



Presentation for WEEC, Gothenburg 29 June 2015

Jumping into the age of relation – and why ‘ESD’ isn’t enough:

14 propositions

A) The limits of ESD

1 ‘Whatever you’re doing, it’s not enough’

- (David Pencheon, Head of NHS Sustainable Dev Unit, UK) talking to an HE audience of ESD practitioners.

It isn’t enough because the issues are outstripping our abilities to respond thoughtfully and effectively as a species.

We have ‘massive institutional failure: we haven’t learned to mold, bend, and transform our centuries old collective pattern of thinking, conversing, and institutionalizing to fit the realities of today’ - Otto Scharmer (2006: 3). And this includes educational institutions!

2 The label ‘ESD’ is very helpful.... and very unhelpful

It allows communication, exchange and growth around a reasonably common understanding.

But the label suggests a boundary – which may exclude other educational change movements: global citizenship, health education, human rights education, biodiversity education, gender/equality education, political education etc.

Also, it suggests that a strategy of insertion, accretion or overlay is sufficient. This can obscure recognition of the pressing need for deeper change in cultural and educational paradigms.

3 ESD/EfS is debilitated by a false dichotomy between *instrumentalism = indoctrination*; and *developmentalism = insufficiency*

Between those that say educating ‘for’ anything is educationally unsound....and on the opposite side, those that say that educating people to be critical and autonomous learners is not sufficient to assure a necessary and urgent ‘Great Transition’ during our Anthropocene age. But these positions are reconcilable.

4 ESD/EfS is debilitated by a lack of philosophical clarity

If it’s just seen as an ‘add on’ to the mainstream - which we are happy to leave otherwise left unchanged - this matters, though not greatly. But if – as seen by UNESCO - it’s seeking to forge a ‘new vision for education’, it matters a good deal.

5 An adequate re-thinking of education - fit for our times - must start from an adequate critique

Overall, ESD/EfS is debilitated by lacking a robust critique of the dominant socio-economic culture – and dominant educational culture.

The epistemological ghosts of reductionism, objectivism, dualism, materialism, individualism, anthropocentrism, technocentrism, etc stalk mainstream education, and, to a lesser degree also, ESD/EfS, at the same time as managerialism and neo-liberalism influences debate, policy and practice.

6 Education is a ‘slow learner’ in relation to context

There is an astonishing disconnect between the signs of global change (the concern of the forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals), and the relatively closed world of education. Apart from employment, and fitting in as members of society, deep discussion about the purposes of education – in relation to social and global futures – is rare.

B) The problems of perception

7 The issues 'out there' are manifestations of the way we think 'in here'.

'The world is a complex, interconnected, finite, ecological-social-psychological-economic system. We treat it as if it were not, as if it were divisible, separable, simple, and infinite. Our persistent, intractable, global problems arise directly from this mismatch.' - Donella Meadows (1982, 101)

8 The Western intellectual/ cultural inheritance is maladaptive

I believe that (the) massive aggregation of threats to man and his ecological systems arises out of errors in our habits of thought at deep and partly unconscious levels. - Gregory Bateson (1972, 463)

9 Our collective 'thought system' (ie. Western worldview) is certainly resilient, but not sustainable

If 'sustainable systems need to be resilient' (Folke *et al.* 2002, 23), resilient systems need to be sustainable.

'...we often invest enormous mental energy to maintain a perspective on the world that's at variance with reality.' - Thomas Homer-Dixon (2009, 3).

C) TOWIE – 'The Only Way Is Ecological'

10 We are unavoidably participants in a systemic and co-evolutionary world

'All thinking worthy of the name must now be ecological' - Lewis Mumford (1964)

'Everything is related to everything else' - Barry Commoner's 'First Law of Ecology' (1971, 29)

'...the kind of attention we pay actually alters the world: we are, literally, partners in creation. This means we have a grave responsibility...' (author's italics) - Iain McGilchrist (2009, 5)

11 Notwithstanding 'The Future We Want', the *future we will get* depends on the degree to which we can re-think our thinking appropriate to a highly systemic world.

'If everything is intimately interconnected, then the quality and integrity of all kinds of relationships are of paramount concern.' - (Duane Elgin, 1997,4)

'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.' - (Paul Raskin 2008: 469).

This entails a conscious shift of emphasis from relationships largely based on separation, control, manipulation, individualism and excessive competition towards those based on participation, appreciation, self-organisation, equity, justice, sufficiency and community.

12 The task for education: foster reflexivity which is both critical and contextual.

This requires *second order learning* on the part of educators, policy makers, and organisations/institutions, as well as students.

13 Global issues and trends are encouraging retrenchment, isolationism and fundamentalism - but also, for others, rising ecological and global consciousness, a questioning of assumptions and values, and burgeoning alternative pathways which centre on building an ecology of relationships and resilience.

The latter is evidenced in the rapid rise of such areas as ecological economics and the circular economy, renewable energies, biomimicry, sustainable agriculture, holistic health, adaptive management, ethical investment and fairtrade, ecological and regenerative design, community building, participative democracy, and the Transition Movement.

14 Such flourishing opens doorways for a co-evolutionary renewal of educational philosophy, policy, and practice wherever possible, working with hope to create a fair, humane, and biodiverse world *now* in the face of negative trends.

Professor Stephen Sterling, Centre for Sustainable Futures, Plymouth University, UK
stephen.sterling@plymouth.ac.uk
