



Learning *for* **sustainability**

in times of accelerating change

**edited by: Arjen E.J. Wals
and Peter Blaze Corcoran**

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Table of contents

Acknowledgements	13
Foreword <i>Juliet Schor</i>	15
INTRODUCTION	19
Re-orienting, re-connecting and re-imagining: learning-based responses to the challenge of (un)sustainability <i>Arjen E.J. Wals and Peter Blaze Corcoran</i>	21
PART ONE – RE-ORIENTING SCIENCE AND SOCIETY	33
Chapter 1 Towards greater realism in learning for sustainability <i>John Huckle</i>	35
Chapter 2 Participation and sustainable development: a matter of public concern <i>Joke Vandenabeele and Katrien Van Poeck</i>	49
Chapter 3 Pedagogy for survival: an educational response to the ecological crisis <i>Thomas Nelson and John A. Cassell</i>	63
Chapter 4 Weaving pedagogies of possibility <i>Marcus Bussey, Ase Eliason Bjurstrom, Miriam Sannum, Shambhushivananda Avadhuta, Bernard Nadhomi-Mukisa, Leonel Ceruto, Muwanguzi Denis, Ananta Kumar Giri, Asha Mukherjee, Gennady Pervyi and Maria Victoria Pineda</i>	77
Chapter 5 Harnessing time travel narratives for environmental sustainability education <i>Eric C. Otto and Andrew Wilkinson</i>	91
Chapter 6 Ethical deliberations in environmental education workplaces: a case story of contextualised and personalised reflexivity <i>Lausanne L. Olvitt</i>	105
<i>Learning for sustainability in times of accelerating change</i>	7

Chapter 7 Queering ecology: interrogating ‘seductions to organic wholeness’ in popular environmental rhetoric <i>Joseph P. Weakland</i>	121
Chapter 8 Building resilient communities: where disaster management and facilitating innovation meet <i>Karen Elisabeth Engel and Paul Gerard Hendrik Engel</i>	133
Chapter 9 Towards successful joint knowledge production for global change and sustainability: lessons from six Dutch adaptation projects <i>Dries Hegger, Annemarie van Zeijl-Rozema and Carel Dieperink</i>	149
Chapter 10 Getting active at the interface: how can sustainability researchers stimulate social learning? <i>Jayne H. Glass, Alister Scott and Martin F. Price</i>	167
 PART TWO – RE-CONNECTING PEOPLE AND PLANET	 185
Chapter 11 Finding hope in a world of environmental catastrophe <i>Elin Kelsey and Carly Armstrong</i>	187
Chapter 12 Inviting the unforeseen: a dialogue about art, learning and sustainability <i>Natalia Eernstman, Jan van Boeckel, Shelley Sacks and Misha Myers</i>	201
Chapter 13 Relationship-based experiential learning in practical outdoor tasks <i>Erling Krogh and Linda Jolly</i>	213
Chapter 14 Transformative learning: towards the social imaginary of sustainability: learning from indigenous cultures of the American continent <i>Sylvia Catharina van Dijk and Eduardo Ernesto van Dijk</i>	225
Chapter 15 Re-connecting with traditional knowledge: the experience of the Shangri-la institute for sustainable communities in China <i>Yunhua Liu and Alicia Constable</i>	241

Chapter 16 Sustainability as meaningful relatedness: lessons from Grandmother Bear <i>Johanna M. Beyers</i>	255
Chapter 17 Spirited practice of transformative education for sustainability <i>Alison Neilson, Doug Blomberg and Rosalina Gabriel</i>	269
Chapter 18 How reflective practice can enhance learning for sustainability <i>Katherine Davies</i>	283
 PART THREE – RE-IMAGINING EDUCATION AND LEARNING	 297
Chapter 19 How to handle knowledge uncertainty: learning and teaching in times of accelerating change <i>Rebekah L. Tauritz</i>	299
Chapter 20 Enhancing environmental learning through controversy <i>David Zandvliet</i>	317
Chapter 21 The role of knowledge, learning and mental models in public perceptions of climate change related risks <i>Jennifer Helgeson, Sander van der Linden and Ilan Chabay</i>	329
Chapter 22 Designing and developing learning systems for managing systemic change in a climate change world <i>Chris Blackmore and Ray Ison</i>	347
Chapter 23 Challenges for educators of building people’s capacity for mitigating and adapting to climate change <i>Robert B. Stevenson, Jennifer Nicholls and Hilary Whitehouse</i>	365
Chapter 24 Living systems, sustainability education, and institutional change <i>Michael K. Stone and Zenobia Barlow</i>	381
Chapter 25 Balancing the whole: a dialogue around a frameworks-based education programme <i>Ken Webster and Paul Vare</i>	395

Chapter 26 By their practice you will recognise them: a case study on a failed effort to implement education for sustainable development into the competence based Swiss curriculum <i>Johannes Tschapka</i>	411
Chapter 27 Learning for sustainability in science education in Africa: 'learning as connection' an imperative for transformation <i>Overson Shumba</i>	425
Chapter 28 Exploring possibilities of organisational learning-based change and transition towards sustainability <i>Abel Barasa Atiti</i>	439
Chapter 29 We know how they feel: Global Storylines as transformative, ecological learning <i>Marie Jeanne McNaughton</i>	457
Chapter 30 Engaging youth in developing urban plans using geographic information systems and computer visualization <i>Dennis J. DeBay, James Haley, Sheron Mark, Michael Barnett, Amy Anderson, Eric Strauss, Lindsey Cotter-Hayes, David Blustein and Catherine Wong</i>	477
Chapter 31 Active learning about energy and sustainability: the SIEU experience <i>Lieke Dreijerink and Geja Roosjen</i>	497
EPILOGUE	509
Afterword: let's face the music and dance? <i>Stephen Sterling</i>	511
Biographies editorial team	517
Contributor biographies	519

Afterword: let's face the music and dance?

Stephen Sterling

There may be trouble ahead,
... Before they ask us to pay the bill,
And while we still have the chance,
Let's face the music and dance.

Irving Berlin 1936

There are three people in a vehicle. In this story, they all seem to have a foot on the accelerator. Not too far in the distance, and clearly coming into view, there is a noticeboard. It reads: 'Brake hard or change direction! – Abyss ahead!'. As the vehicle continues speeding forward, the occupants react differently to the noticeboard. One has seen it coming for some time; in fact, she anticipated it. Her optician told her she had good foresight. 'For goodness sake,' she says, 'we must slow down and change direction while we can.' A second, who has also been aware of the notice for some time, says 'It's certainly an interesting notice. Let's deconstruct its meaning exactly, then we can develop our critical awareness and understanding, and decide what to do.' The third person, who was much later in recognising the sign than the other two says, 'I don't think there's any danger ahead, and if there is – which I doubt – we'll deal with it then.' Meantime, the vehicle is still getting closer to the notice, and stays on track ...

A metaphor of course, but perhaps illustrative of our collective predicament. We all – or nearly all – have a bit of our foot on the accelerator, whilst at the same time, increasing numbers are aware that braking, changing direction, and learning 'our way out' is critically important. At the same time, a significant proportion of the population and vested interests drive forward regardless, albeit with a growing suspicion that, in the words of the old Irving Berlin song, 'there may be trouble ahead.' Yet the signs are there now. As AtKisson comments (2011, p. 300):

change of all kinds – in the biosphere (nature as a whole), the technosphere (the entirety of human manipulation of nature) and the noosphere (the collective field of human consciousness) – is happening so rapidly that it exceeds our capacity to understand it, control it or respond to it adequately in corrective ways.

Years ago, I thought that the multifaceted and critical nature of global crises – no doubt familiar to readers of this book – would in themselves generate awareness and critical reflection sufficient to exert some braking and change of direction. To an extent, they have, and there is far more discussion and practice of

sustainability oriented activities of all kinds than there was, say, when the seminal 'Our Common Future' report was launched in 1987 (WCED). That report called for 'vast campaigns of education, debate and public education' (1987, p. xiv). Some 25 years later, there is much to celebrate in the field of sustainability education and learning (Tilbury 2011). Yet, taking a broader view, there is an element of truth in the saying, 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.' So there is a deeper issue here, which requires more than 'more sustainability education.' As Paul Raskin of the Tellus Institute puts it: '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, p. 469).

This is a call for nothing less than a change of cultural worldview, and it is one that has been echoed by many others before and since publication of Raskin's 2008 global futures paper. He and his colleagues in a further report liken the shift required to the great historical transitions towards settled agriculture and industrial society (Rosen *et al.* 2010). Mary Clark goes further: in the last 2,500 years, she suggests, there have been only two 'major periods of *conscious* social change, when societies deliberately 'critiqued' themselves and created new worldviews' (Clark 1989, p. 235). In parallel, a Worldwatch Institute report advocates that we should tap our potential 'as conscious agents of cultural evolution' in order to create a sustainable civilization (Gardner, cited in Starke 2001, p. 206). Seen from such perspectives as these, 'the learning society' is one that seeks to understand, transcend and re-direct itself through *intentional learning*. However, as Rosen *et al.* (2010, p. 15) suggest, this deep shift in values and institutions – this 'Great Transition' – is far from guaranteed.

In sustainability discourse, the concept of resilience – building resilient economies, and communities and so on – has become topical. What is less considered, however, are worldviews as resilient belief and thought systems. Whilst 'sustainable systems need to be resilient' (Folke *et al.* 2002, p. 23), resilient systems need to be sustainable. Like many others, I argue that the dominant western worldview (and the economic, political and educational systems informed by it) – still largely mechanistic, objectivist, materialist, dualist, and reductionist – is no longer appropriate to our times; it is the root of our current predicament, not least as it is resistant to fundamental change (Sterling 2011). As Homer-Dixon suggests (2006, p. 3), 'we often invest enormous mental energy to maintain a perspective on the world that's at variance with reality'. There seems to be an element of lock-in operating here, even as the encompassing conditions of complexity, systemicity, uncertainty and unsustainability become ever more evident in wider society. At individual level, the maintenance of deep-seated worldviews tends to prevail

despite evidence that they may be no longer adequate for changed conditions. It may be that Chapman's view (2002, p. 14) is true of many, who, he suggests:

will not change their mode of thinking or operating within the world until their existing modes are proved beyond doubt, through direct experience, to be failing.

At one level, this is easy to understand: faced with change, or more seriously, threat, many people are likely to hold onto – even retreat into – the security of what they know and believe, rather than willingly embrace uncertainty and possible loss of familiar identifiers. Other writers have a deeper analysis however. Ehrlich and Ornstein (1989, p. 7) suggest that in evolutionary terms, our brains are still adapted for the relatively stable environment of our forebears where threats were signalled by short-term changes and action was usually required immediately. We can still identify with and react to the short-term and immediate, but find it much harder to perceive and appreciate the import of large-scale threats occurring over years. So the media and the public become animated, say about the plight of a single whale, but do not become concerned about the acidification of the oceans threatening whole ecosystems.

McGilchrist (2009) has a further and radical take on this issue, arguing that the root of our 'increasingly mechanistic, fragmented, decontextualized world' (p. 6) lies in the structure of the brain, and the different 'views of the world' that each hemisphere has. In a carefully researched book, he makes a case that the left hemisphere – more associated with focus, linearity, precision and control – has come to dominate the right brain (more associated with perception of holistic pattern, relation and the big picture), to the extent that the former has become the dominant mode of perception and cognition. He speaks of the 'progress of the sleepwalking left hemisphere, always going further in the same direction, ambling towards the abyss' (*ibid.*, p. 446), and suggests that mass technological culture, urbanisation, mechanisation and alienation from the natural world is reinforcing the dominance of the left hemisphere. The further implication of this theory is that, far from us acting upon a somehow separate and inert world, the world has plasticity: as Gregory Bateson suggests it 'partly becomes – comes to be – how it is imagined' (1980, p. 223). Similarly, McGilchrist states '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] (2009, p. 5). Far from being detached and unaffected observers, we are – unavoidably – participants in a greater whole: as I've stated elsewhere, we are not on the Earth, but *in* the Earth, inextricably actors in the Earth's systems and flows, constantly affecting and being affected by the whole thing, natural and human, in dynamic relation (Sterling 2010).

This demands an essentially *relational* worldview and episteme that is in tune with reality: a worldview that is participative, holistic, systemic, ecological, and one that – in line with McGilchrist’s diagnosis – helps our right brain to balance out the current dominance of our left brain thinking and tendencies. Achieving this cultural reorientation appears to require unlearning, new learning and re-learning, and ‘on a grand scale...across society, necessitating a metamorphosis of many of our current education and learning constructs’ (Williams 2004, p. 4). This is more than an isolated ‘education for sustainability’ programme, it is about a shift of personal consciousness and educational culture, involving movement in three interrelated areas of human knowing and experience: *perception* (or the affective dimension), *conception* (or the cognitive dimension), and *practice* (or the intentional dimension). In essence, it entails an extended and participatory epistemology, a connective ontology and an integrative praxis – affording a deeply relational sense of what it is to be human at this most challenging of times.

Such ‘expansion of consciousness’ sounds like a New Age mantra; rather, and at its simplest it is noticing ‘what is’ beyond ourselves, and recognising (that is, re-cognition) that our own wellbeing emerges from the wellbeing of the whole, whether the issue is health, inequity and social cohesion, biodiversity, climate change, and so on. Homer-Dixon echoes this in his advocacy of ‘the prospective mind’ which is ‘grounded in the knowledge that constant surprise and change are now inevitable’ (2006, p. 29). Hence, we should make a distinction between two types of learning: *anticipative learning*, or ‘learning by design’ on the one hand, and *reactive learning* or learning ‘by default’ on the other. Default learning happens when events impress themselves on the learners’ consciousness, by surprise, shock or crisis. Learning by design, by contrast, implies a prior awareness, a willingness, openness and intention to learn in response to a perceived innovation, threat or opportunity. The former is a reactive response; the latter is an anticipative response.

Instead of educational thinking and practice that tacitly assumes that the future is some kind of linear extension of the past, we need *anticipative* education, recognising the new conditions and discontinuities which face present generations, let alone future ones: including the massive challenges of global warming, species extinction, economic vulnerability, social fragmentation and migration, endemic poverty, the end of cheap energy – and more positively, the rise of localism, participative democracy, green purchasing, ethical business, and efforts to achieve a low carbon economy. This implies a ‘culture of critical commitment’ in educational thinking and practice – engaged enough to make a real difference to social-ecological resilience and sustainability but reflexively critical enough to learn constantly from experience and to keep options open in working for a sustainability transformation.

Back to the vehicle metaphor. I'm not sure the left-brained, technocratic, vested-interested drivers are ever going to awaken and change direction sufficiently, or slow up. The concerned drivers need to ally, increase their numbers through anticipative education and learning, map out the promise of new directions and put pressure on the steering wheel to achieve the Great Transition. The emergence and success of such phenomena as the Transition movement (Hopkins 2008), of the Occupy movement, of global citizenship initiatives (Hawken 2007), and One Planet Living are hopeful signs. As Alan AtKisson puts it, 'the good news is that this is a transformation already underway. The bad news comes in the form of a challenge: *How fast can we make....beneficial changes happen?* (AtKisson 2011, p. 21) (author's emphasis). To change metaphors, while many are like Irving Berlin's dancers – content to party yet dimly aware the bill is as yet unpaid – we need to demonstrate a much better party is possible, one that can take us through the long night and usher in a new dawn.

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