

Education for sustainable development

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Sustainable development is often described as resting on three pillars – environment, society and economy. Education for sustainable development also rests on three pillars, and I shall discuss each of them briefly and perhaps shed some light on why I think we need not only think carefully about these pillars, but also worry about them and work towards maintaining them – or in some cases rebuild them. The three pillars of education for sustainable development are *students*, *teachers* and *institutions*.

One may wonder whether there is anything specific to say about students and teachers in relation sustainable education other than we need more students and more teachers working in this area. And likewise, one may wonder whether there is anything in particular to say about institutions in relation to sustainable education other than we need more universities with more emphasis on education for sustainable education in all its forms. But while this is certainly true, the issue is more complicated than this short answer might suggest. We must think carefully about these three pillars and we need to work towards maintaining them for they might soon be lost.

Universities

Let me begin by discussing institutions. The goal of sustainable living won't be realized without widespread and general education which means that schools play a central role in sustainable development. And although learning takes place as much outside of schools as inside them, schools are the only institutions in contemporary societies where it is possible to work in a systematic way towards the goal of educating the population in general and cultivate attitudes, values and behavior which may contribute to sustainable living.

When I talk about schools in this context I include all school levels and although I focus on universities today, or higher education in general, much of what I have to say applies to all school levels. Before I say anything specifically about sustainability I want to draw attention to the vast diversity of universities and the radical changes that they have undergone in recent decades. The relevance of these changes is well put by Ronald Barnett when he says:

It is no longer clear, if it ever was clear, what is to count as a university or what the responsibilities of a university might be. At one time, universities could be held to have a universal mission to acquire knowledge and disseminate it. Now, that universal mission is itself in question from three directions. (Barnett, 2003, p. 562)

The three directions that he is thinking of are:

First, there is increasing diversity in the mission of individual universities, with spaces and opportunities open for universities to engage with the wider society in new ways. Second, the fluidity and uncertainty of the wider world has caused the academic community to doubt its own central callings: “knowledge” and “truth” are being questioned as terms that have universal meanings. ... Third, universities are less and less in charge of their own destinies, even if they retain substantial autonomy. (Barnett, 2003, p. 562)

These issues are made more relevant by the fact that universities are very far from being the only institutions in the business of discovering and utilizing scientific or theoretical knowledge, but share this role with very many other companies in various sectors. I am not complaining that there are companies whose business is knowledge, only pointing to an aspect of contemporary society which makes it more difficult to identify the role of universities.

It is not only difficult to identify the role of universities, the traditional role of universities is actively being undermined by some strong currents in the modern fluid society. A university could take its mission to be (i) serving scholarship, (ii) serving students, or (iii) serving society. These categories are not thought of as mutually exclusive, for the traditional university, as for instance Wilhelm von Humboldt conceived of it, emphasised service to scholarship and thought of it as thereby serving both students and society.

Lately, the second category has gained increased significance while given a consumeristic interpretation. This is exemplified by the somewhat popular conception of universities as ordinary service institutions. It is not uncommon to hear people describe the relationship between universities and students as that of a service provider and a consumer.

With respect to the third category, i.e. serving society, there is an ever increasing demand that universities serve society by serving the economic system which they do by producing skilled workforce. This understanding of the mission of serving society is also exemplified by the conception of the university as a preparation for the working life. This conception of the mission of the university is clearly brought out by Minda Rae Amiran when she writes:

This society, though its leaders are themselves college graduates, tends to see the nation's institutions of higher education as servants of the economy, as, for example, in *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a report by the US National Commission on Excellence in Education that accuses American colleges of producing inadequate employees. (Amiran, 2003, p. 552)

The understanding of the university as serving students by preparing them for the job market, and serving society by producing skilled workforce places the educational activities of universities within an environment that is shaped by market ideology and instrumental rationality narrowly conceived. Furthermore, this understanding of the possible missions of universities places the first category, that of serving scholarship, in third place.

Jón Torfi Jónasson brings out the relevance of this paradoxical situation with respect to the identity of the university in the following pair of quotes. He first notices the strong rhetoric support that universities enjoy:

In the morning twilight of the 21st century the universities find themselves in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand they have experienced an explosive growth in the last few decades – in absolute terms, on a global basis, and at least in relative terms, in Europe. They have received tremendous rhetorical support from both governments and industry, whose officials proclaim that higher education is the primary vehicle for the economic progress that will define how the nations of the world will enter a new age. The universities are often hailed as the single most important societal institution on which the world can pin its hope for genuine development; they are expected to play a bigger social role than ever before. In other terms, they seem to enjoy unprecedented strength, trust and respect. (Jónasson, 2008, p. 17)

Then, Jón Torfi Jónasson continues to describe the situation from the point of view of the universities themselves where the reality may be out of tune with the pronounced importance:

On the other hand, they seem to suffer from lack of confidence, existential uncertainty, fuzzy purpose, absence of undisputed relevant role models on which to base their development and, at least in relative terms, from a lack of funds. They consider they are neither getting the moral nor the financial backing they feel the national or official rhetoric does imply. They deem that they not only receive contradictory messages about the necessity to advance the frontiers of science – by

competing on scientific score listings – but also that they are begged to be practical and relevant to help the national or the local economy to grow in the short term – by contracting service projects, attending to practical fields and problems, or by providing first class professional education. (Jónasson, 2008, pp. 17-18)

Jón Torfi Jónasson draws out attention to the paradoxical situation to shed light on the very condition of universities in as institutions of higher education. This reality is also especially important for sustainable education as Stephen Stirling points out succinctly in his book, *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change*. He writes:

Western education is presently characterized by a number of paradoxes, which raise some profound questions about its role. Firstly, for nearly thirty years education has been identified in international and national policies as the key to addressing environment and development issues, and latterly to achieving a more sustainable society. Yet most education daily reinforces unsustainable values and practices in society. We are educated by and large to ‘compete and consume’ rather than to ‘care and conserve’. Secondly, education is, as never before, subject to unrelenting emphasis on inspection and accountability in the name of ‘quality’. Yet dysfunction, stress and the pressure to compete are widely compromising the quality of educational experience and the lives of educators and learners. Thirdly, governments are concerned about the ‘socially excluded’, drop-outs from schooling and ‘failing’ schools and higher education institutions; yet policies which force institutions to compete mean that the advantaged ones get better and richer while the disadvantaged ones become further disadvantaged and receive blame for failing. (Sterling, 2001, p. 21)

What Sterling is here pointing to is a consequence of the way in which universities, as well as much of the education system, are thought of as serving students and society while still being educational institutions. Universities are placed within the marked system whose first commandment is to “compete and consume” and while looked upon from that point of view the traditional vision of service to scholarship becomes foreign and so do the possibilities of universities to respond in a meaningful way to the problems that this very system has generated.

Now, what shall we make of all this? Some might say that the moral of the story is that we need to add sustainability to the curriculum. That may be right, but it is certainly not enough. We need to teach about sustainability and expect our students to learn about sustainability, and we have to change the general educational culture so that all learning contributes to sustainability. But we also have to give universities, and education institutions in general, a place outside of the market economy which has generated the global problems – environmental, social and economic – that we now face.

Students

I now turn to the second pillar of sustainable education, namely students. Barnett in his somewhat pessimistic paper is not too positive about the very category of the student:

In a fluid age, we can no longer assume that students share any qualities or intentions in common. A generation ago, in the so-called “elite” system of higher education in Europe and especially the UK, students pursued higher education with mixed motives, but significant among those motives was an interest in becoming a deeply immersed in particular field of knowledge. The range of motives has hardly changed, but their balance has: much more prominent now is the determination to do well in examinations, and this largely due to the significantly higher earnings profiles that are available to college graduates. (Barnett, 2003, p. 565)

Here, again, we can see Barnett describing the situation as one where the mission of the university is increasingly drawn toward a joint mission of serving students and society premised on the market economy. The eventual result of this is that the category of the student is called into question. Thus, Barnett says:

The key conceptual question is quite simple and intractable: what, in a fluid age, might we take the category of the *student* to stand for? (Barnett, 2003, p. 566)

Visiting an old college in Oxford a couple of years ago, I could literally see the classical idea of the student in the buildings. I passed through a gate and entered an almost closed world of learning and living. To be a student in the Middle Ages was to be a member of special community of learning, with special duties and special rights. As an academic I look upon the old idea of the student with mixed feelings. I sometimes wish that I could have students that had few other responsibilities but to learn. My students are very far from living in a closed world of learning, they have so many and diverse roles; they are husbands and wives, they are mothers and fathers, or grandmothers and grandfathers, they are employees, and they are also students. These different roles do not always mix well. But at the same time I take it to be a privilege to have an opportunity not only to influence people who have such rich and diverse roles, but also to gain an insight into different realms of society through conversations with my students – insight that I could not get from anywhere else and which in turn influences my teaching in important ways. Or so I like to think. The addition of international students to the student body has certainly made my work more challenging at times, but it has also made it more rewarding.

The changing constitution of student populations not only makes it more difficult to define the category of the student, as Barnett notes, it also makes it more interesting and more important. And, in so far as our aim is education for sustainable development, we

should not only fear the loss of the category of the student, but also welcome the possibility of a more interesting and more relevant category. For it impossible to educate the general public without the general public, in all its diverse roles, taking on the role of students.

The challenges that contemporary societies are facing, whether environmental, social or economic, show us that we all need to become students. The idea of the student cannot be defined with respect to narrow limits in time and place or in terms of some special duties of learning, but must be defined with respect to much more general categories such as willingness to engage in learning. To put it differently, to be a student must be defined in terms of taking part in society as a member of a learning society. This conception of the student does, of course, maintain key elements of the medieval conception of the students, but it differs in that the relevant learning society is not a closed community of some college or university but the wider society, in fact a global society.

Teachers

The third pillar of sustainable education are the teachers. Those of us who work as teachers find ourselves increasingly in the role of service providers. But this distorts our role as teachers. It is essential to education that it is not aimed at *fulfilling* desires but at *changing* desires. And the criterion for a good education is not akin to consumer satisfaction, but something different. In business there is a saying that “the customer is always right”, in school the student is not always right. In fact, an authority on right and wrong may not lie with any given person, whether student or teacher, but becomes the outcome of an educational dialogue among different individuals. Moreover, to view the essential role of teachers as providing service to students misconstrues the relationship between students and faculty. At the university level, especially the masters and Ph.D. level, the relationship between students and faculty should be more like that of co-workers rather than that of a consumer and a service provider.

I sometimes ask my students whether they think that Socrates was a teacher. Socrates, this key figure in western philosophy, would meet people in the street and start a conversation. Actually, not just a conversation but a dialogue, i.e. an exchange of ideas. He described himself as being a midwife, though not helping women to give birth to children but by helping men to deliver the knowledge that they already had in themselves. The first response of many students when I ask this question is to say “No,

Socrates was not a teacher for he had no such position, he did not provide those listening to him with any knowledge, and the people with whom he was conversing did not have to meet any standards or pass any checks.” But when I ask my students whether what Socrates was doing had anything to do with learning, my students always answer that it certainly did. And when I ask them whether this learning was important or trivial, they also answer that it was important for it revolved around the most important aspects of human life, such as virtue and justice. And then I sometimes ask again whether Socrates was a teacher or not, and I get the answer that in a way he was, and in a way he wasn’t.

Those of us who are teachers are given a special opportunity to answer the question “What is a teacher” for we can respond not only verbally but also in action, we can show in our work what we mean. Education for sustainable development is values education and as teachers in the business of education for sustainable development, we must realize that it is not enough to teach about values, we have to make values the core of our teaching. In order to do that we have to shape the institutions where we work in such a way that they become a place where values are on the agenda, where knowledge is not detached from the facts of human life, and where human life is not valued in some narrowly instrumental terms derived from the market economy where humanity means little more than useful labor.

The human condition

Education for sustainable development is, I maintain, education that aims at understanding and accepting the human condition. In her remarkable book, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes:

The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human being with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice. The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms. (Arendt, 1958, p. 2)

The human condition is a global condition. This has been recognized lately and is reflected in slogans such as “think global, act local”. This slogan recognizes the fact that we must, in our thoughts and concerns, break out of the here and now and try to reach far away places and future times. But it is not enough to reach out in thought only, sometimes we must also reach out in action, and thus sometimes we must act on the principle “think global, act global”. As individuals we may not have many options to do

so, but that is why it is so important to establish institutions that can do so – or, since the agency of institutions is eventually tied to the agency of individual persons, make channels which enables people to surpass the limits of individual agency and act globally towards cultivating humanity. That has been the aim of the United Nation University, it is also the aim of International Studies in Education at the School of Education at the University of Iceland – and that is why I am particularly pleased to get the opportunity to address you here today.

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