

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Geoff Fagan, Director CADISPA at the University of Strathclyde

It is hard to imagine what a ‘sustainable community’ would look like at a time when, through no fault of their own, people who are losing jobs, identity and quality of life feel disempowered to change their circumstance. It is especially hard for ordinary people to adopt behaviours and practices that encourage a commitment to a lighter environmental footprint when system abuse by a few key players results in hardship for the many. Had the institutions for which these players worked been grounded in the reality of every day life; had there been a connection between those large institutions and ordinary people, there is a real chance that behaviours would have been modified and a world crisis avoided. The time has come to create a shared common space in education between people and professionals and traditional and non-traditional learners.

When Hopkins (2008) talks of Transition Communities and the Great Re-skilling, he is advocating a fundamental shift in the way that we understand and engage in our society and the development of a new skill set across that society (see *Transition Skills*, this volume). This means enabling more people to become skilled in changing our society based on a fundamental reassessment of the values and principles that underpin it. David Orr (1994) asks the inconvenient question ‘why make formal education more efficient when we know that it is not the inefficiency of the structure that is at fault – but the education system itself?’. If we do not change the system (all systems?) in a fundamental way, we will, by making it more efficient and fit-for-purpose, support and encourage unsustainable practices.

New educational programmes are needed which are based on different values and a process of learning based on ethical principles, ecological values and with the inclusion of ordinary people. The crisis that the world faces is too large to be addressed by focusing education on a narrow range of learners - educational institutions need to reach out to provide opportunities for a diverse cross section of the local community to gain sustainability literacy skills. At the same time, there are important skills and knowledge about living sustainably which are embedded in the traditions of local communities and can be shared with both learners and educators alike if educational institutions become more inclusive. The question is ‘how?’: what would this new contract look like?

The change required is profound and is based on an acceptance that learning from within the old paradigms will lead to the perpetuation of that which has led to the current crisis. The re-skilling of the population that Hopkins (2008) calls for means the adoption of new definitions of what constitutes ‘worthwhile knowledge’ and new partnerships for learning. It means ensuring that sustainability literacy permeates through every learning programme so that entire populations become sustainability literate and use their skills within local communities, nationally and

globally. It also, necessarily, means that learning institutions relocate from their campus fortresses to places that are geographically and philosophically accessible and open.

Probably the greatest change, however, is in reassessing the assumptions that underpin the generation and transmission of knowledge and its ownership by an intellectual elite. The skills necessary to survive in the twenty first century are in existence already - they are demonstrated every day by those in the most disadvantaged circumstances. How they live within their means, balance and define priorities, protect the powerless, problem solve and share knowledge are lessons that have their location in everyday living. However, this kind of practical wisdom for making skilful use of local social and physical resources is exactly the kind of knowledge that is de-valued by a formal education system which favours abstract, generalisable or technical knowledge.

Somehow, a common space of learning has to be created that flattens the intellectual playing field and creates porous, permeable boundaries between those who know (in whatever situation) and those who would wish to know. The university professor, in this circumstance, would truly become the novice learner and the community activist who left school at 15 and yet who knows in fervent detail the skills of political engagement and local sustainability becomes the expert. After all, many 'lecturers' are from a generation responsible for immense environmental destruction, so it is questionable whether they should 'lecture' those who will be facing the consequences of that destruction. This fluidity of role, its challenge to the assumption of who might know, and the permeability of the boundaries between learners and facilitators is the critical change for the foreseeable future. But what does this mean for institutions and the role of the educational facilitator?

First, ordinary people need to be welcomed into an institutional learning community as equals. Without this they will be without status and unable to contribute to the generation of knowledge for building a sustainable society on. This connection of education to living experience is not as strange as it seems – nor as radical. One of the purposes of education is to serve the common good. It belongs to the people. It stems from them; it is financially supported by them and, however indirectly, it must service their human needs. If education exists for the common good, however inconvenient, it must be seen to belong to the people and be allowed to serve the learning needs of all. If people from a wide range of social and economic circumstance are welcomed into the decision-making heart of any learning institution, the institution will inevitably influence (for the better) the communities it serves.

An open, inclusive partnership between a host community and an institution would mean learners have the opportunity to interact with people whose life experiences more than qualifies them to sit and debate; to wrestle and defend and eventually to decide on the future direction of their place. The effect on all learners would be profound. This injection and grounding of reality into what was once cloistered lecture theatres could be central to the new paradigm of learning.

The new partnership also demands change in the way that learning institutions structure themselves. Discipline silos have no place in twenty first century education. The world today

presents itself as a set of complex and interconnected problems and this is how learning institutions must help us solve those problems. Complexity is at the very core of sustainability, and dealing with complexity an essential sustainability literacy skill (see *Coping with Complexity, this volume*). To deny that and to tackle problems as though they can be successfully distilled to their elemental parts – siloed and then solved – will not help learners gain the essential skills they need to navigate their lives in a complex world (see *Ecological Intelligence, this volume*). This change is perhaps the hardest lesson for traditional learning institutions to accommodate. They will need to accept that they are no longer the sole purveyors of worthwhile knowledge, the owners of a knowledge depository to which only the privileged can get access – at a price. Knowledge itself must come to be recognised as non-possessed, dynamic, related and positional. It will soon become more appropriate to talk of knowledges, and in so doing recognise and celebrate different interpretations of situations, and the many ways in which those interpretations can be applied with equal ethical merit in a world of competing cultural differences.

Learning facilitators have a critical role to play in this new ‘education of the future’. What is described here is a new educational discourse based on different values. It seeks a learner’s involvement in a new power relationship to their subject and towards their co-learners. It seeks to diminish the pseudo-expert role so comfortable to many teachers (yet so wafer-thin in reality) as unnecessary and obstructive. Learners need facilitators – not Educational Horticulturists or Priests (Brookfield 1983). The learners of tomorrow need help in eliciting information from a wide variety of sources, sifting it, understanding it and, importantly, taking a critical relationship to what it is telling them. They need help in understanding the political dimensions of knowledge creation, the social construction of society, and what that might mean when applied to their circumstance. They need to value a range of different forms of knowledge, including the traditional knowledge of living sustainably within the local environment that is embedded within indigenous and local communities – the kind of knowledge that is passed down intergenerationally rather than through textbooks. The role of the learning facilitator and local community is therefore of great importance if education is to provide learners with sustainability literacy skills.

With peak oil and constraints on fossil fuel use threatening intensive farming as well as mass production, transport and long distance supply lines, the twenty first century is likely to see a great deal of relocalisation and participatory democracy. Learners eventually will demand, as will entire populations, a much greater engagement in the affairs that concern them (IAP2 2009). The days when institutions of all kinds could rely on hierarchical structures, opaque decision-making processes and the strict and elitist control of access to information and critical debate are fast disappearing. Community participation and engagement with shared decision making, and a consequential ownership of outcome is the way the future will inevitably be constructed. This new intellectual democracy holds immense potential for change, accountability and transparency when applied to educational institutions.

The new educational era brings together learning facilitation, participatory curriculum planning and citizen engagement in the affairs of all learning institutions and in knowledge generation. It ushers in a time when collections of learners will focus on gaining the sustainability literacy skills

that are essential for dealing with the new and unique challenges ahead, and using those challenges as a central focus for learning. The institution itself will, in embracing this new era, liberate itself from the constraints of elitism, selection and exclusion, and embrace its core and historical purpose – that of serving the common good. Local communities in this new era will be recognised as a rich depository and generator of knowledge and skills for sustainable living and will be openly welcomed as equal partners in the processes of learning.

So, when we ask the question of how education will change in the future, how it will adapt to the threats and opportunities of the twenty first century and provide learners with the sustainability literacy skills they so urgently need, there are a number of possible directions:

- Institutions will do what they demand of others: become open, transparent, participatory and inclusive – and demonstrate a commitment to intellectual and ethical sustainability that embraces both behaviour and systems. But also, and much more profoundly, they will alter their relationship to knowledge generation, learners and facilitators, changing the perception that worthwhile knowledge belongs exclusively to them;
- Educators will undergo professional development to become facilitators of learning, and in the process liberate themselves from discipline silos, instead sharing learning and teaching, knowledge and power. The learners will then begin to take the responsibility for their own learning in partnership with members of the local community and educational facilitators, in classes which reflect the problems of the world. Place-based learning will not be an after-thought but integral to the framework within which learning takes place (see *A Learning Society*, this volume). This will provide the basis for the Great Re-skilling.
- Educational institutions in the future will not be campus based but will reach far into the hinterland of local and national communities and into the minds of learners everywhere. The days when education could be separated from the vast majority of the citizenry are disappearing. Its knowledge banks, so long the inaccessible domain of just the Few, will continue to be drilled deeply but, and at the same time, will apply the learning gained so that it flows wide and useful into the communities it serves.
- Education will be integral to the Democratic Project. It will demonstrate its commitment daily to negotiated learning and help ordinary people as well as emergent young professionals make sense of their world and act upon it. It will also, in part, continue the tradition of solitary and rarefied research but not, as now, in an institution set aside from life.

Education will be able to contribute most to sustainability literacy when it is able to coalesce around a new set of inclusive values that celebrate the potentiality in all people. Sharing power, giving access freely, listening actively to people with a diverse set of skills is just the start. This is a new paradigm of education that is grounded in reality and will promote a knowledge exchange that not only helps learners gain skills for life in the twenty first century but is also life enhancing for all involved.

Sterling, S (2001) *Sustainable education*. Dartington: Green Books
Brookfield, S (1983) *Adult learners, adult education and the community*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press
IAP2 (2009) International Association for Public Participation. www.iap2.org
CADISPA. Conservation and Development in Sparsely Populated Areas. www.CADISPA.org
Quest University Squamish BC Canada. www.questu.ca [an example of a university that goes beyond the boundaries of academic disciplines and geographic borders in the pursuit of knowledge and global understanding]
Hopkins, Rob (2008) *The transition town handbook*. Dartington: Green Books