate change and shifting and extreme weather patterns, employment issues, social justice, economic volatility and a rising population. These fuel a renewed urgency and debate about the possibility of sustainable development (Assadourian et al. 2013) – how to live well, into the future, without eroding the Earth’s ability to sustain present and future generations. Continuing the metaphor, we can ‘drive on’ blindly, of course, hoping for the best. Or we can anticipate, think ahead, take avoiding action, take alternative routes. We can choose to be wise learners for the future.

When I started in environmental education some forty years ago, it was about education that would help people understand and act on environmental issues. Now, more broadly, it’s about

education and learning that can help secure a more sustainable future than ‘the one in prospect’ – as the renowned educator David Orr puts it.

Of course, there is a good deal of concern about what are sometimes referred to as the ‘grand challenges’ of our age. Prior to and following the Rio+20 Summit of 2012, which brought the world community together to look at issues of global sustainable development, there have been numerous high-level reports and documents outlining the need for change towards more resilient, just and environmentally sustainable societies.

For example, the international Sustainable Development Solutions Network’s (SDSN) *Action Agenda for Sustainable Development* (SDSN 2013) details ‘ten priority challenges of sustainable development’: ending poverty; development within planetary boundaries; effective learning for children and youth; gender equality and human rights; health and wellbeing; improving agricultural systems; curbing climate change; resilient cities; securing ecosystem services and biodiversity; and transforming governance. These are proposed as the basis of ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs) which are currently being discussed prior to their elaboration and adoption internationally in 2015 to replace the Millennium Development Goals.

So there is a growing consensus on the broad directions that need to be taken. The means by which such goals are to be addressed are often presented as: policy and monitoring; finance and incentives; legislation and regulation; information and campaigns. But these policy instruments are often effective only for as long as they are in operation – because they are externally applied. Education however, can build lasting change – that is, *sustainable change* – when it is owned by the learner. Whilst policy instruments tend to treat symptoms of unsustainable activities and behaviours, education and learning can reach hearts and minds, and therefore address root causes. Further, many commentators over some years have been pointing to the urgency of a deeper cultural change, away from short-termism, individualism, excessive competition and materialism, towards an ethic of care, social justice, mutuality and wellbeing (see Earth Charter at <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org>).

Put alternatively, outer change depends on inner change as regards how we view ourselves and our relation with others and the wider world towards a *relational* consciousness, and this is essentially a *learning* process. The futurist Paul Raskin argues, ‘The shape of the global future rests with the reflexivity of human consciousness – the capacity to think critically about why we think what we do – and then to think and act differently’ (Raskin 2008: 469). Hence the importance of the kinds of education that can effect this transformative process. The field of *education for sustainable development* (ESD) can be seen as a response to these considerable challenges.

Particularly since the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, and Agenda 21 – which in chapter 36 laid out the challenge of educating for a more sustainable society – an international ESD movement has emerged strongly, drawing on longer-established approaches, such as environmental education, conservation education, development education, human rights education, and global education. This movement is concerned with *identifying and advancing the kinds of education, teaching and learning policy and practice that appear to be required if we are concerned about ensuring social, economic and ecological viability and wellbeing, now and into the long-term future*. It is, on the face of it, hugely ambitious. As UNESCO states:

ESD is far more than teaching knowledge and principles related to sustainability. ESD, in its broadest sense, is education for social transformation with the goal of creating more sustainable societies. ESD touches every aspect of education including planning, policy development, programme implementation, finance, curricula, teaching, learning, assessment, administration. ESD aims to provide a coherent interaction between education, public awareness, and training with a view to creating a more sustainable future.

(UNESCO 2012: 33)

This calls for a particular quality and orientation of educational and learning policies and practices, across all societies and contexts. UNESCO defines ESD as education which ‘allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to

shape a sustainable future' (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/>).

Yet this reflects the central paradox of ESD. On the one hand, it is seen as critical to any prospect of a more sustainable future, but on the other it challenges mainstream thinking, policy and practice in much formal education. Sustainability issues are often characterized by 'wicked problems', complexity and uncertainty, requiring participative pedagogies and collaborative engagement, interdisciplinarity, real-world research and engagement, and an open-ended and provisional approach to knowledge. This is a different kind of education for a different age. However, universities – in particular – are based on silos with regard to their teaching, learning and research, and the more transformative and holistic approach that sustainability requires is often difficult to implement, requiring systemic change and organizational learning over time (as we have attempted at Plymouth University).

Nevertheless, despite the real challenges involved – and the lack of a supportive political climate in England – there is a strong and growing movement towards the embedding of sustainability in education in schools and universities. This is often 'bottom-up', but increasingly there are signs that senior managers recognize that sustainability is important to an institution's operation, curriculum and reputation, and the rich notion of whole institutional change towards the 'sustainable university' is beginning to take root (Sterling et al. 2013). Amongst university students, an NUS and Higher Education Academy study over three years shows that more than 80 per cent of students surveyed believe sustainable development should be actively promoted and incorporated by UK universities – a powerful incentive to universities hoping to increase student numbers (Drayson et al. 2013). Further, the centrality of learning to developing effective leadership for sustainability is increasingly recognized in the business world (Courtice 2012).

We are all 'driving the future', through our everyday actions and choices. If we are to secure a safer and enduring future for generations to come, the sustainability revolution 'requires each person to act as a learning leader at some level, from family to community, to nation to

world' (Meadows et al. 2005: 280). This is a big ask, but an inescapable one, and education needs to step up to the task.

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